

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 26 March 2013

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Mr G. Hill.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee I welcome Mr Gordon Hill, otherwise known as Hilly, and 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. If your evidence contains adverse comments about any individual or individuals, I will request that you do not refer to the name or names of those people.

Mr HILL — Yes, I understand.

The CHAIR — If you do make an adverse reflection about a person and name them, I will suppress that evidence. 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 in relation to the evidence that you are going to give to us this morning. Again, we thank you very much for being before us. Please commence.

Mr HILL — First up, I would like to apologise just in case I say something inappropriate. If I start to swear, it is just my way because I live out in the bush. I am not a city slicker.

The CHAIR — I think we will manage.

Mr HILL — I also look after cancer patients; that is where I work. A lot of the time I work there is voluntary because of my situation. I live out on a property of 54 acres. It is mainly to do with cancer patients because I lost my wife to cancer a few years ago.

I will start off with when the sexual abuse started. I was about five years old when I was first brought in. I was actually cleaning the stairway when one of the nuns at the home — can I give the name of the home?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr HILL — St Joseph's, which we all class as Joeys. While I was cleaning the stairway I was pulled up by the ears and taken into a room. There was a priest in there. This is the first recollection I have of sexual abuse. I was told, 'You'll be cleansed'. At that stage I did not know what 'cleansing' meant in their terms because I was only about five years old. I was stripped off, given a drink and told to stand up and then sit on a chair. But then my memory leaves me because of whatever they gave me to drink. I do not know whether it was drugs or what. All I remember afterwards was that about a half hour later I was kicked out the door and told to take my rags with me and I went back to work.

When I talk about rags, my uniform or work clothes were bib overalls — a lot of people would not know what bib overalls are — and a pair of leather sandals. That was it. Back to work. That was when the sexual abuse started. That went on for at least seven years until I went to the next section of the home. A lot of kids in the home who did not have an outside link were used, as I class it, as slave labour. We did not have people working there as paid labour. This home was a self-contained orphanage. They had their own farm, their own chook house and their own garden. They supplied vegetables to other institutions; they supplied milk to other institutions. That was where the slave labour started to come in.

I also have to tell you now that in this home, unbeknownst to me, I had two brothers — an older brother and a younger brother, who went into the home at different stages to me. My older brother knew a little bit about home life because he went in a bit older than me. I was only two and half, not quite three, when I first went into this home. I did not get out until the early 1960s, so I spent about 15 years in this place.

It was not until I was about 10 or 11 years old that I went from the boys area of working, where I used to clean the classrooms and the dormitories. There was no schooling whatsoever. The only time I went into a classroom was to clean the blackboard and all the papers off the floor. I did not learn how to read or write until I got out of the home many years later, when I went onto a farm and taught myself how to read and write.

Going back to the sexual abuse, as I said it when on until I was about 11. Then I went to the next section and thank God it stopped. But a couple of the priests who were there used to love certain kids. They were predators. I was classed as — I do not know how you put this — a 'bobby top', which is somebody who has been circumcised. They had a preference for those sorts of kids, I presume. The sexual abuse got worse as it went on because they had different stages of it. I do not know how you say this: as just a child it was sexual abuse and

then it went on to a physical and dungeon type of thing, a B and D type of situation. I do not know if you know about B and D; you would be tied up and all this sort of thing.

I will not elaborate much more on that because I have other things to talk about, including mental abuse. I did not know my surname until I was about 11 years when I went from one section to the next. I was classed by my locker number, which was 29, and that number is like a brand in my head. As I said, I had two brothers; we did not know each other. The idea was that if you had brothers who went in there but had no link to the outside world, they could segregate them to do the work because there was nobody to complain to. If you did complain, you could only complain to one of the older boys, or the priest or the nuns, who were the predators. You were a victim. A lot of people do not understand that — that anybody could do that sort of thing, but it did happen.

