

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Geelong — 15 February 2013

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Mr J. Saric.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr Joseph Saric. I thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. With Mr Saric is Ms Helen Last. 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. The hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation, the committee members will ask questions relating to both your submission and the evidence you are going to provide to us today.

On behalf of the committee, I thank you again for appearing before us this afternoon. Please commence when you are ready.

Mr SARIC — My testimony is to the Victorian inquiry. My name is Joseph Saric. I am 69 years of age, and I am a resident of Clifton Springs. First of all, my experiences: I was given to St Joseph's orphanage, Sebastopol, near Ballarat, when I was eight years old, in 1952, and I spent three years there as my mother was unable to support me and thought I would have better opportunities there. During that time I was a victim of an obsessive and sadistic priest who punished altar boys with severe physical beatings, leaving us with physical and emotional scars. These beatings, in addition to being responsible for the care of infants, meant that my primary education was severely affected.

I returned to live with my mother in Fitzroy in 1955, around 11 years of age, and worked to supplement my mother's income. I was sexually assaulted at this time by a butcher's assistant whilst we were delivering meat to Werribee Corpus Christi Seminary. At that time I was supposed to have attended St George's Primary School in Carlton.

At the age of 12 I was placed at Salesian College, Rupertswood, and lived there for four years until I was 16. There I was again a victim of severe physical trauma caused by priests. One of the priests found me assisting a friend with an exam paper and first began punching me before bringing out a strap and beating me so brutally I was bruised for over five days.

In a later incident, a priest threw a friend of mine out of the window. It was a 2.5-metre drop. I punched this priest, who again resorted to a vicious strapping as punishment. A priest's reasoning for brutally beating me was changing radio stations to listen to the king — Elvis. This beating left me bruised again for a long period of time, and I was unable to attend the Saturday night movie.

A priest found to be a sexual offender through the Melbourne Response and still under investigation by Victoria Police was also present at Rupertswood during my time there. My awareness of his activities as a sexual offender has developed since I have spoken with victims who have told me of their abuse.

My observation: the reason I am so passionate about the Catholic Church's victims of sexual abuse is that, being a Vietnam vet, the similarities and parallels I experienced on my return home are precisely how the victims of Catholic sex abuse would feel. They have lost their dignity. It looks as though any tactics that the Catholic Church can use to make itself a winner are permissible and the victims are reduced to objects in the church's eyes. They are pariahs, unfortunate mistakes and collateral damage. I would like to repeat that: they are pariahs, unfortunate mistakes and collateral damage.

Most sexual abuse victims suffer from chronic PTSD. The best definition I could come across of PTSD was by an SAS warrant officer, and I quote:

PTSD is like a blender. It shreds all your beliefs and values and for the rest of your life you are trying to find out who you are.

It destroys your personality; the person you should have been is destroyed by trauma. If you accept that war trauma is classed as 100 per cent of PTSD, then it follows that victims of serious sexual abuse and victims of rape by priests and nuns known to them have PTSD on the same level as war trauma. That is why victims of sexual abuse by clergy and religious persons suffer from a very high degree of chronic PTSD, and to add to the victims' suffering the Catholic Church has still not recognised the depth of this damage, and it is still not delivering top-level care and support to victims.

When the Australian Catholic Church realised it could no longer dismiss these victims and their situations, it set up the Melbourne Response and Towards Healing, which are nothing less than quasi-church systems. The

Catholic Church fooled the government of the day and the public by making nothing look like something. I repeat: it made nothing look like something. The main problem with this system is that it acts as judge, jury and executioner with no reference to secular authorities or systems. The two processes are privatised. The church is not accountable to any secular authority and there is no external review of the processes. What we need now is honesty, not more denial and not more media spin, because ultimately this has led to a flood of distrust amongst victims. The fact is that the church's credibility, trust and respect from its parishioners has been lost on a scale more damaging than any financial compensation the church has to deliver. The question becomes: can any amount of money ever compensate for the destruction of the personal innocence and personal faith of so many victims who carry the scars of their experience for a lifetime?

