

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Ballarat — 28 February 2013

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Ms A. Ryan.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee, I welcome Ms Ann Ryan. Thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation, committee members will ask questions relating to both your submission and the evidence you provide to us this afternoon. Again, I thank you very much for being before us today. Please commence when you are ready.

Ms RYAN — My name is Ann, and I have lived my entire life in the Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, living a very active Catholic-based life until 1997, when the flame died forever.

The CHAIR — Please take your time, Ann.

Ms RYAN — I loved the teachings and believed to the depths of my soul. I attended Catholic teachers college in Ballarat and taught in Catholic schools in this diocese for 28 years. It seems fitting that I am here again in Ballarat to speak to this inquiry. I am so grateful for such an opportunity, because hopefully we are moving towards truth, justice, peace and some kind of recovery.

I come to speak for the boys I taught, whilst being unaware of the dire situation many of them were in at the time. I am their voice, seeking a hearing, being believed, achieving some degree of justice at last, seeking empathy for their struggles as they live their lives amongst family and friends. The years from 1982 to 1997 were personally fraught with anguish, calling for help from the church authorities — namely, the bishop of the diocese, the diocesan pastoral council, the Council of Priests, the special issues committee — through letters, personal visits, participation in diocesan planning and events. It was a call to challenge, and begging almost, but the responses were devoid of genuine feeling for the victims.

I need to ask again: why did the bishop, the Council of Priests, the special issues committee, the diocesan pastoral council — all the representative bodies of the people of Ballarat diocese — not hear the depth and enormity of what was taking place? Why did they not act to protect and care for all the vulnerable children who had no voice? Why did they respond so remotely and coldly to my efforts? Why did the Sisters of Mercy not take some appropriate action at the time? And more than anything, I still wonder at the silence of the Catholic community.

Because of inaction from within the church I began to use my voice more publicly. I had come to know some older young men who had been affected, and with them we contacted Broken Rites. I have continued to write letters to our local newspaper, the *Standard*, whenever the opportunity arises. I participated in a *Four Corners* program in 1996 to try and raise issues, and a public forum in Ballarat in the same year. I have personally supported a few of the young men that I came to know after the court hearing in Warrnambool in 1994, when this particular priest was tried. Two of these young men have since passed away. During this latter time of my particular struggle, in 1996, both the principal and the parish priest connected to my parish and school actively threatened my teaching position if I continued in the public domain. So I resigned from teaching in parish school in 1996. That is my short version of what I have contributed to the inquiry. I have other more supportive evidence, if you feel it might be needed.

The CHAIR — We have read your submission. The paper you are speaking of, would you like to speak about that? Or is there any more — —

Ms RYAN — It is mainly just to do a chronological, year-by-year type of thing, that is all.

The CHAIR — I know the committee members will want to ask questions of you, Ann.

Ms RYAN — Okay.

The CHAIR — Can I ask: you very rightly point out in your submission, and just now in your evidence, that you were there and you taught those boys during the time as a teacher. Understanding that they have gone through a tremendous amount, what do you think they are looking for, from your understanding?

Ms RYAN — Well, it is such a long time; I do not have contact with any of them anymore. So I would think they would be looking for some of those matters I suggested — like a voice, being heard, being believed, being cared for.

The CHAIR — Thank you, and I think you did say that it was, ‘Why were they not being heard?’, and that you think that is what they need, to — —

Ms RYAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — have been heard and have been listened to?

Ms RYAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Yes; thank you.

Ms RYAN — They had nowhere to go as young boys. I mean, what they were experiencing was totally out of their childish domain.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr McGuire — Thank you, Ann, for your testimony and your submission. I would like to ask you: you were saying, ‘Why did they not act?’, and yet you have had a lot of correspondence yourself directly with Bishop Mulkearns. Do you believe that that reflected a broader and a mandated Catholic Church approach to any of these sorts of allegations? What is your belief about why they did not act?