With mental abuse, they kept putting you down all the time. Once every three months you would be paraded with about five other kids to see if you were eligible to be fostered out or adopted. I was always picked when I was working, which was in the dirtiest clothes. You were working so hard and they picked you out and put you in a line. Then when you did not get picked they would turn around and say, 'Nobody wants you. Nobody cares about you. You're just a bloody nobody'. Afterwards you would think, 'Did I comb my hair right? Why have I got a dirty face?'. It was because you were always in your bloody working clothes.

I had trouble with my clothes, because we only had two sets of clothes: Sunday best to go to church in, and your working clothes, which were the normal bib overalls and sandals. The sandals were all right but they wore out and you only got two a year. Sometimes some of the other kids would see your shoes, which were better than theirs, because you never used your good shoes, and for five years I wore one set of shoes when I had to, but with two right feet. I did not have a left shoe and a right shoe. Even today I have trouble. I have to buy two pairs of shoes every time I buy a pair of shoes, because my left foot and my right foot are two different sizes. If I stand on my feet for too long, my feet swell up and I have trouble with them. But that is only a little, minor thing compared to some of the thrashings I got.

In relation to slave labour, I went into the dungeon area. If you were very naughty, or they thought you were naughty, they wanted you to be a scapegoat. One of the things I was put in this dungeon for — and at this stage I was working on the farm milking cows, because we had our own milking sheds and farm — related to the time I was coming back at about 6 o'clock one night after milking, which was about 800 metres from the farm to the main orphanage. We walked past a hall and you could see through the window that there was a fire in the building. I sent the other kid I had with me to get somebody to help and to say there was a fire in the big hall. I went in and I was pulling down the curtains on the stage when one of the nuns walked in from the passage to the main orphanage. I got caught. I was pulling down the curtains, but that did not matter. It was 'You were there, so you must have done it'.

The punishment for that was what they used to call battle stations; a lot of people would not know what that was. In the hall you would be stripped off in front of all the other kids, and you had the big kids, one on each arm and one on each leg and you would be stretched out. Because we had cut up a couple of their whips, they resorted to what they used to call drill sticks, and I am going back a few years. They used these drill sticks in the army. They were about 1.5 metres long. I was thrashed with that across the back and the buttocks. I am talking about being stripped to your bare skin. After about 10 whacks with one of those they broke the bloody stick. These sorts of sticks do not break straight across; they always break on an angle. I have got scars. When I started to bleed on this side they opened me up and turned round to the other side, because I was making a mess on the floor. They started on this side. I have scars on my waist straight across where I was beaten, and of course I was bruised everywhere else. And because I made a mess I was in trouble again, so they threw me in what they used to call a dungeon, which was a four by four room away from the orphanage down by the incinerator. That is where you were left with a bucket, a soundproof door and a light above you. There were no windows. For your bed you had a concrete slab and three or four hessian bags for a blanket. I stayed down there for about a month. Now people say, 'How do you know it was a month?'. That is easy: every Friday they used to burn the leftover papers from the orphanage school classrooms, and that was right alongside the dungeon. You would hear them open the door of the — what do you call it?

The CHAIR — Incinerator.

Mr HILL — Yes, which was a steel door, and you could smell the smoke, so you knew it was Friday. That is how I knew how long I had been in there.

From then on I went into the area which was the garden area, and that is when I started to lose my teeth. I got caught eating carrots out of the ground, because I was only there to pull the weeds out. They wanted to make an example of the kids, and it was either an engineer's hammer or a pair of pliers and they would pull a tooth out, or they would whack you across the face with hammer and it would break your teeth. Later on in life I got to a dentist to try to get new teeth. I got the false teeth okay, but they cannot line them up in the jaw properly, because the jawbone has been broken and the teeth have been that badly damaged and the bones are that damaged that I cannot wear false teeth, so I have never been able to eat an apple, and never been able to eat a raw carrot ever since.

I will go on to slave labour. These are some of the things that are only skimming over what happened.