The more I delved into the sexual abuse of victims by clergy and systems, the more it struck me: where was the moral compass of the senior hierarchy and management of the Catholic Church in Australia? The senior hierarchy, instead of practising the first commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you', has chosen a totalitarian management model of power, control and greed. I repeat: power, control and greed. The only criteria that the Catholic Church judges itself on is holding onto power, control and success. Love does not count, and money is more important than empathy and compassion for the victims of sexual abuse. The Catholic Church will only secede to a greater power than itself, and that is the state and federal governments. Law has to change in both parliaments so the Catholic Church is no longer an institution and a law unto itself. It has to answer to secular law, Parliament and the Australian people.

The best example in the modern era is the James Hardie company, which treated its asbestos victims with utter contempt. It was only when the company was brought to the Federal Court and made to pay for current and future liabilities and living costs for asbestos victims and its senior management was made accountable for the negligence that victims received legal justice. This example, as victims and the public see it, should also be the outcome of the current inquiries into the Catholic Church and its hierarchy in Australia.

The federal and state parliaments under the Trustee Act 1907 have given the Catholic Church unfettered power. It may not have been the original intention, but there is no doubt that when the Catholic Church was given its historical charitable status they applied this charitable tax-free status broadly across the whole spectrum of Catholic institutions.

There is no legal entity with a sole head in the Australian Catholic Church that can be successfully sued by victims in a civil court in Australia. This system has to change, with a government review and repeal of the Property Trusts Act, so that the Catholic Church can be sued for historical sexual abuse by its clergy. Also, at present the Catholic Church cannot be held by law as vicariously liable for priests' sexual assaults. This is very different from where employers can be held liable for their employees' crimes.

It is inconceivable that the Catholic Church can raise \$30 million for World Youth Day in 2008 and approximately \$35 to \$50 million for Domus Australia in Rome. This is a hotel for Australian Catholics to have a comfortable stay when visiting Rome and was set up by Cardinal Pell with the support of Archbishop Hart to encourage people to make pilgrimages to the Vatican.

In Australia the Catholic Church pays no council rates and has every conceivable tax exemption, and yet victims of clergy sexual abuse have to go to Centrelink — I repeat: victims of clergy sexual abuse have to go to Centrelink — for ongoing monetary support. We as taxpayers have to foot this ongoing bill, and I suggest that the amount of the money the government has paid out for the church's responsibility be brought to light and the government be retrospectively repaid.

How is it that the Catholic Church has assets of nearly \$1 billion in the archdiocese of Melbourne, which is known as the wealthiest diocese in Australia, and yet can give such paltry pastoral care and mental health assistance, no formal welfare help and very little compensation through its public process for victims?

It is up to the federal and state parliaments through the inquiry and commission to rectify these injustices. It is scandalous that a church with so much power, control and greed can have so much influence throughout society, even over those who are not followers of the Catholic Church. It is unbelievable that the Catholic Church lurks behind its beatific corporate veil, free from litigation and even criminal prosecution in the area of clergy sexual abuses. This prosecution must also look at the involvement of the church hierarchy in knowing

about the sexual offending yet moving these offenders from place to place where they have continued to prey on little children and vulnerable adults.

The governance of the Catholic Church in Australia has now slid into exhaustion, with little momentum to assist victims and church communities. The senior hierarchy, with middle management, lacks the resolution, courage and wisdom to face change. They do not have the capacity to make use of outside wisdom. I repeat: they do not have the capacity to make use of outside wisdom.

They have proven their incompetence and are incapable of administering to the needs of victims. After 17 years their inability to see that they have a conflict of interest at the core of what they have set up — a conflict which shows their mishandling — has created further misery for victims. The Catholic Church should be taken out of future rehabilitation schemes to help victims, except for providing extensive financial input to these schemes and developmental input on a best practice pastoral care program.

As a Vietnam veteran who suffers from chronic PTSD and holds a gold card as a returned soldier with total and permanent disability since July 1997, it is my experience that the only way to move forward with the Catholic Church's response to victims of clergy sexual abuse is to adopt the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the department of repatriation's responses to returned soldiers and their families as a working model. This is Australia's best practice and could also serve Australian clergy victims. I have put this forward to the committee as world best practice in caring for survivors through papers I provided to the committee earlier this week.

Where am I now? I have recommended that the post-traumatic stress centre in East Melbourne, as a professional practice centre, be consulted on the mental health care of clergy sexual abuse victims. This centre has already played a significant role in working with the federal government to inform best practice in response to post-traumatic disorders and other significant traumas experienced by veterans.