Ms RYAN — Simply put, I think everybody knew what was happening and did not behave appropriately.

Mr McGuire — And the reasons behind that? Do you feel that that was a — —

Ms RYAN — Protection, damage control.

Mr McGuire — And that was a mandated approach, what, across the church?

Ms RYAN — By mandated, what do you mean by that?

Mr McGuire — Well, a specific strategy and, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do’.

Ms RYAN — I do not know. I do not really know about that. It is hard to know what goes on behind closed doors. I was not privy to conversations and meetings where those sorts of things might have been consolidated. But I do — part of me — I acknowledge that at the time the bishop was — he did not have the appropriate leadership skills, not that that is excusing his approach. I hold the collective body of priests guilty.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mrs COOTE — Thanks, Ann, very much indeed. We are beginning to see from people coming to present to us just what a courageous thing it is to do. So thank you for being here and sharing your submission with us. You said before, ‘the silence of the Catholic community’, and then you went on, in your answer to Mr McGuire, to talk about Bishop Mulkearns and said that you felt that he lacked the leadership skills.

Ms RYAN — Yes.

Mrs COOTE — Do you still believe that there is a conspiracy of silence here in Ballarat and there is a silence of the Catholic community, and that the current bishop has the leadership skills to be dealing with these issues? Do you think things have changed?

Ms RYAN — There is a new bishop, I think. I am not aware — I do not know anything about him. The prior bishop, Bishop Connors, I do not think he — I only had the one or two meetings with him, but he struck me as not being on the same page as the people who needed help either.

The silence of the Catholic community — I don’t know. My point of view is that even talking among some of my Catholic friends, they just do not want to hear, they do not want to know, they do not want to engage. Some

do, others don't. In the early days none of them would. They all thought I was cranky. But I would have thought by now that, you know, most Catholic families have their children. If they were really truly thinking about more of the things that have been in the public eye in recent years, some sort of class action — you would think they would have enough power to initiate some sort of collective action, to ask for the truth, you know.

Mrs COOTE — So there does not seem to have been, from the bishops you have known, any sense of movement?

Ms RYAN — No movement, no.

Mrs COOTE — Any movement at all? So it seems to be more of the same.

Ms RYAN — Not out in the public domain. It is all sort of in-house, and I found that, even when I had discovered who some of the families were in Mortlake, and the parents, even though they were heartbroken, and the boys were only young at that stage, there was no way — I could get them to go to the police. Some of them went to the bishop and were received the same way I was — no productive outcomes — but there was no way they would go to the police.

Mrs COOTE — So do you believe still, under your terms, the silence of the Catholic community, that today they still would not go to the police here in Ballarat today?

Ms RYAN — Some maybe would. I am not sure. I have totally removed myself from the Catholic community so I am not really sure of the conversation at the moment, no.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you very much indeed.

Ms HALFPENNY — I am just looking at the letter that you received from Bishop Mulkearns in response to a letter that you sent to a number of people, and it makes reference to a parent that came to see him to complain, obviously that something had happened with their children, and the letter from the bishop says that:

He was satisfied that this action was appropriate and did not wish to take the matter further. There was no threat or reaction to threat.

Do you know what that means — this thing about threats?

Ms RYAN — No, I cannot recall what that might mean at all.

Ms HALFPENNY — So following on from Andrea in terms of people not being inclined to raise it or speak out about what has gone on, I am not sure if it is spread from the church or — —

Ms RYAN — I would have to see the full context again. I am sorry I cannot quite remember.

Ms HALFPENNY — Okay.

The CHAIR — It is quite all right if you cannot recall.

Ms RYAN — I cannot remember, I am sorry.

The CHAIR — That is all right; thank you.