Slave labour: we used to sometimes be hired out to parishioners from the church. They had their own church, and other people used to use the home's church as well. If you were eligible and old enough they would hire you out to these people. You might be away for three months, four months, but some of the abuse that actually went on in those places and where you actually slept and lived — —

You never got paid, but the home got paid; so they were double dipping. They would get subsidies from the government for keeping the home open; they were also getting subsidies from people that you were hired out to.

There was one place I worked in just out of Mildura, which is Merbein. That was fruit picking, and then grapes and on an orange farm. That was not quite so bad, because they had younger people. But the worst one of the lot was at Buangor. I am a non-drinker because of that pub I worked at, because I could not stand the smell of stale beer. I used to go in and clean up the pub for the old guy; actually he was the dad of one of the priests from the home. I am not going to give you any names, but they were the dad and mum of the priest that used to be the parish priest of the home. That is how I got the job.

My living quarters there were an old tool shed that did not even have a lock-up. They had a cousin that had come back from Ararat, which was a mental institution, and I used to get abused — and I mean sexually abused — in that place there too, because I could not lock the door. It only had one of the old-fashioned latch locks that would just clip down and it would slide out. When I actually tied the door closed from the inside to hold it closed, they would just get the wire cutters and cut it open. I was there for 11 months until the old fellow at the pub, the father — he had very bad emphysema. This is how it used to be. In that place they used to tie you up on the bed, stretch you out and blindfold you, but you could smell.

The smells of certain things even today take me right back to those times: diesel can take me back to when I was five years old; kerosene can take me back to when I was seven and a half. And I relive that all the time. People say I am a workaholic. Maybe so, but the idea of working such long hours that I do, even though a lot of the work that I do is for charity, is that I try to block it out. You cannot go to bed at a night-time and sleep, because the memories come flying back at you.

Social skills, I had none. When I finished up getting out of the home itself, I did not have any social skills. I did not know how to read or write. The first time I got off a bus to go across the street, I got this bloody big hand grab me on the shoulder. I did not know there was somebody behind me, but it was a copper. He said, 'Are you stupid?'. The first thing you learn in the home is to answer a question with a question, because if you say yes straight off, then you get verbal abuse. But you ask why. 'Can't you read the stop sign?', he said. I did not know what a stop sign was. I did not know what money was because I had never handled money. He was going to take me down to the station, but no way: I am out of the home, I do not have to go back there, and nobody is going to take me to jail, so I bolted. This copper was a big boy and a bit podgy, but he could not run as fast as a homie. He never caught me, and I have never seen him again, thank goodness.

Social skills, going on that still: I could not relate to people so I used to hide myself away. I lived with my mother — or 'that woman', as I used to call her — for 11 months, or I was supposed to have, but I would keep running away from there. I got a job at the same ordinance factory where she worked. When I ran away, I used to hide. I was virtually a street kid, but I still used to go to work — I wouldn't not go into work. I used to hide in the garbage cans, which were those big skip bins. I always used to catch one that had one of the lids you could lift off, and you could get in the other way — so the two-lid jobs.

I lived in there for about three weeks until it got really wet — I am talking about Echuca. Then I found out that I could go, if I was smart enough, and get into the football ground, into their change rooms, and of a night-time

that is where I used to sleep — on their massage tables. I was up in the morning before anybody was up and back to work, and nobody knew where I was living. When the job there finished I got a job out on a farm, which suited me right down to the ground because I was isolated in the country. I used to only go into town once every three months. My boss used to pay me an allowance on the job, and the rest would go straight into a bank account, which was fine. At least I only had one person to deal with. That is when I started to learn. When I came into town, I used to go to the ABC Shop. I would buy a tape and an ABC book. The tape would tell you what you wanted, and you would have the book to show you what you wanted. So I started to learn how to read and write and so on.

