

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continued phase three of its hearings for Case Study 28 today. Case Study 28 is looking at the Diocese of Ballarat (and the Christian Brothers' schools within that diocese). The first stage of the hearing was held in May 2015 and the second session was held in December 2015.

In today's hearing, we heard evidence from Bishop Ronald Mulkearns, former Bishop of Ballarat, and Dr Peter Evans, a psychiatrist.

Bishop Ronald Mulkearns

Bishop Mulkearns gave evidence via video link from a nursing home in Ballarat. He has terminal cancer, and could only testify for 90 minutes before needing to adjourn his evidence.

He told the Commission that he retired in 1997 at the age of 68, which is young for retirement, because he was not handling the issue of paedophilia well. He said: "I'm terribly sorry that I didn't do things differently in that time but I didn't really know what to do or how to do it."

Bishop Mulkearns was asked about referring priests for treatment to other priests like Father Augustine Watson and Father John Harvey who were trained psychologists/psychiatrists. At the time Bishop Mulkearns was in office, there were four or five people identified who were available to treat priests who were offending against children. Senior Counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC, said this suggested the problem of paedophilia and the need for treatment was commonplace and discussed amongst clergy, otherwise he would not have known that these people were available.

Justice McClellan asked several times whether Bishop Mulkearns' advisors knew of the problem of paedophilia, but Bishop Mulkearns could not comment on their knowledge. He said that his impression was that the problem was homosexuality. Asked if this was a euphemism for child sexual abuse, Bishop Mulkearns replied that it was not.

Bishop Mulkearns was asked whether he had discussed the Royal Commission with other priests or bishops since it began. Bishop Mulkearns said that he has seen priests and bishops on social occasions, but have not discussed the Commission. It was suggested that this was remarkable, given that there have now been three hearings into the Diocese of Ballarat, for which he was Bishop for 26 years.

Ms Furness asked Bishop Mulkearns whether he would agree with the statement that his time as Bishop has been characterised as paedophile priests coming to his attention and him covering it up so that the public would not become aware of the problem and think less of the Church. Bishop Mulkearns said that he was not only looking after the interests of the Church, but the interests of all involved by trying to get treatment for the offenders.

Bishop Mulkearns' evidence was adjourned for another date.

Dr Peter Evans

Dr Peter Evans is a psychiatrist and former Franciscan priest who briefly treated Gerald Ridsdale.

In relation to Ridsdale, who he saw in 1975, he said that Ridsdale did not seem to come of his own volition, but rather was required to attend. He said he was passive aggressive and the treatment was unproductive. The reason for Ridsdale's referral was anxiety he was experiencing after a single accusation of child sexual abuse at Inglewood, which he denied. Evans told the Commission that he was contacted by a police officer who said that charges would not be laid, but that he still believed Ridsdale to be guilty.

He told the commission that there were three "categories" of priests who abused children. He said that core abusers with significant personality disorders and were almost impossible to treat. This group should either be in prison or chemically castrated, he opined. The second group were generally amenable to treatment because they felt guilt and wanted to change. The third group, he said, were those who identified as homosexual and acted out sexual with adolescents. His advice to this group was to leave the priesthood and deal with their homosexuality in a rational manner.

He said that at the time he trained in psychiatry, there was very little training on this issue. He had never heard of a priest offending until Ridsdale was referred to him in 1975, and said that it was unthinkable before then. He agreed with a statement made by a previous witness, Dr Carolyn Quadrio, who said "if it doesn't exist in your mind as a possibility, then you won't see it." He said this meant that things which today are seen as red flags for child sexual abuse would not have been seen in the same way back then, and that awareness only arose in the mid-1980s.

He said that the Church's attitude to sexual abuse was not a malicious denial but a gross ignorance and psychological illiteracy.

Evans told the Commission that he believed celibacy to be a factor, but one which was neither necessary (because non-celibate men and women commit abuse) nor sufficient (because many celibate people do not abuse.) His reasoning is that people with sexual deviancies but strong religious beliefs can be attracted to the celibate life because it imposes many external constraints, but they act out when the constraints are removed. He suggested the numbers are higher in religious communities because they used to recruit boys when they were still in adolescence.

Evans also commented that it is possible for a person to live with a paedophile and not be aware, reminding the Commission that institutional abuse accounts for only 10-15% of child sexual abuse, with the majority occurring within the family, and with many wives unaware that their husbands are abusing their children.

The hearing adjourned for the week, and will resume on Monday at 8am with the evidence of Cardinal George Pell.