Mr WAKELING — Thank you Chair, and thank you very much for your concern on this very important issue. Can I just take you to the time you were at the school? Could you perhaps provide an explanation to us, as the teacher? We have heard from students and parents, but as a teacher, what was the culture like within the school, as a teacher? How do you believe the culture of the school was in dealing with these types of issues? Is this something that — was there a culture within the teaching, among your colleagues, that issues like this would be something of concern to your colleagues, that they would want to have raised? Or was there a culture of perhaps turning a blind eye?

Ms RYAN — We were not told. You see, I discovered this after the priest had left the parish. We were not told at the time, and that is where I am asking the question of why the Sisters of Mercy did not initiate some action at the time. Maybe they did. Maybe they did say something to the bishop and the priests and wanted to

do something, maybe they were blocked, who knows. I do not because I did not have the information at the time or the questions for them, but this is what I mean. This was all happening and I was oblivious to it while I was teaching there. It was a small school, only about 70 enrolments, and when this particular parish priest came to our parish he immediately engaged with the children and he had these, you would say they were probably the introductory type of games — video games — in the presbytery and other sorts of games, you know, like table tennis and stuff, and apparently the principal of the school had given permission for the grade 5 and 6 boys to go over there at lunchtimes.

Apparently the priest had asked if they could, so off they went, over there. And we had no knowledge of what was going on, and it was into the priest's second year of tenure there that one of the mothers of a victim — actually three of her boys were victims — went to that principal and said to her that something funny was going on because, 'I was messing around, playing with Peter the other night and happened to accidentally touch him inappropriately, and he said something and I said, 'I beg your pardon, what did you say?' and he said, 'That's what Father So-and-So does'. The mother came straight up to see the principal, and the sad part of this story is that this is the mother who complained to the bishop's office one week after this priest was put into the parish; and 18 months down the track, it is her again with another of her boys. By the time this priest left, her three sons had all been abused.

So this is how the principal became aware of it. The principal did not tell us as a staff. She told her colleagues. There were three nuns living at the convent at the time — two teachers and one pastoral worker — and the pastoral worker was the one who went and confronted the parish priest about the allegation. Initially he denied it, but she persisted and he relented and then they contacted the bishop and he was removed straightaway.

We were told the next weekend from the pulpit, that, 'Father has had a death in the family and he is finding it very difficult to deal with, and we are not sure when he will be back'. That is what the parish was told. And we sort of all believed it until a few months later when we had our annual parish fete. This particular parish priest strutted back into the arena. I never really liked the man and I could never tell why, but I noticed that some of the people in the parish — because so many families really came to absolutely love this priest because he drew the children in and he loved the children and he visited families and played with the children and he just had a new way of presenting the mass and the Eucharist and there was a really good feeling towards him — but I picked up, when he came to this fete, that there were parents who had been his friends, but there was a real feeling of unrest and, 'What is he doing here?', sort of thing.

So I kept my ear to the ground over the next couple of weeks and asked a few questions, and a couple of mothers alluded to inappropriate behaviour. No detail. I never got any detail from anybody, and then it was about 1989 when the diocese ran a program called Renew, and I was the coordinator in our parish, and I was part of the outreach group, and one of the mothers of a victim, as it turned out, used to be my helper in the library and one day — I do not know why — she just burst out with all this story of her son.

So that is how the story became known to me and that was seven years after the priest had gone. She was able to tell me for sure a number of other families that she was pretty sure were also involved, but no-one had ever done any talking to each other or looking after each other. They had not been to the police, they had not sought counselling, they had done nothing. So with the names that she did give me, I felt I just had to take the risk of knocking on the door and asking the question, which I did, and every one of them joined the conversation. Then that is when my particular action started, trying to restore a bit of, I do not know, justice, whatever, because I was thinking, 'All those young boys'. I had noticed the change in their behaviour. They had become very sexual. They were always in the dictionary, in the encyclopaedia, and every time you went to see what they were reading, it was something sexual and they were laughing. It was persistent, all the time. I did say to the principal, because I was a librarian but I used to teach her class two afternoons a week while she did principal duties, 'The boys are behaving in a very sexual manner. This has been going on for weeks'. She agreed. She had noticed it. She did not tell me then, either, what it could have been related to. I said, 'Perhaps it's early onset of puberty', and she just agreed with me, and I believed it.