When I went from one job to another, they would ask for a résumé. I did not know what a résumé was. It is all right for somebody who has been to school — they know exactly what a résumé is. I said, 'I do not know what you are talking about'. He said, 'Write out what your skills are'. I thought, 'What bloody skills is he talking about?', and I said, 'Look, I'll work for you for a day for nothing, and if I'm any good, you can put me on, otherwise I'll go somewhere else and find work there'. A lot of the time I'd only work for an hour and I would go up to the guy who was the boss and say to him, 'Finished. Done. What do you want me to do next?'. He said, 'Impossible'. He would go back and check to see what I'd done. 'I'm finished'. He started to scratch his head and he said, 'There's none of this bloody-well business of working for a day for nothing. You can bloody-well stay with me'. It has been like that ever since. I have worked the hard way.

What I used to do to find out how to get social skills was to watch other people, how they worked. My mind used to tick over and say, 'I can do it quicker, better and easier than the way they do it'. They might have done it by a book. Some of the jobs I have done people used to say, 'That has taken my normal workers a day and a half to do. You've done it in four hours. What have you done wrong?'. They would see what I'd done and they would say, 'It's been done properly. How did you do it?'. It is up there.

The CHAIR — Hilly, can I interrupt you there? I am sorry to interrupt your train of thought, but committee members will want to ask questions relating to your experience in your submission, but before we get that, is there anything further you would like to say to the committee?

Mr HILL — Only that what I put down as a submission I think I put on the bottom, because it was a pretty rushed one. There is a lot more involved in that questionnaire that I did not say. Mine was rushed through because I live in Western Australia, not over here. One of the things I always thought was, 'Get away from the place as far as possible'. But it never gets away from the mind.

The CHAIR — Certainly. You did very well in your submission, so thank you. You provided us with a lot of detail, and certainly your evidence just now also has a great deal of detail. Thank you very much for that. Just going to people like yourself, obviously experiencing what you did experience in your younger years, what do you think victims or survivors of that abuse — the very physical abuse that you describe and the sexual abuse — would like to have from the church or from the government? What do you think they would like to have?

Mr HILL — I would like the government for a start to pay back. They did not bother to come and check these kids out. Foster families now are a lot different to home families and what we used to go through. A government agency is supposed have inspectors. They used to come to the home. We were isolated. We were the ones who had to cook scones and tea and everything for them. They used to go down to the parlour. They never used to come and see the conditions. If they did come and see the conditions of the home, it would be, say, one classroom that had been thoroughly cleaned out, and it was prearranged. They only saw the good side. They did not see the poor kid who was scrubbing the stairs, who had the whitest hands or the whitest knees because he had been using White King. I used to have some of the cleanest hands and knees in the bloody home, because White King is pretty powerful stuff.

That is one of the things I would like them to pinpoint is to get these guys to go out and get details from some of these kids who are in homes. The church should be turned upside down and all the rot taken out. A lot of these bishops, cardinals, priests and whatever should get out from behind their robes and admit what actually happened, because we, the kids, were the ones who made them their millions in the church.

The CHAIR — Do you think they knew what was going on?

Mr HILL — They knew. At our home you would see different priests go at different times, and you used to wonder why. Later on in life you found out. They knew that somebody had dobbed them in, so they would transfer them to another parish or another home, so we would get another one in. That was the trouble. They would bring ones who had been transferred that they would want to get rid of out of there. They were predators too. All they were doing was transferring them from one home to another.

Mrs COOTE — Hilly, thank you very much indeed. That learning-to-read story was a great endorsement for the ABC Shop. You did well. I would like to just talk about reporting to the police. You said in your written submission that you tried it once and that you were just a number. You were no. 29 and it was a waste of time, and after that you did not bother anymore. Could you just tell me at what stage you first went to the police and why specifically?

Mr HILL — That is funny, because I was still in the orphanage at that stage. Because we had trouble us kids were always hungry. Anybody who lived in Ballarat — and this is going back to the late 40s and early 50s — would know that alongside the home used to be an old, pardon the expression, dunny run. In the old days they did not have toilets in the houses, they just had these bowls. This was where they used to have the dump. In that dump area were blackberry bushes, and they used to flourish. We used to get underneath the fence of the home and go in there and have a feed and a half. But if you ever got caught, you were in trouble because blackberries always stained the mouth. I got caught over there and a couple of bigger kids caught me and they actually picked me up and threw me into one of these blackberry bushes. These bushes grow wild, and it is like getting into a big thorn and then trying to get yourself out of it — you cannot. Well, you do.