Other practical assistance to victims of clergy abuse I highly recommend include, one, that all mental health contractors are thoroughly supervised; two, that education programs are provided to clergy victims similar to the comprehensive PTSD course of three-month duration, costing about \$25 000 per participant for full psychiatric support, some live-in facilities and further outpatient voluntary participation; three, that specialist drug and alcohol programs are part of the recovery process; four, that financial counselling is made available to clergy victims on an ongoing basis; and five, that secondary victims be given professional assistance and ongoing support, with mental health assistance made available to families

My road to recovery has been long and arduous because of my complicated mental health circumstances. I have been diagnosed with chronic PTSD and other established conditions, which has presented as a need for a range of specialist assessments, attention and responses. I can confidently say I have received this help through the Department of Veterans' Affairs and the quality of treatments and practitioners have been highly professional and effective. This is what we want from the Catholic Church in Australia.

I serve as an altar server at masses at St Mary's Basilica in Geelong, and I want to highlight the person who brought me back to the Catholic faith — that is, Father Kevin Dillon, the parish priest of St Mary's. It is a long journey back to be able to participate the way I do at St Mary's church and parish. I carry the deep pain of being terribly abused as a child and as an adolescent. I also fought in Vietnam and witnessed terrible violence, but coming back to be able to participate in the way I do at St Mary's church has been made possible through my struggle to understand and live with PTSD in a more mature way as an adult victim. I have developed the capacity to forgive and let go but not quite forget, to understand myself more fully and accept myself as I am. In Good Faith and Associates, through the work of Helen Last and those who assist her, has also contributed enormously to my spiritual and personal growth and wellbeing.

PTSD destroys you spiritually because the shock and trauma destroys your inner self, your soul and who you are. To rebuild our identities and souls, we need people who understand us and are genuinely in helping relationships with us, providing professional monitoring help when needed for the many life problems that arise.

Meeting other people with similar circumstances is of vital help, as is having the freedom to move in and out of a support group without being judged. My experience of the Melbourne Victims Collective, developed by In Good Faith and Associates, has been just that, plus the group has great respect for each other's experiences. It has developed wisdom about clergy sexual abuse and provides free support to its members through professional associates.

In conclusion, I do not know of any organisation in Australia that could handle the enormous complexities of victims of clergy sexual abuse — PTSD — other than the Department of Veterans' Affairs and repatriation system as employed by the federal government. These systems need to be considered alongside other organisations such as In Good Faith and Associates which provide a holistic care and assistance model particularly to victims of clergy and religious abuse in Australia. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Joseph. Can I thank you again for coming before us to share your story and for the very insightful recommendations that you have made to us. You described the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder very effectively, and you also went on to describe certain areas where you thought changes needed to be made within the church.

Mr SARIC — Yes.

The CHAIR — I think you said that the law has to change, that the church has to answer to secular law and you wanted an avenue for the church to be sued.

Mr SARIC — Exactly.

The CHAIR — Forgive me, you might have said this, but do you feel that there needs to be some acknowledgement and an apology from the church in relation to what you and others have experienced, in addition to those things that you have highlighted to us today and in your submission?

Mr SARIC — I totally agree with an apology. But the problem I see with the Catholic Church is that they are only words. They have had plenty of practice — and Father Kevin Dillon does not come into this category — in talking from the pulpit and all the rest of it. Words are just words to a lot of these people; they do not mean too much. Words are meaningless.

Because of my Vietnam experience I like to see deeds and I like to see actions. Ultimately they show me what that person is. I have worked with a lot of men out in the field with serious problems under combat conditions. But one thing came out of all it: who would stand with me, who could I trust to stand with me, who would be the man that would back me? I would back him to the last if that be the case. To me, only deeds and actions represent a way forward. Apologies are just words. I am sorry, but that is the way I see it.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that clarification.

Mr McGUIRE — Thank you very much, Joseph, for your strength in appearing today, the evidence you have given and also for the effort that you put into your submission. I would like to go to the point where you talk about the post-traumatic stress disorder issue, because it was what I was alluding to with Max as well. We still have to get the message out to people with this report that this is something that you just do not get over, how deeply it wounds your sense of self. I found your assessment really interesting — that someone with your background can put it as bluntly as that. Can you provide a little bit more information to us on that, because the general public needs to be able to understand it in a broader perspective? The best way I can put it is that it is something that you carry like a shadow.

