

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Geelong — 15 February 2013

#### Members

Mrs A. Coote

Ms G. Crozier

Ms B. Halfpenny

Mr F. McGuire

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr N. Wakeling

Chair: Ms G. Crozier

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#### Witness

Ms S. Higgs.

**The CHAIR** — On behalf of the committee, I welcome Ms Sandra Higgs. 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. 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 your submission and your evidence provided today. Again thank you, Sandra, for being with us this morning. Please commence.

**Ms HIGGS** — I was molested when I was nine years old. We belonged to St Mary's parish and my dad was very involved in the parish. When he went and reported it he thought that the priest was put in a monastery but, no, he wasn't. He was moved on to another parish. Our front door in Myers Street was right on the footpath. He used to come, and, being the eldest, I had to answer the door. He literally shoved me up against the wall in our hallway, kissed me on the mouth and around my neck, and pushed himself up against me. At one stage he tried penetration. I cannot remember how long it went on for, but I was so glad that my dad had the presence of mind to know that as a child I would not understand what was happening and what I was saying. Just every opportunity he got he did it to me. I was very frightened of him. I was never comfortable around him again after that, and it was never discussed after Dad reported it.

Then years ago I found out he was a parish priest with the primary school, and it just brought everything back. I rang the cathedral. I asked to see somebody, to speak to somebody about it. I ended up getting an appointment in their presbytery with monsignor, somebody taking notes and another man. When that report came back the monsignor said that I 'prattled on'.

So after that I went to St Patrick's and spoke to another monsignor, and he was very helpful. He suggested we go to Broken Rites, and I did. After a time I could not go anymore because it was just too emotional. They suggested we get a solicitor, which we did. I got a payout, and that was not my intention. My intention was to get rid of that priest. I had three visits to St Pat's, and in the last visit the monsignor had the paedophile priest there on the other side of the table. He denied it to start with, and then he kept saying 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I hurt you or your family'. I just yelled at him then because he said, 'What about my family? What about my family?', and I said, 'What about mine?'. Anyway, the monsignor took us to the door to escort us out, and he said, 'We know he's guilty'.

Through my schooling I had problems learning. I think my childhood was so unhappy. I was unhappy, really unhappy, as a child. Then when I was 16 I got pregnant. I have a son, and he was taken off me and adopted. The priest at St Mary's made arrangements for me to go to St Joseph's Foundling Home, and that was just horrific. I think the whole process was debilitating. I was uncomfortable. We had to go to a psychologist of our own, then one for the Catholic Church. Then we went to the QC, and he made the decision as to how much compensation we were to receive. I was made to sign a document to say that I would not disclose how much I was given. When it was presented it was, 'Take it or leave it, or take us to court'. I was not in a position to be able to go to court, and the paedophile priest had died two days before we were to go before the court.

I have illnesses which I believe are caused from all the stress in my life, caused by being molested. I have met some lovely priests in my lifetime, I really have. For many years I did not feel comfortable around any of them, but over the years I have learnt to find acceptance. The whole problem is my children do not want to know about it. They do not want to discuss it. I feel sad about that, but I have a very supportive sister beside me, so she has been my lifeline. Christ said to us that one day we will have the Antichrist amongst us, and we have. They are the hierarchy of the church. They are not doing God's work; they are doing the devil's work. How it is going to change, I do not know; I really do not know. They still don't get it. They still do not understand, and they are supposed to be intelligent men. No, I don't get it; I really don't.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for telling us your story and your insights. You said that a priest apologised to you — —

**Ms HIGGS** — No, he did not apologise.

**The CHAIR** — He did not apologise, but the monsignor acknowledged that he was guilty.

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — You did not want a payout.

**Ms HIGGS** — No, that was the last thing on my mind. I just wanted him out of the church.

**The CHAIR** — Out of the church. You have just described the hierarchy as the Antichrist. For victims such as yourself, there are other issues that you say in your written submission that the church should do. Could you describe in your own words what you think the church needs to do?