I got that sick that I camped in one of the cleaning areas where they used to clean the cans. I was away from the home for maybe two days, and I was camping in their cleaning area, which was a fair way from the home itself, because of the smell apparently. When the workmen came on the Monday with their next lot of cans to clean out, they found this little kid in a corner underneath these old wheat bags. I was crook, so they called the police and they came and picked me up and took me to the hospital. At the hospital they gave me injections and fixed me up. I was there for about 3 hours. Then they must have realised I had come from the home, so they rang the home.

On the way over there I had two policemen, and doctors and nurses had come to see what condition I was in. They wanted to know, so I tried to tell them, which was pretty hard to do because it is an authority figure you are talking about, and you have to be careful what you say to an authority figure as a kid. I tried to explain that I came from the home and that I got abused and all this sexual abuse and how I got scars on my body. It was like talking to a brick wall: 'Nobody does that sort of thing. I know the home. I know because we've picked up runaways before'. I said, 'I wasn't running away; all I was trying to do was have a feed'. But the condition I was in was why I was in the hospital. They said, 'You're wasting your time'. You are talking to somebody in authority — somebody you teach kids to look up to: 'If you're in trouble, go to a policeman'. When you get that sort of reaction — no way.

Ms HALFPENNY — I just want to ask you a bit about schooling at the orphanage and the unpaid work — the slave labour. Could you just explain, was there a school in the orphanage? How was it that you were not there? Was it because you did not want to go or because they wanted you to do work instead? What happened?

Mr HILL — That is quite an easy one. As I said before, the kids who did not have an outside link with the world were virtually picked. The orphanage does not have paid workers. They will train you up because you have no-one outside that you can complain to. If you have a complaint, you take it to an authority. Say, for instance, I am a kid who has a mum, dad or uncle who comes and sees me once a month. I used to hang off the fence like hell until I was about 10 thinking, 'Maybe it's my turn and somebody's going to come and see me', but it never happened. If you did not have that outside link, then you were top notch for what they wanted.

As far as the schooling was concerned, it was the same thing. Somebody had to clean the dormitories. Somebody had to clean up after their meals. Somebody had to do the stairs. Somebody had to cook the meals. Somebody had to do the passageways. You always had to have that passageway spotless before those kids came out of the class. The only time I saw a classroom was when the other kids came out of the class to have their morning tea, which was bread and jam, and milk. I was allowed to go in there and clean all the paperwork off the floor and clean the boards themselves.

That alone was a physical abuse from the other kids because you would still be in there finishing off the dusting of the boards, cleaning the boards down, when some of these other bigger kids would come in and strip you down. You can bet your bottom dollar that as soon as something went wrong, one of the nuns would come in and spot you with no pants on — you never had underpants or anything like that — and you would get in trouble again. I soon learned how to do the boards without having to stand on a stool to wipe them down. What I did was get the cleaner and get a broom handle and tie them up, and I was up and down. I was pretty quick. You learned your skills.

Ms HALFPENNY — So the staff then selected you not to go to school, and you never — —

Mr HILL — It was all run by nuns, and they were the worst under the sun.

Ms HALFPENNY — Just one other question, just to understand: have you ever made a complaint to the church as an adult about the things that happened to you?

Mr HILL — I made a complaint once. I went to a meeting which was run not so much by the church but a church representative called Towards Healing. I do not know if you have ever heard of that. Apparently they had a session over in Western Australia — that is where I come from — and this guy was a representative from the church. It was funny because he was going crook because there were supposed to have been 10 people in this meeting. Somewhere along the line my name came up, and I got called in to it. I did not really want to go because to me psychos just mess with your bloody brain.