Mr SARIC — It is. I would like to tell you what happened to us when we came back from Vietnam. We had no debriefing; we had absolutely nothing. I left Saigon and landed in Sydney and I had to go to my other uniform. I had a ticket waiting for me to catch the plane home in civvies. I was not allowed to indicate in any way that I had just come back from Vietnam. What happens is because there is no debriefing, there is absolutely nothing. Bear in mind that PTSD was not recognised until 1980 in the DSM, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, that psychiatrists use. So up until that point — I came home in 1971 after doing nearly 22 months in Vietnam — they did not have those tools. Understand that.

We were like a lot of diggers that came back from the African, New Guinea and Korean campaigns. One of the things that mesmerised them was why these Vietnam vets were cracking up so much. There were a lot of problems with ex-Vietnam vets coming home but the government took nearly 16 years to finally wake up and say, 'What the heck's going wrong here?'. The problem with that is if you have a look at the time frame, it has taken nearly 17 years for the Catholic Church to realise, understand or try to understand — albeit by force — what is going on. So the similarities and parallels are there.

I am suggesting to you now, and this shows you what level the government has reached with the post-traumatic stress disorder people in East Melbourne, now before people come back home from Iraq, which has now finished, and Afghanistan, they bring in people, psychologists, everybody who has trained, in that area and they are debriefed before they come home. The important part about PTSD is you have to nip it in the bud as quickly as possible after you leave the scene for the simple reason that you cannot do it in the area that you are fighting because you are still keyed up. I have this in the back of my brain — you have to be taken out of the situation, which is what the PTSD or repatriation people do with you; they do the same thing. What I am saying is very, very important. Where all this has gone wrong is in the time frame and the time lag. All these initiatives have now been put in so you nip it in the bud as early and quickly as possible to stem the consequences of PTSD. Does that help?

Mr McGUIRE — Yes. Obviously there needs to be professional help. Do you think that if we put an acknowledgement in our report for victims that they are innocent, they did nothing wrong and there is no need to feel guilty, that that would be helpful at least in officially addressing that issue? Do you think that would have some value at least?

Mr SARIC — Yes. I would like to explain this. This is how I am going to compare it. War-related PTSD in its own way is different from that of victims of sexual abuse. This is where PTSD, as far as I am concerned — and I can see it from both perspectives — is different. Victims of sexual abuse never had a choice; they absolutely had no choice in what they did. Therefore their shame and guilt would be much higher than the war-related PTSD of the troops. Remember this: the diggers that went over at least had a choice. I volunteered to go to Vietnam. The national servicemen had a choice. If you were a conscientious objector, you did not go because you could not let them go; you could not let them go amongst your own men.

So the difference between war PTSD and sexual abuse is that in one case there was choice and in the other case there was no choice. The reason I realised what was going on is that I had to work on my war PTSD before I could go back to my abusers at St Joseph's, before I could go back to the sexual abuse, before I could go back to Salesian College. It is like an onion: you have to peel it back and peel it back. It has taken me 18 years through the Department of Veterans' Affairs to understand psychologically what is going on.

What happens with PTSD is that because your soul has been destroyed, you as a person has been destroyed. Where the problem lies is that you were never allowed to be the person you wanted to be. The anxiety and stress that comes out of PTSD comes from you forever trying to find out who that person was. What you are trying to do is reinvent yourself.

When I was at repat I said to the psychiatrist, 'Hey, Doc, can I get rid of this garbage? I'm just having trouble living with it'. And he turned to me and said, 'Joe, the only thing I can do for you is help you to manage it; I can help you to cope, but the scarring will always be there. The best I can do for you is for you to realise where that scarring is and get in the comfort zone where you can accept it, manage it and cope'. Even today I only just found out about a coexisting problem that I have had all my life. I will not mention it; if you like, I will mention it in private chambers, but I will not mention it in public. If that coexisting problem was not there, it may be that I would not be here talking to you today.

