

Royal Commission Case Study 28

Ballarat Diocese

TJHC update



Monday 14 December 2015 – Day 15

Day 15 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 Bishop Brian Finnigan finalising his evidence to the Commission.

He was asked some further questions from lawyers representing abuse survivors about his knowledge of the movement of priests in the Ballarat Diocese while secretary and member of Bishop Mulkearns' Consultors Committee from 1979 to 1997.

It was put to Bishop Finnigan that evidence he had given about his knowledge of Ridsdale's offending against children was different from the evidence he had previously given the Commission in a private hearing.

Counsel Assisting the Commission put it to Bishop Finnigan that he had not given evidence in a way that had assisted the Commission and that it lacked compassion and had not been candid.

It was put to Bishop Finnigan that he had constantly distanced himself from any knowledge of child sexual abuse by priests to protect himself and the Church. Bishop Finnigan said he disagreed with this assessment.

Bishop Finnigan told the Commission that the Church needs to be more thorough in assessing candidates for ministry, that a more urgent approach needs to be taken in dealing with accusations and that a priest proven to have abused a child should be immediately removed from ministry.

Fr Brian Mc Dermott was parish secretary to Bishop Mulkearns from 1985 to 1990 in Ballarat.

He gave evidence about a meeting of priests in 1980 about Gerald Ridsdale and the problems that people were having with him in Mortlake. He told the Commission that he had been unaware of a boy living with Ridsdale in the presbytery in Mortlake until recently.

Fr McDermott was taken to a letter written by Mrs BAE to Bishop Mulkearns after she had met with Fr McDermott in Melbourne about Ridsdale abusing her son BAF. In the letter she asked that Ridsdale be removed from all contact with boy.

Fr McDermott told the Commission that while some financial assistance might have been given to Mrs BAE Ridsdale was not moved from Horsham immediately.

When put to Fr McDermott that his actions had been inadequate he responded that 'at this stage, perhaps naively, I still had confidence that the authorities would take proper action'.

Fr John McKinnon, a member of Bishop Mulkearns' College of Consultors, told the Commission that he recalled the consultors meetings 'going round and round' often without an agenda.

He told the Commission that while he was part of a program in the early 1980s designed to help improve the emotional maturity of priests issues of child sexual abuse were 'pushed under the carpet' and that he didn't think 'the clerical culture has moved' much.

'I think how on earth are we going to change the culture? I think the church would never have done a Royal Commission on itself...we need people from outside looking in... it's so hard when you're part of a culture to recognize what it is like. I think we need help...help that's hard for us to face.'

He said he had never discussed Ridsdale with Mulkearns: 'we didn't get together much and talk about what's going on or what the vision was...'

He also gave evidence about celibacy and the impact it could possibly have on a priest being able to develop an understanding of the sensitivity and sacredness of children.

He said he thought there is a big overlap between the issues of child sexual abuse within the Church and the issues of church culture and Catholic attitudes to sexuality.

Like many of the priests who have given evidence in this part of the Ballarat hearing Fr McKinnon was taken to the minutes of a number of consultors meetings and other documents in which the behavior and movement of offending priests, including Ridsdale, Ryan and Day were discussed.

Fr McKinnon said he had little or no recollection of the meetings.

The hearing continues on Tuesday.