At this meeting were supposed to be 10 people, but only 6 turned up. There was a young lady who had gone through a similar situation but over in Western Australia. He started talking, and after 10 minutes I could not get the gist of this guy. It had not even gotten to me as far as talking was concerned. The young lady was trying to explain what had happened to her, and he was pushing her down. I thought, ‘This is crazy. You’re getting paid by the church — which is the predator — to try to help us out, but all you’re doing is saying, “It’s all in your mind. You’ve got to get over it. You’ve got to put it aside”’. I just got up in the end on behalf of this woman, because she was crying in the end, and I thought, ‘You’re supposed to be there for comfort, not to bloody-well put them down’. I said, ‘Hang on a minute, mate. You are getting paid for this, aren’t you?’. He said, ‘Yes, but so much a head’. I thought, ‘You’ve opened a can of worms here’. I said, ‘You would be on about \$160 an hour per person’. He said, ‘Yes. How do you know that?’. I said, ‘Never mind how I know. This lady and some of the other guys would be flat out to have tonight for tea baked beans on toast or tomatoes, if they can afford it. You can go home to a five-course meal — a \$200 meal. That is going to take them three weeks to get that money. You get it in an hour’.

The CHAIR — Hilly, when did you have that meeting?

Mr HILL — That was 2004.

The CHAIR — I might just move to Mr O’Brien if I can now.

Mr O’BRIEN — Thanks, Hilly. Just one question: you referenced that you tried to get your records. Could you explain what you received, and do you have what you received still?

Mr HILL — I have not got it with me at the moment.

Mr O’BRIEN — If you could provide it, it may be telling in its absences.

Mr HILL — That took a long time, and a lot of that had come up through my elder brother, because, as I said, there were three boys and, unbeknownst to me, another two girls in another home, whom I did not know anything about until I got later on in life, which is mental abuse in my book. If it had not been for my elder brother going through the system — he wanted to do a family history, and he started to go to Open Place. Do you know that? It used to be CLAN at one stage, first off, then it went to Open Place. He went through that authority and got a lot of information back on himself, his younger brother — because I was mentioned in his references — but they could not give out information on me to him.

When it came to me he got me onto this place. It took me 10 years the first time, and I did not get any satisfaction; as usual, under the carpet, or I fell through the cracks in the floorboards, as I used to always call it. But I finally got some information back because I wanted a birth certificate. I am retirement age now, and to get

the aged pension I need a birth certificate. I bloody well finally got a birth certificate, and I got five pages of my records. Half of those pages were blanked out because of references back to other parts of my family. In all there would not be two lines of my record.

Mr O'BRIEN — Any reference to schooling or anything?

Mr HILL — No. I did not know if I had had the measles, I did not know if I had been bloody naughty or what.

Mr O'BRIEN — If you could provide those records, they would be, again, helpful, as you say, for as much as what they do not provide as what they do.

Mr HILL — Well, they did not provide anything, virtually. I have five pages, but, as I said, a lot of it is blanked out. I have them now.

Mr O'BRIEN — If you could provide a copy to the secretariat, we would be most grateful.

Mr HILL — That is in West Aussie.

The CHAIR — That is okay. You can send a copy of that through to the secretariat if you would like to. As Mr O'Brien said, that would be very helpful.

Mr HILL — Yes, that is no problem.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr HILL — It took a long time. It took me nearly 58 years to get that, but because I did not even know my own age. I always thought it was one date, and it took me nine months to get married because I could not get myself a birth certificate. In the end they sent me over a birth extract with a note. That is the closest I can get to it. At that time, when I was getting married, my own fiancé's mum said, 'He is trying to put off marrying you, girl! Bloody well come on, get him going'.

The CHAIR — It did not work!

Mr HILL — It did not work, because I was too persistent.

The CHAIR — Well done. Hilly, could I, on behalf of the committee, thank you very much for appearing before us this morning and for providing the evidence you have. It has been most helpful. Thank you very much indeed.

Mrs COOTE — Thanks, Hilly. Thank you very much.

Mr HILL — I am glad I got the chance to do it.

The CHAIR — The hearing will now adjourn until 1.10 p.m. Thank you.

Witness withdrew.