The other thing is that there are a lot of comorbid problems. You have to understand that with PTSD you get these complexities that play within it. With the coexisting problem I have I can understand the PTSD better because I understand what the coexisting problem is and how it interacts and coexists with the PTSD. What I am saying to you about a lot of these victims of sexual abuse is one has to understand that it is not just PTSD; it is the comorbidity problems. If they are depressive or anxious people, that depression and anxiety comes out of the PTSD because it is an anxiety and stress problem. Couple that with them not knowing themselves — because they never had the opportunity to know themselves — and that is when they start falling apart, because they do not know what is happening. It is just continuous tension because you do not realise who you are. It is that dissociative state.

One of the reasons I have coped so well is because I have learnt to disassociate and move forward. There is only one problem with that: if you do not know what the problem is, you do not know what the solution is, and then that plays up and comes back and haunts you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Joseph.

Mrs COOTE — Joseph, thank you very much indeed for a really comprehensive and detailed analysis and for your suggestions going forward. It is a really helpful submission. Thank you. Can I ask you about the Vietnam Veterans Association assistance that you said came from the federal government. That is a federal program.

Mr SARIC — Yes.

Mrs COOTE — Given that child sexual abuse by a lot of organisations, including the Catholic Church, is not just isolated to Victoria, and given that there is a royal commission coming up, do you think there needs to be a national body to deal with this issue rather than a Victorian one? Should a royal commission recommend the establishment of a model across Australia along the same lines as the Vietnam Veterans Association scenario, with qualified people, support and pastoral care? Is that the sort of thing that you think would be appropriate?

Mr SARIC — You are basically right on the money with your suggestion as far as I can see. Let me put it to you this way. One of the things I see with the Victorian parliamentary inquiry is that now that the royal commission is in, it is going to be an absolutely huge problem. In my opinion the question to be asked is: does the Victorian Parliament get in with the federal government and work with them, or does the Victorian government hand all its responsibilities to the federal government under the royal commission? The problem that we all have is the amount of expertise, the capacity, the ability, the resources. Only the federal government could possibly, from my experience, with Helen's help — —

We have to design a unique program specifically for victims of sexual abuse through the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health. My suggestion is that the committee works with Professor David Forbes. I have put a pro forma in your submission. My suggestion is that everybody who has an interest in this should go to Professor David Forbes, who is the head of ACPMH in East Melbourne, to get advice on how to set up this body. Now that this has become a federal as well as a state issue, I honestly believe this.

One of the reasons I believe this is because the repatriation system works in every state in the commonwealth, and I believe also in the Northern Territory. They are the only ones with the expertise and the trained clinical psychologists. Mr Neil Woodger is a clinical psychologist formerly with the national Vietnam Veterans Association. Chris Mackey, of Chris Mackey and Associates, who was a registrar in 1994 at the repatriation hospital, is a clinical psychologist specialising in post-traumatic stress disorder in victims of sexual abuse. Then there is the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service, which is the intermediary body. Do you mind if I read this out or do you just want me to talk?

The CHAIR — Just very briefly, Joseph, can I reassure you that this parliamentary inquiry will be working very cooperatively with the royal commission. There is a long way to go with that, but rest assured that we will be assisting where we can.

Mr SARIC — Yes. But as I said, my personal opinion is there absolutely nobody in Australia that has the expertise of the ACPMH, which is paid by the government to intervene in military situations under the Department of Veterans' Affairs and repatriation. The military only gets advised by them. What I am saying to you is that the military itself, when it gets comes to repatriation and looking after diggers, has virtually no say at all. It is left to those two departments to do the work.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you very much indeed.

Ms HALFPENNY — That is really great information. We have had various people discuss gold cards and how to respond to health issues. You have really put that in a well-organised way. Following on from that, in terms of the gold card idea, are there other aspects to that other than health? I suppose what you are talking about is a scheme that would look into all the research, that would provide services to those who need them and that would be separated from the church so that you did not have to ask, 'Please may I have one counselling session', but you would actually have a right to it. I am assuming then that you would be proposing that the church would contribute to that fund. Are there other areas where you think there ought to be support for people who have been abused by people within the church?

Mr SARIC — There is one thing I am absolutely definite on: under no circumstances, in my personal opinion, should the church ever get involved in rehabilitation, unless it is under strict guidelines and the

government vets it, because the problem with the Catholic Church is the old story that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That is really the problem there. Organisations like Helen's — there are a lot of organisations out there that can contribute to this. The problem, as I said, is that sexual PTSD, although there are a lot of problems that are the same — there are coping problems, there is aggression, there is anxiety, there are a lot of issues there — is unique. What I am trying to say is that because it is unique to itself it has to have a unique response.

