

In today's round of hearings for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Commission heard from survivors BTO and BTU, former Principal of St James Primary School, North Richmond Patricia Taylor, and Archbishop of Melbourne, Denis Hart.

Testimony of BTO

BTO was abused by Father Wilfred Baker over a two year period beginning in 1976 (when BTO was 12 years old) at Good Shepherd Parish, Gladstone Park. He said that he would feel guilty about the abuse, blaming himself. He disclosed to his mother and then- Father Philip O'Donnell in 1978. BTO understands the matter was reported to Archbishop Little, and Baker was removed from the parish.

BTO spoke about the effect on him today. He said that he struggled with education and was hesitant to have children. He says that he worries about them and is overprotective. He told the Commission that he suffers from low self-esteem and massive self-doubt.

He spoke of preparing to give evidence against Baker, only to have him plead guilty at the last minute. He said that this was retraumatising. He also spoke of his experience with the Melbourne Response, under which he received \$35,000 in financial redress.

BTO finished his testimony by saying that he couldn't save himself, nor could he save the people who came after him because he did not speak up. He begged the Commission to please save him and all the others who had been abused.

Testimony of Patricia Taylor

Patricia Taylor was the Principal at St James Primary School, North Richmond from 1985. She testified that when it was announced that Father Wilfred Baker would commence as Parish Priest, she was called to the Catholic Education Office for an off-the-record meeting with Maryanne Brookes and Father Mark Reynolds. She said they gave her four warnings: she was not to let children ever to be alone with Baker, never allow them to go into the confessional with Baker, not to give him staff contact numbers and not herself to be in a room alone with him.

Following the meeting, Ms Taylor told the Commission went to see Bishop Peter Connors, and told him what had been said. She had hoped that Baker would not be appointed to the Parish, but nothing happened following her report.

So Ms Taylor took the initiative to put procedures in place so that children would never be alone with Searson. This included going to meet him each morning at 8.15am so that he did not have a reason to come to the school. She would also ensure she had cheques which required Baker's signature on her desk so that, if he ever phoned asking for a student to come to the presbytery to bring something to him, she could say, "I will do it because I have something for you to sign." Ms Taylor also altered the Sacramental program so that confessions were heard by Baker sitting on the altar and in full view, so as to ensure children were not alone with him in the confessional.

During the time she was at the school, there were no reports of sexual abuse by Searson.

Ms Taylor also testified that he was constantly verbally abusive to her, and that he was drunk most days. She said that she would put herself between Baker and the teachers.

It was suggested to Ms Taylor that the current structure in Victoria (where the Parish Priest is the employer of the Principal and staff at the schools) be changed. Ms Taylor said that she has worked for 12 Priests, 11 of whom had been wonderful men.

Testimony of BTU

BTU was a student at St Mary's Boy's School, East St Kilda. He was abused by Pickering in the presbytery and when he would take him away on holidays. He recalls that at one time, he was taken to dinner with a group of men, all of whom were accompanied by young boys. BTU first disclosed the abuse in confession to Father Baker (another abusive priest) and, breaking the Seal of Confession, Baker reported this to Pickering, who confronted BTU.

BTU said that he went through the Melbourne Response and received \$30,000 in redress. He told the Commission that he believed the abuse affected not only his emotional health, but his physical health.

Testimony of Archbishop Denis Hart

Archbishop Hart is the current Archbishop of Melbourne. He became Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Melbourne in September 1996.

His testimony was to be based on the relationship between the Archbishop, the Auxiliary Bishops and others, based on his current knowledge.

Archbishop Hart told the Commission that the Archbishop alone had the power to appoint, transfer and remove a Priest, and that the only function he could not perform was to reduce a Priest to the lay state – this was an action reserved to the Holy See. He gave evidence to the Commission about the procedures involved in suspending a Priest from ministry, and also the applications and reports made to Rome.

Archbishop Hart spoke about the role of a regional/Auxiliary Bishop, and said that they were not usually involved in administration. Their role was to be an advisor to the Archbishop.

Archbishop Hart spoke about "common features" which point to the failure of process and poor handling of complaints by the Archdiocese. These included:

- the absence of adequate policies, processes and procedures to deal with complaints of abuse when they were received;
- where policies, processes and procedures did exist, the failure to implement and follow their requirements;
- the failure by Church leaders to listen when complaints were made and then to have those complaints investigated and acted upon;
- the failure to act upon credible information which was indicative of risk, but instead requiring "proof" of allegations or the involvement of police before being willing to act;
- in some cases discouraging those who wished to make complaints from doing so;
- procrastination and an unwillingness to confront difficult decisions particularly where they involved acting against priests; and

- the failure to withdraw priests from involvement with children or from ministry when the evidence of their inadequacies or wrong doing was clear.

Senior Counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC, asked Archbishop Hart who in particular he was referring to in each of these criticisms. Archbishop Hart largely responded that he was speaking about the Archbishop, but conceded that this could also include Vicars General and Auxiliary Bishops.

He told the Commission that his comment about “passivity and inactivity” of Church leaders excluded Cardinal Pell, who introduced the Melbourne Response and made big changes in the Archdiocese’s handling of abuse complaints.

The Commission will continue the testimony of Archbishop Hart on Tuesday.