

In today's round of hearings for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Commission heard from Bishop Peter Connors, former Police Officer Bill Howitt and Bishop Hilton Deakin.

### ***Testimony of Bishop Peter Connors***

Bishop Connors' testimony concluded today. He confirmed to the Royal Commission that he had been told by previous witness Dr Peter Barker of a complaint of child sexual abuse by Father Ronald Pickering. He said that he failed to act on the information other than passing it on to Archbishop Little.

Bishop Connors also gave testimony about Father Desmond Gannon, who records show admitted to complaints of sexual misconduct in five or six parishes. Gannon was allowed to resign and be appointed as "Pastor Emeritus", rather than the real reasons for his resignation being disclosed. He gave brief testimony about Fathers David Daniel and Nazareno Fasciale, and was asked by the Royal Commission about the minutes of various meetings of Church officials.

He admitted that it was the culture of the Church at the time to keep these matters "in house", but said that he hoped this attitude has now been rectified. He said that they Bishops' Conference have put in place people who are working full-time on the protection of children, and requires every Priest to go through child protection training.

In cross-examination, Bishop Connors was drawn to the irony that actions which were intended to protect the good name of the Church have had the opposite effect, destroying a sacred trust which will take generations to restore.

### ***Testimony of Bill Howitt***

Bill Howitt was a former Senior Constable with Victoria Police. He investigated the complaint against Father Peter Searson of holding a knife at the chest of a primary school student. He said that he recalled Searson to be a "very polished interviewee" who was not rattled or phased by allegations. He said that the prosecution of Searson did not proceed because parents did not want to expose their children to court processes, and a guilty verdict would have been difficult with uncorroborated evidence from children.

Mr Howitt told the Royal Commission that he spoke to a high-ranking Church official in Melbourne and Sydney, who said that nothing could be done about Searson unless a conviction occurred.

### ***Testimony of Bishop Hilton Deakin***

Bishop Deakin was the former Vicar General and then Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. He began his evidence by apologising for any action or neglect of his which attributed to past hurts.

He said that Archbishop Little had instructed him to only report complaints of child sexual abuse to him verbally, and not put them in writing. He reported being so upset about this instruction that he spoke to Bishop Joseph O'Connell about it, as well as the Papal Nuncio at the time.

Bishop Deakin was asked about specific complaints and incidents of abuse in relation to the Priests being examined in this Case Study, but could not recall specific complaints, and gave comments in more general terms.

He spoke about the “psychotic” behaviour of Father Peter Searson, calling him the most despicable man he had ever met in his life.

Bishop Deakin did not agree with Commissioner McClellan and other witnesses that issues of abuse would have been discussed at Curia meetings. He said that Bishops with this information may not have shared it.

The Commission will continue the testimony of Bishop Deakin on Friday.