

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continued Case Study 28 today. Case Study 28 is looking at the Diocese of Ballarat, and began the first stage of its hearing in May 2015. A third sitting for Ballarat will occur in February 2016.

In today's hearing, we heard from two retired Priests for the Diocese of Ballarat: Father Frank Madden and Father Eric Bryant.

Testimony of Father Frank Madden

Father Madden was ordained in 1964. He was appointed the administrator of St Patrick's Cathedral in Ballarat in 1977 and continued in that role until June 1982 (Father Madden explained that technically, the Bishop was parish Priest of the Cathedral, so he was "administrator" instead of parish Priest.) Father Madden was also Vicar General from 1971 to 1976. He explained that he was never really sure about how to exercise the role of Vicar General, and mostly undertook the role of the Diocesan financial administrator. He said he was never good at the "out front" roles traditionally associated with the Vicar General, and told the Royal Commission he was a failure in this respect.

Father Madden was asked about his knowledge of abusive Priest Monsignor John Day, whose case was examined in great detail in yesterday's Commission proceedings. He said that he first learned about Day's conduct when the Police came to see Bishop Mulkearns in January 1972. He could not recall any of the meetings of the College of Consultors where Day was discussed.

Father Madden was also asked about Gerald Ridsdale, who served as his assistant Priest for a period of two years. Again, Father Madden could not recall specific details of any meeting of the College of Consultors where Ridsdale was mentioned. He told the Commission that the moves for Ridsdale were not necessarily so unusual that they would have required explanation. Father Madden said he first became aware of Ridsdale's misconduct when Ridsdale himself told him in 1988, while they were at the same parish. He said he remembered it clearly because he was concerned about the people in his parish.

Father Madden was asked about the allegations made on Monday by BWE. BWE testified that in September 1983, he was serving at a funeral Mass at the Cathedral being concelebrated by Father Madden and then- Father George Pell. BWE said he overheard Father Pell tell Father Madden that "Gerry has been rooting boys again." On Monday, it was noted that Father Madden had left the Cathedral parish in June 1982 and moved to Horsham, some 200km away.

Father Madden said he would only have returned to the Cathedral for the funeral of a Priest or maybe a Priest's parent. He said that he considered it to be bad form to return to a former parish, because it is the duty and the privilege of the current parish Priest to fulfil those pastoral duties. He could not recall going back for a funeral to the Cathedral while in Horsham. He could not remember either the name Gladys Pope or Margaret Morgan (for whom the two funerals were conducted in September 1983).

Father Madden further said he would be very confident that there was never an occasion on which he concelebrated a funeral at the Cathedral in Ballarat with Cardinal Pell, except for the funeral of Monsignor Nolan. He said there was "absolutely not" a time when Father Pell said: "Gerry's been rooting little boys again" to him, and said that it was never his experience that Father Pell did or would use this language.

Father Madden said that he did not appreciate the devastation caused by Ridsdale when he provided a reference for him for sentencing after his first trial. He said once he realised the scale of the effects, he immediately regretted it.

He also told the Commission that he took responsibility for not asking more questions or investigating what was going on with Ridsdale.

Testimony of Father Eric Bryant

Father Bryant gave evidence to the Commission about a meeting of the College of Consultors where Bishop Mulkearns advised that it had become necessary that Gerald Ridsdale be moved. He said he remembered it well because it was his first meeting. He said that Bishop Mulkearns told the meeting that there was a problem with homosexuality within the Diocese, and that Ridsdale needed to be moved. He said no ages were mentioned.

Father Bryant told the Commission he began to suspect that Ridsdale was abusing young people while Father Bryant was in Hopetoun parish between 1985 and 1988. He had heard things on the “grapevine.”

Father Bryant said he took personal responsibility in relation to Ridsdale because he visited him at Whitecliffs (a camp where Ridsdale used to take – and abuse- his victims) on one occasion in the mid-1970s. It was pointed out to him by another person there that the boys looked glum and morose. Father Bryant said that had he have realised what was happening, he would have removed the boys and prevented so much further harm. He said that he often wept over that experience and his role in it.

The hearing will continue tomorrow.