As a perfect example, if the committee went and saw how wards 17 and 18 at the repatriation hospital work and how they run their PTSD courses, and if the committee got a sample about what those wards are about in conjunction with specific people like Helen and all organisations that contribute with specialist psychologists and psychiatrists, then I think you would find that you can get a very good way forward. The fact remains that the royal commission will also be caught with this in the same way as you people. It will have the same dilemma. They are the only people who I can see are capable of putting in first-class practice and giving these people the best movement forward to reinvent themselves.

Mr WAKELING — Joseph, thank you very much for your comprehensive submission. It was very useful, so please be assured that the committee will be using this information for our deliberations. I bring you to page 10 of your submission, where you talk about what you actually did with your abuse in terms of taking it further. You have indicated that you have never reported to a religious organisation and that you have not gone to the police either. You go on to say that you have not gone to any religious organisation or compensation system because you do not trust them to handle your complaint fairly. Has your view changed on that, or is there a system change that you would expect as a consequence of the work we are doing that may develop a program where you would then feel comfortable to finally have your matter potentially dealt with by the police but also dealt with in respect of compensation?

Mr SARIC — Let me put it to you this way: I was very impressed with the Vietnam veterans counselling service. I was at the repatriation hospital for four months because of a mental breakdown. The stabilising process under crisis was absolutely magnificent. Under the repat system, although I was working for the Ford Motor Company at the time, I was paid by the government to be there. Ford did not pay for that. I did not have a gold card at the time, but they go in there and assess you. I spent four months there. It took me a long time because the thing I did not know at the time was that not only the PTSD from Vietnam but also the childhood stuff and everything else was contributing. At that point I did not know that. What I am saying to you is — and I can honestly tell you — if it was not for the repatriation system and the help they gave my family in every possible way, I possibly might not be talking to you here today, because the stress is absolutely onerous.

Now, what I am saying to you is that now that I have found out about what happened to me, or now that I have accepted the fact — and this is one of the things I do very well — I can dissociate. One of the things I do very well is dissociate and move forward. The problem with that is that you still have to face your issues because they are still niggling you. What I am saying to you is that currently under the church scheme I would not go to them and I would not trust them. I can tell you that as for their standards, it is not even worth talking about. Their pseudo-quasi system is not even worth Third World status. That is how much I detest their system. It is all about them, nothing about us. But I can honestly tell you that it was the repatriation system and the Department of Veterans' Affairs that got me on an even keel. From there, I went then backwards.

Mr WAKELING — Thank you. I appreciate your feedback with regard to compensation. With respect to taking your matter to the police, have you given that thought? Is that something you may give further consideration?

Mr SARIC — I have changed my mind on that. One of the things you have to remember about this, as Max has pointed out, is that one of the problems you have when you get abused as a child is that you get very anti-authority. You get very paranoid, and I still suffer from that today. Consequently, trust for authority drops right off. Now that I know what systems are in place, now that the government has reviewed that position and now that it has looked into all these problems, I will be honest with you that I would be quite comfortable in going back and talking to the police now. I was not comfortable before, because I did not believe their systems were properly in place. That was my experience from what I saw with repatriation through the Vietnam vets when I went for counselling and major rehabilitation.

My mind has now changed. I know that the systems have improved a hell of a lot. The reasons that I believe the Catholic Church should not be involved in any of this are: one, it is a criminal offence; two, it does not have the resources; three, it becomes a conflict of interest. It is like having Dracula in charge of the blood bank. Under no circumstances, I presently believe, should the Catholic Church be involved in any rehabilitation, because it is like a red rag to a bull. It is like the military trying to rehabilitate Vietnam vets. It is not going to happen.

Mr O'BRIEN — On behalf of my colleagues, I thank you again for all the detail and support you have provided with your testimony. I would like to pick up, in a sense, where your statement ended, and that was with the support that had been provided to you by people like Helen Last, and you mentioned Kevin Dillon. Particularly I would like to take you to the support that victims have provided for each other. We saw the support the three of you gave each other. Not only for my benefit but for the benefit of other victims who are out there and contemplating what to do, could you outline some of the benefits and the ways you have mutually supported each other and the importance of that, given that you effectively came forward only in 2011?

