

### ***Testimony of Cardinal George Pell***

Senior Counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Gail Furness SC, told the Commission that four witnesses had made allegations against Cardinal Pell, and that lawyers for those witnesses would question the Cardinal on those matters.

After some preliminary questions about Cardinal Pell's current role as Prefect for the Economy and his authority over Vatican finances, Ms Furness asked about the newly-established Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and the special tribunal to consider abuse of office by bishops in relation to the abuse of minors. Cardinal Pell said he was not a member of these, but fully supportive of their work. He also clarified recent reports which suggested that bishops were not obliged to report offending to police, saying that the position of the Vatican is that the law of the land should be followed.

Speaking about Australia, Cardinal Pell said that he favoured a national redress scheme because it would show that payments are not dependent on the decision of the Church. He said that no matter how independent the structure may be, a Church-initiated redress body might always be seen as subservient to the Church.

He told the Commission that he was not there to defend the indefensible, because the Church had made enormous mistakes and is working to remedy them. In many places including Australia, he said, the Church "has mucked things up and let things down."

Questioning then turned to Cardinal Pell's early years as an assistant priest in Ballarat. He had been ordained in Rome in 1966 and continued study there and then obtained a doctorate at Oxford University before returning to Australia in July 1971 to take up his first placement as an assistant priest at Swan Hill.

Cardinal Pell told the Commission that at the time (the early 1970s), there was a predisposition to believe children when it came to allegations of abuse, and agreed that there was an instinct to protect the Church from shame. He said there was also an overestimation of what could be done by psychiatry and psychology, and a general tendency not to report to civil authorities; that people were not prevented from doing so, but they were also not encouraged.

Ms Furness asked Cardinal Pell about whether he had any criticism of the way Bishop Ronald Mulkearns (who testified last week) handled matters. He said that the destruction of documents (which he learnt about in 2013) was unacceptable, and that the way Bishop Mulkearns dealt with the offending by Father Gerald Ridsdale was a catastrophe for victims and the Church. He agreed that there appeared to be a case for Bishop Mulkearns to answer before the newly-established Vatican tribunal.

Cardinal Pell was questioned at length about his knowledge of rumours of sexual abuse of children by Monsignor John Day in the period between Cardinal Pell returning to Australia in July 1971 and a newspaper article being published about his offending in August 1972. Cardinal Pell said that he probably heard some gossip, but could not remember exactly when he heard it because it was more than 40 years ago. He also reminded Ms Furness that Cardinal Pell's parish at Swan Hill was 200km from Monsignor Day's parish of Mildura, noting that there was not much contact between the two populations.

[Editor note: Monsignor Day died in 1978 without being charged with a crime.]

Ms Furness then asked about Cardinal Pell's next appointment as an assistant priest at St Alipius parish, Ballarat East, and specifically about the offending of Christian Brothers Dowlan, Farrell, Fitzgerald, CCK and BWX (who were the subject of last week's proceedings.)

Cardinal Pell said that apart from reports that Fitzgerald was giving the boys a kiss as they left – which was viewed by many as a harmless eccentricity of an old man – he had not heard much else. In relation to Dowlan, Cardinal Pell said that in the early 1970s, he heard information about harsh discipline and other infractions possibly of a sexual nature. When asked what he did about it, Cardinal Pell said he mentioned it to the school chaplain, who told him that the Brothers were aware and had it in hand. Dowlan left the school shortly thereafter.

When referred to statements by students Timothy Barlow and Timothy Green who said that the abuse by Dowlan was common knowledge amongst the students, Cardinal Pell said that he had heard from a student who he considered to be an honest one or two fleeting references to misbehaviour which he concluded might be paedophilic activity.

Towards the end of the testimony, questioning commenced about Father Gerald Ridsdale, who was also an assistant priest at Ballarat East with Cardinal Pell for 9-10 months. He said that he had not heard any gossip about sexual offending by Ridsdale and that while Ridsdale taking boys away on overnight camps stood out as unusual, he thought that the presence of a large group of boys was a useful precaution against wrongdoing.

The hearing adjourned shortly after the discussion about Ridsdale. It is likely that further questions about Cardinal Pell's relationship with and knowledge of sexual abuse by Ridsdale will continue tomorrow.

The hearings resume again at 8am.