

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continued its public hearing into Case Study 35 today. There was just a single witness, former director of the Catholic Education Office, Monsignor Thomas Doyle.

Testimony of Monsignor Thomas Doyle

Monsignor Doyle was the Director of the Catholic Education Office in Melbourne from 1979 until 2010. He conceded that he did not have special training in education or management when placed into this role.

Monsignor Doyle explained that the CEO had regional educational coordinators whose responsibility it was to look after schools in a particular region, as well as a chairperson for primary staff.

Monsignor Doyle was taken through many items of correspondence relating to Father Searson, initially from his time at Sunbury parish and then while at Doveton school.

A letter from Searson's former assistant priest, Philip O'Donnell (who testified in this hearing) said that Searson was psychologically unsuitable to be a pastor of any parish, and noted that he had caused deep personal hurt and had been caught shoplifting.

There were many other examples of incidents involving Searson at Doveton, all of which were included in various items of correspondence. These included:

- pointing a handgun at students who were cleaning the toilets;
- offering another student who was scared of the dark his handgun;
- killing a cat in front of children by swinging it around his head;
- showing children a dead body in a coffin;
- making children sit on his lap during confession;
- tape recording confessions;
- making students kneel between his knees during confession;
- cuddling and patting students in the confessional;
- holding a knife to a girl's chest;
- striking a boy; and
- defaming a student.

Monsignor Doyle said that he reported these incidents to the Vicar General and to Archbishop Frank Little, but without the Archbishop's action, nothing could be done to discipline or remove Searson from the parish or the school. This was also the case because the school was under the authority of the Parish Priest, who was the "employer" of the Principal and staff.

Monsignor Doyle said that he expressed constantly his desire that Searson be removed from the parish to both the Vicar General and the Archbishop, but that Archbishop Little did not do anything about it. From the documentation, there appeared to be numerous references to the need for better evidence, saying that the allegations were "substantial but not substantiated."

Monsignor Doyle was challenged by both Counsel Assisting the Royal Commission Stephen Free and Commissioner McClellan that he could have done more to ensure the welfare of the students,

notwithstanding the inaction of the Archbishop. They proposed that it was Monsignor Doyle's responsibility to protect the students.

A list of grievances prepared for a meeting with then-Bishop Pell named a number of problems. They included matters relating to school maintenance (eg, lights removed from classrooms, gas heaters not working), harassment of staff, and aspects of his behaviour towards children. Notably, the only complaint of which appeared to indicate he posed a risk of sexual misconduct was that he Searson unnecessarily used the children's toilets.

It was noted that Searson finally received a canonical warning for defaming a student, but it was commented that this was absurd given the gravity of other behaviours.

It was noted that Searson stayed on at the parish and school for another 11 years following these complaints being made, and it was not until he was investigated by the Melbourne Response established after Archbishop Pell replaced Archbishop Little that he was placed on administrative leave.

On cross-examination, counsel for former principal Graeme Sleeman suggested that if a proper investigation had been conducted by the CEO in light of all of the complaints made against Searson, then he might have been convicted for his behaviour. [Note: Searson pleaded guilty to the incident of striking a boy and received a good behaviour bond. He was not charged with any other offences.] Counsel for Mr Sleeman also proposed that financial pressure was placed on Mr Sleeman to stay in his role as principal because he had a personality which could cope with Searson, and that following his resignation, Sleeman was prevented by the Archdiocese from getting another job in Catholic education.

In cross-examination by counsel for survivor Julie Stewart, Monsignor Doyle admitted the response to Searson was "woefully inadequate."