**Ms HIGGS** — I think the church needs to — not the church, the hierarchy — stand up and admit to their mistakes and to apologise to all of us victims for what they have put us through and change things. Get out and live with the people. Do not sit up there on your high horse with the best of everything when we are suffering. They have got to change the way they structure things. I think probably now that this has all come to the fore, in the seminaries they are really going to look at people in a different way. They are going to counsel people, I would hope. I am a practising Catholic now. I wasn't for a long while. My faith means a lot to me, and I just think it is very sad that this is what has come about now.

**The CHAIR** — Elements of pastoral care that were described by Father Dillon earlier this morning?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Thank you very much for your fortitude and your evidence. You have acknowledged that it was said that there was an admission given, so can you explain on the record what happened then with the police process? Were you ever encouraged to go to the police?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes. After that I went to the Geelong police station and gave a statement. I am so glad that things have changed now, because I was so uncomfortable. They took me into a room. Thank God I had a female police lady, but while I was giving my statement policemen were walking in and staff were walking in and out, and I felt very, very uncomfortable. I know now that is not going to happen to anyone else. It was very debilitating.

**Mr McGUIRE** — What happened then? Just take us through that process.

**Ms HIGGS** — They just asked me the questions. They took it all down. But I did not receive a copy at all of my statement that I gave to the police.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Did you find the way you were treated by the police and the church unsatisfactory, or how would you describe it?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, very unsatisfactory.

**Mr McGUIRE** — What would you like to see changed there?

**Ms HIGGS** — I know that they have a task force now, so they are not going to use that process obviously that they used before. Like I said, I want the hierarchy to stand there and apologise and do something to change the whole system.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Would you like to see it clearly defined — no more excuses, this is the crime and it should be investigated by police? Do you think it would be important for this committee if we looked at a specific offence to stop cover-ups and these sorts of things?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, I do. Yes.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Do you think that is a vital issue?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**Mrs COOTE** — Sandra, thank you very much indeed. When you went to Broken Rites, was it they who encourage you to go to the Melbourne Response and to go through that process?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**Mrs COOTE** — Had you heard about the Melbourne Response before that?

**Ms HIGGS** — No, it was actually the monsignor who suggested that I go there.

**Mrs COOTE** — Oh, okay. Broken Rites helped you get prepared?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, they did. They were very helpful, but it just got too much because, like today, you are sitting there listening to people's stories and it is so sad and it is debilitating. Every time I went I would come out and I was shaking like a leaf. Just my whole life, I have had no confidence.

**Mrs COOTE** — We know how hard it is coming to see us, but it must have been really difficult to go into the Melbourne Response. Who did you deal with there?

**Ms HIGGS** — Chris MacIsaac, and there was another lady. I cannot remember her name.

**Mrs COOTE** — Were they compassionate?

**Ms HIGGS** — Oh, yes.

**Mrs COOTE** — They were understanding of your circumstances and helpful?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, they were.

**Mrs COOTE** — Before you left the meetings, did they look after you — give you a cup of tea or perhaps help you out the door?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, they did.

**Mrs COOTE** — They were kind and supportive?

**Ms HIGGS** — They were very supportive.

**Mrs COOTE** — You felt that the Melbourne Response itself, once you got in there, was okay. Did you come across Peter O'Callaghan?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, I had to go and see him prior to the church offering me \$25 000.

**Mrs COOTE** — Was he kind and compassionate too?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, he was, but I just felt that he was all for the church and not for the victims.

**Mrs COOTE** — Did he make it very clear to you that if you were to receive money, that you would not be able to speak to anybody else, and was he firm about that?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**Mrs COOTE** — Was that intimidating or concerning?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, it was to an extent. I thought if they are going to give us money, that to me is a cop-out. I would have been much happier if they had said to me, 'We are really sorry that this priest did what he did to you and that it has affected your family. We will try and change things', but no.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — You said that when you first decided to go and complain to the church or contact the church, because you had heard that the priest was still practising and he was actually in charge of a school.

**Ms HIGGS** — He was the parish priest.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Was that around 1993 that you first contacted them?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — On that issue, did they show any concern about your complaint? What you were doing was trying to protect other children from the same happening to them.

**Ms HIGGS** — The only one who showed anything was the monsignor we saw at St Pat's. I honestly believe that when Powell came down, he got rid of him and he was moved to a parish because he was too sympathetic to the victims.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — When you went in there, there was the monsignor. How many other people were there?