Mr SARIC — This is what I picked up through the PTSD course, which was absolutely integral to my coming back to some sort of normality and finding the real Joe, not the associative Joe and not the one who was lost. How we did that was that there were 10 of us on the course and they got us together into a cohort sort of situation. We were cohort 13. They got us to work together. They built up the camaraderie, the same as we had in Vietnam, if you would like to put it that way. There were rules that governed how we communicated with each other.

For instance, anything that was said in the room was not allowed to go outside the room, and that was fair enough because then everybody could trust each other. Nobody was allowed to talk about it. If you spoke about something confidentially, it was not to be taken out of that room. That was where the trust was built. The thing that was very good with that was that if you felt overwhelmed with the blood and guts and war and that sort of thing — and there were a lot of guys there with different experiences to me — they did not look down on you if you moved away from it. So what I am saying is you need an environment where you feel comfortable, where you feel safe, where you are not looked down on, you are not a pariah, you are not an unfortunate mistake and you are not collateral damage.

Mr O'BRIEN — Turning to the sexual abuse issue, have you found that with your experience with Helen Last and Kevin Dillon, others you have spoken to, and the other victims, Max and Chris? Could you just take us to the sexual abuse support mechanisms you have found and elaborate on those for us?

Mr SARIC — Yes, no worries. In some quirky way, despite the difference between sexual abuse and war PTSD, there are also similarities and parallels. They all call Max, Chris and me the Three Musketeers; we always talk together, we always work together and wherever we go it is always the Three Musketeers. It is that camaraderie. It is the same as the war stuff. It is the same with Helen. When the PTSD gets complicated and you cannot understand it, she talks to you. She gets you to understand what is going on because, as I have said, she is very good at coexisting and comorbid problems, and that is what got me back.

When I talk about Vietnam and the repatriation system, it is surprising how similar the parallels are. The only part where the parallels are not the same is the paedophilia and pedantry problems, which have caused another layer of a problem, if I can put it that way. But the treatment of it, the way you work together and the faith you have in the people who look after you — you can talk to them and they do not look down on you — that is very, very important. That is what you do not get through the Catholic Church.

Mr O'BRIEN — The one person you did not touch on then but you have mentioned before was a person who gave evidence this morning, which took great courage as a serving member of the Catholic Church.

Mr SARIC — Absolutely.

Mr O'BRIEN — Can I ask you to outline the importance you have felt Kevin Dillon has played in helping you to deal with your issues and in his work for other victims, given his testimony this morning and other things.

Mr SARIC — Yes. I would like to put it this way. Father Kevin Dillon is an honorary member of the Geelong Vietnam Veterans Association, and so was I. When I did the PTSD course — and I will be quite honest with you here — they talk about spirituality in a not so much vague but generic way. They do not care if

you pick Buddhism, they do not care if you pick Hinduism, Islam or whatever you want to pick, just as long as it brings out your spiritual self.

One of the problems I had as an altar boy was that I loved serving mass, but because of circumstances every time I made a mistake I got the living hell belted out of me. I could not understand a God who was so punitive; I could not understand a God who could love when all of this did not work. I told Father Dillon the story and he said to me, 'Joe, would you like to come back and serve mass at St Mary's for me?'. There you are; that was the start of it.

Then through the Elijah Institute in America there was a seminar at the Baptist Church in Barrabool Hills. They had a spiritual course for victims of sexual abuse. That was the final clincher that made me realise, 'Hang on, Joe, there's another way to this'. It taught me from a spiritual point of view that you have to forgive, you have to let go and forget about revenge. That gets you back on your feet again and to start getting rid of the paranoia. I have to say that I cannot get rid of all of it, but I am doing my utmost to cut it to the level that I am comfortable with. You have to remember that PTSD is so complicated because for a lot of these people it has been left for so long, and there are things that have absolutely built up in lots of ways that they do not have control over because nobody has ever bothered to do something for them.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Joseph, on behalf of the committee, I thank you very much for your time this afternoon in appearing before us and for providing your evidence. It has been most helpful. Thank you again.

Mr SARIC — I would love to say that if the committee for any reason needs my help as to how to move forward in the best way, I am more than happy to help you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that offer.

Mr SARIC — My pleasure.

The CHAIR — That now concludes the public hearings for today. I will ask members of the gallery to vacate the room. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.