

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse began a public hearing into Case Study 35 today. There was an opening statement by Senior Counsel assisting the Commission, Gail Furness SC, testimony by former priest Philip O'Donnell, and testimony from survivor witness BVD.

Opening statement by Gail Furness SC

Ms Furness' opening statement outlined the evidence which is expected to be heard in Case Study 35. The case study will focus on the conduct and management of eight priests of the Archdiocese of Melbourne: Nazareno Fasciale, Kevin O'Donnell, Ronald Pickering, Wilfred Baker, Peter Searson, David Daniel, Desmond Gannon and Barry Robinson.

Ms Furness noted that the Royal Commission had conducted a comprehensive data survey of all Catholic Church authorities (ie, dioceses and religious orders) in Australia including the Archdiocese of Melbourne.

The key points highlighted by Ms Furness were:

- In the 35-year period between January 1980 and 28 February 2015, 454 people made a claim or substantiated complaint of child sexual abuse about priests, religious, employees and volunteers operating within the Archdiocese of Melbourne;
- 335 of these were a complaint about a priest;
- There were seven priests who were the subject of 10 or more complaints, and these seven accounted for 54% of all claims made;
- There were 14 civil claims relating to child sexual abuse by a priest, and half of these resulted in monetary compensation at an average of almost \$238,000 per claim (or \$270,000 when legal and other costs are taken into account);
- There were 277 claims which went through the Melbourne Response at an average of almost \$35,000 per claim (or \$46,000 when legal and other costs are taken into account.)

Ms Furness then went on to outline a summary of the history of each of the priests whose cases would be the subject of the Commission. Instead of summarising these at this time, they will be covered in subsequent testimony. But Ms Furness' entire opening statement [can be read here](#).

Testimony of Philip O'Donnell

Philip O'Donnell was a former priest of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. He was trained at the seminaries at Werribee, Glen Waverly and Clayton. He gave evidence about seminary life, saying that Werribee was a dreadful experience. It was highly structured and there was virtually no contact with the outside world (radios and newspapers were not permitted until the final year, and immediate family was permitted to visit once a month.) He said that sexual development was not part of the formation in those days, and it wasn't discussed amongst seminarians.

He commented that there was a "highly camp" group at the seminary at Glen Waverly, who were outrageous and enjoyed flaunting in front of seminary staff, who could not deal with them.

His first appointment as assistant priest was to a parish at Gladstone Park with Father Wilfred Baker (who would go on to plead guilty to 16 counts of indecent assault and one account of gross

indecent with a male person.) He said that Baker had an obsession with adolescent boys, and became particularly concerned about his fixation with one particular boy in late 1977 or early 1978. O'Donnell approached the parents who initially did not believe it, but changed their mind a few weeks later. O'Donnell interviewed the boy, who said that Baker had taught him to drive by having him sit on his lap, and that he would shower with him.

Following this, O'Donnell testified that the boy's parents met with both the Vicar General (then Monsignor Peter Connors) and Archbishop Frank Little. The parents did not want the matter to become public. Following these meetings, Baker was appointed by Archbishop Little to a parish at Eltham.

After a brief time in Scorseby parish, O'Donnell was moved to Sunbury parish with Father Peter Searson (who would go on to plead guilty to the unlawful assault of an altar boy.) He reported that Searson banned him from using the presbytery and parish resources.

Complaints against Searson included that he would take children to the presbytery for sex education.

O'Donnell wrote to the Vicar General Monsignor Cudmore in 1996 about the problem of child sexual abuse, and predicted that it would be a huge problem for the Church.

He attributes his request for laicisation in 1999 in part to his almost 20 years of dealing with child sexual abuse, and the realisation that there were perpetrators for whom it could never be proven that they were committing abuse. He also said that then- Archbishop George Pell was supportive and compassionate throughout his request for laicisation.

In speaking about clericalism, O'Donnell said that Archbishop Frank Little had a liberal/pastoral style of Church governance. He did not take unsubstantiated gossip or allegations or opinions too seriously because he trusted his priests. O'Donnell said he was an Archbishop who had the ability to live with the tension of imperfection, and contrasted this to Archbishop Pell's more "clerical" style of governance.

Ms Furness commented that Archbishop Little's reluctance to take complaints about clergy seriously meant that he did not take clergy abuse seriously either. O'Donnell said that he could be "completely wrong", but this could have been a case of Rome pulling the strings and ordering Archbishop Little not to do anything. He did not comment why this would not have been the case under Archbishop Pell.

O'Donnell gave his opinion that mandatory celibacy, an all-male priesthood, the extreme authority given to the Bishop and the Pope, the permanency of the priesthood ("a priest forever") and sexual immaturity were contributing factors to the sexual abuse crisis.

Testimony of Philip O'Donnell

BVD began school at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 1974, and Father Peter Searson became parish priest in 1977. BVD described Searson as intimidating, and said that he would touch him around the groin when he was putting on his robes to prepare to serve as an altar boy. BVD never complained because he was too scared, and was taught to respect priests.

In 1978, BVD's mother volunteered BVD to wash Searson's car and mow his lawn each Saturday. Over a period of six months, Searson used this time to sexually abuse BVD, telling him that he would go to hell if he told anyone about it.

BVD did not disclose his abuse until 2011. He was diagnosed with chronic and severe post-traumatic stress disorder, and had been suffering depression his whole life. He told the Commission that the abuse shattered his faith in humanity, and spoke about the self-loathing which has consumed him all his life. He said that he is unable to develop sexual relationships because he feels like he is defiling the woman that he is with by engaging in sexual activity with her, and that these feelings are overwhelming.

He mentioned that he wants the Church to be accountable for what happened to him, because he believes they knew what had happened but didn't do anything. BVD wants someone to say sorry, and commented that he does not see a moral justification for the large disparity of payments to survivors between the United States and Australia.

The Commission will resume at 10am with the testimony of survivor witness Julie Stewart.