

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 the continued testimony of Bishop Brian Finnigan and testimony from Father Brian McDermott and Father John McKinnon.

Continued testimony of Bishop Brian Finnigan

Bishop Brian Finnigan continued his testimony today, beginning with cross-examination by counsel for the Truth, Justice and Healing Council and other Church parties. In this cross-examination, Bishop Finnigan was taken through an interview he gave to Catholic Church Insurances in 1993 regarding his knowledge of the offending by Gerald Ridsdale. Bishop Finnigan was asked whether the answers he gave in that interview described the knowledge he had at the time of the interview (ie, 1993) or prior to that. Bishop Finnigan said that the interview related to his 1993 knowledge.

Bishop Finnigan also denied claims made by convicted paedophile Paul David Ryan that he had told him of his attraction to adolescent boys. Bishop Finnigan also pointed out that he was overseas at the time Ryan alleged they had met following complaints received about Ryan in Peshurst parish.

Justice Peter McClellan then focussed on a part of Bishop Finnigan's 1993 interview where he had said that if a particular parent (whose name was withheld) had gone to Father Madden, he would not have been happy and would have said to her: "Woman be quiet, we don't talk about those sort of things." Bishop Finnigan insisted that this related to the particular woman's marital problems and seeking an annulment, but both Justice McClellan and Senior Counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Angus Stewart SC, suggested it related to Ridsdale's offending against boys, particularly when considered in light of the surrounding interview questions and answers.

Bishop Finnigan rejected a suggestion that he knew that Ridsdale had a young boy (Paul Levey) staying with him while he lived in Mortlake.

Mr Stewart accused Bishop Finnigan of not seeking to assist the Royal Commission or the public to understand the sequence of events with regard to Ridsdale's offending, and of consistently distancing himself from any knowledge of child sexual abuse to protect himself and the Church. Bishop Finnigan rejected this, saying he was not intending to create confusion, and that he admired the work of the Commission which he believed was doing a great service to the Church.

He disagreed with Justice McClellan that giving women greater responsibility in the Church would be a panacea to child sexual abuse, noting that other Christian denominations with female ministers were not immune from child sexual abuse.

Testimony of Father Brian McDermott

Father Brian McDermott was secretary to Bishop Ronald Mulkearns between 1985 and 1990. He was asked about testimony he had given in an earlier private hearing with the Royal Commission where he had said that a meeting of parish Priests occurred to discuss their concerns about Ridsdale when he was in a parish at Mortlake. Father McDermott said he had no direct knowledge of this

meeting occurring, but recalled he may have been told about it by either a parishioner of Mortlake or another Priest.

Testimony of Father John McKinnon

Father John McKinnon was a member of the College of Consultors between 1986 and 1997. He told the Commission that these meetings were “eminently forgettable” because Bishop Mulkearns was not a good chair. He said that Bishop Mulkearns would not mention if a Priest was being moved because of an offence against a minor, and that the consultors would not ask because there could be many reasons why a Priest was moving (including that some Priests had a tendency for restlessness.) He also said that sometimes Bishop Mulkearns would give the impression that he was not going to tell the consultors’ anything, and so they would not ask.

Father McKinnon also spoke about the culture of the Church more generally, and told the Commission that Priests could be emotionally immature, particularly if they entered the Seminary at a young age. He attributed this in part to the celibate life of a Priest, but noted that a person could develop well if they had solid friendships. Father McKinnon said he was not sure whether Seminary formation was different now in relation to matters of human sexuality than it was in the early 1950s when Father McKinnon attended.

The hearing continues tomorrow with continued testimony from Father McKinnon.