Mr WAKELING — So she was previously aware of allegations?

Ms RYAN — She is the one who the mother came to in 1982. No, she did not know when I said that to her; I must retract that. She did not know at that time. This was when it was all happening and none of us knew what was going on.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you for providing a letter dated 1993 from the Catholic diocese, because it gives us a further insight into the thinking of Bishop Mulkearns at the time. I understand that you have provided other correspondence that we as a committee have received only today and we will review that. One sentence that I would just like to take to is on the second page. It says:

At the time, he himself —

that is one of the priests who was moved, Ridsdale, who was moved from parish to parish all around the Ballarat diocese —

came to tell me that I would be receiving a complaint against him. I told him he would have to leave the parish immediately and undergo psychological counselling before any further appointment would be considered.

There is absolutely no reference there to any contemplation that the bishop would take that information of a complaint of sexual assault and report it to the police.

Ms RYAN — No.

Mr O'BRIEN — That is right; that is how I read it. Could I ask you to elaborate, from your discussions with Bishop Mulkearns and the culture that existed at the time, on how you consider the church hierarchy took its duty to report a crime and investigate it properly?

Ms RYAN — I think they think they are beyond the law and that is about it, really. I do not think they had any intention at any time of taking anything to the police.

Mr O'BRIEN — He does not actually refer to it as a crime. Further on he says:

I ... regret that I was not aware of this fact or of the strong tendency to denial which is characteristic of this illness.

Even then he is not talking about it as a crime; he is trying to say that it was an illness.

Ms RYAN — That is what the bishop used to keep saying when I talked to him, too. He classed it as an illness. The things he would say were, 'It was an illness' and 'At that time we really weren't aware of the enormity of these sorts of actions', and he denied just knowing that this man had committed, you know, all over the diocese.

Mr O'BRIEN — That was his initial response to you and that is what prompted you to write this letter?

Ms RYAN — Yes.

Mr O'BRIEN — Can you take us back to the 1989 correspondence and how that series of denials was effectively broken down by you, as best you can?

Ms RYAN — In 1989 I was a really naive Catholic. I believed I was just going to visit the bishop, make him aware of this stuff, and he was going to act, put some action into place. But he just resisted everything I had to say and denied knowledge of certain complaints or allegations and could not remember parents having been to see him. Yet when he read his 1982 diary he was able to establish, 'Oh yes, a couple of parents did come to see me'. I think that indicates what his attitude was like. He was not sufficiently moved when they were in his presence telling him what had happened to their boys and then some years down the track he had to confirm that 'Oh yes, they did come to see him' because he was sort of vaguely saying that he has no memory of any specific names or details being given to him. Yet those two sets of parents went to visit him and asked for some sort of action and help, as many parents apparently had done before.

I do not think at any time he had any intention of bringing this person, the priest, to face the law and the responsibilities of his actions. I do not believe the bishop had appropriate support, and it was a terribly huge thing to be trying to get his head around himself. He was not a good communicator, so he tended to go into himself. So I cannot see how he would have gone and sat down with appropriate people, or if he did, I do not know who was advising him.

There were a couple of letters I sent that he never got. One time I raised that with him he said, 'Perhaps, Ann, if you put "personal and confidential" on my letters they will get to me', and they did. Since that time I have been

thinking that not all the information was given to the bishop. He got enough. If he was a strong leader he did have enough information to take some really strong leadership, but I do not know that he was always given all the information. This where I have queries about some of the priests.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you; your correspondence is most helpful in that regard.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Ann. Could I on behalf of the committee thank you for coming before us and providing the evidence that you have today. We do appreciate it and it has been most helpful.

Ms RYAN — Thank you. Good luck with the rest of your work.

Witness withdrew.