

Royal Commission Case Study 28

Ballarat Diocese

TJHC update



Thursday 10 December 2015 – Day 13

Day 13 of the Royal Commission's public hearing into allegations of child sex abuse by clergy and religious in Victoria's Ballarat Diocese commenced today with Fr Eric Bryant continuing to give evidence.

Fr Bryant gave evidence about a priest whom the Royal Commission has given the pseudonym BPB. BPB became an assistant priest with Fr Byrant. Fr Bryant said he thought Bishop Mulkearns was assigning BPB to him because BPB might have had a nervous breakdown. Fr Bryant gave evidence that he had not been told BPB had had previous complaints of offending against children made against him.

Fr Bryant told the Commission he received a complaint about BPB's conduct from a teacher who had been told by a parent who lived in BPB's previous parish.

He told the Commission that after receiving the complaint he met with school staff and the principal to put in place management procedures for BPB including that BPB not be on the school premises by himself.

He also said he spoke to BPB and told him that he did not want 'him being anywhere near children or alone with children'.

Fr Bryant told the Commission a further complaint was made to him and that he had taken his concerns to the Bishop's office and that he, the school principal and the parish 'were put under extreme pressure, rather unjustly, because...we weren't informed of what had happened in the previous parish'.

Fr Bryant told the Commission that when he was told in his first consultants meeting in 1982 that Gerald Ridsdale was a homosexual he in no way concluded that Ridsdale had been interfering with children.

He also told the Commission he was 'positive' the use of the term 'homosexual' in consultants meetings up to at least 1986 was not a shorthand way of referring to persons against whom allegations of abuse against children had been made.

Fr Bryant gave evidence that he only became aware Ridsdale was an offender against children after Fr Bryant finished being a consultant.

Asked by Commissioner Murray if he had seen any changes over the years about how priests ensured the safety of children, Fr Bryant told the Commission that there are now protocols and approaches in place relating to contact with children, including with altar servers.

He told the Commission that he believed there were still a number of 'older priests' who were 'still in denial about the pedophilia thing'.

Monsignor Glynn Murphy attended Bishop Mulkearns' consultors' meetings as the bishop's secretary and was chair of the Special Issues Committee which the bishop set up in 1993 to advise him in relation to sexual abuse complaints against clergy and to advise on ways of assisting, in particular, Ridsdale's victims.

The Commission heard from Mons Murphy that the Special Issues Committee was made up of a retired magistrate, a general practitioner, a woman, a police officer and a priest with clinical psychology qualifications.

Mons Murphy was questioned about the way in which BPB had been dealt with and his knowledge of BPB's offending against children, and about consultors' decisions concerning the movements of Paul David Ryan against whom allegations had been made of inappropriate behaviour with a child.

Mons Murphy told the Commission that the only advice he would have given the bishop about priests 'with any questions marks over them' would have been that they 'be removed immediately and indefinitely pending any investigation'.

He said that under the code of canon law there is no restriction on bishops or others reporting child sexual abuse to the police.

Mons Murphy was asked a number of questions about the way in which the diocese approached civil claims against the diocese in relation to child sexual abuse.

He told the Commission the 'default' position of the diocese and the Church more broadly at the time was that it would vigorously defend the claims.

Asked about the workings of the Special Issues Committee, he told the Commission that three or four cases of historical child sexual abuse were dealt with by the committee and that these cases were, in accordance with the protocol setting up the committee, reported by the bishop to the police.

The hearing continues on Friday.

Contact: Michael Salmon 0417 495 018