**Ms HIGGS** — No, just him and there was my sister, who had been molested by the same priest, and another lady.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Did you hear anything about what happened to the priest through the church — any feedback as to what happened, where your complaint went or whether they investigated anything?

**Ms HIGGS** — No, my sister found out that he was in a retirement home for priests, and he had bowel cancer. He died two days before we were to go to court.

**The CHAIR** — Sandra, before we go on, I believe you asked to see the archbishop at some point. Did that happen?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, I did.

**The CHAIR** — Did that happen? Was that request granted?

**Ms HIGGS** — No.

**The CHAIR** — Who did you make that request too?

**Ms HIGGS** — His secretary. I had no idea who it was.

**The CHAIR** — You had no reply regarding that request?

**Ms HIGGS** — No.

**The CHAIR** — Nothing?

**Ms HIGGS** — No.

**Mr WAKELING** — Sandra, thank you very much for your presentation. Can I perhaps just take you back to the time in which the abuse was occurring. Can I ask about Father Fasciale, did he have a strong relationship with your family? I am interested to understand the culture and to understand what we call the 'grooming process' as to whether it was a random act or was this something that he had ingratiated himself with your family?

**Ms HIGGS** — No I think it was not a random act and at that time, before he started molesting me, our mother had left our home, and I think he took that opportunity because he knew she was not there. There was nobody there to protect us, and because Dad was involved in the parish — we had fundraising things going on in our home — so it was not unusual for him to call in, have a cup of tea.

**Mr WAKELING** — So the fact that you were with your father and because he was not the mother, do you think that was a causal factor as to why he felt he had a greater opportunity to build that relationship in your family, which caused this to occur?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**Mr WAKELING** — And were you aware of this occurring to anybody else?

**Ms HIGGS** — My sister; she was five.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Thank you so much, Sandra, for coming forward with your evidence.

**Ms HIGGS** — You are welcome.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Following on from Mr McGuire's question about when you first approached police. You described your interview and the helpful police lady. What happened after that?

**Ms HIGGS** — After my sister had given her evidence, there was a policeman there who was suggesting things we could do, as in going to court. He was very helpful but in the end he said, 'I cannot help you anymore because my hands are tied'. Immediately I thought, 'Okay, there is something not right here'.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Do you recall the year that happened?

**Ms HIGGS** — No, I cannot, really.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — That is all right. Are you able to tell us the policeman's name?

**Ms HIGGS** — No.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — That is fine. What happened with the complaint at that point, that you made to Geelong?

**Ms HIGGS** — I don't know, I have no idea.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Just to get the words accurate, you have said in your written statement at page 98 that:

There was a sergeant at Geelong police station who kept us up to date on the proceedings he was very professional.

Could you tell us what you mean by 'professional'?

**Ms HIGGS** — Because he kept in touch with my sister and with trying to help us get the right avenue of — I cannot think of the word. In that respect he said that there was not a lot we could do, other than after the priest had died, and he just said, 'Maybe you can think about taking a class action to court'. But none of us were in a position financially to do that.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — And in the last bit you said:

A few months later he rang my sister and told her he could not do any more for us. He was told to back off.

You just used a slightly different term then when you said 'hands are tied'. Can you recall exactly what he told your sister, as best you can?

**Ms HIGGS** — That was all he said to her, 'I can't do any more to help you, my hands are tied'.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — And 'I have been told to back off'. Was that a phrase you heard?

**Ms HIGGS** — No.

**Ms HIGGS** — No, I just thought that is what would have happened.

**The CHAIR** — Ms Halfpenny has another question for you, Sandra, if that is okay.

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — I just thought, from what you were saying before when you were talking about your father, it seemed to be around the time that this abuse first happened, and that your father actually complained or raised it, or said something about it?

**Ms HIGGS** — I did not tell Dad, my sister did. He went up to St Mary's parish and said to the priest there, who was in charge because the dean was in hospital, sick, that this is what he had done to my sister and I, and he said, 'You get him out of here, now'. Dad told me in later years that the next day he was gone.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — But you do not know where, just that he disappeared?

**Ms HIGGS** — No, and the priest that my dad was speaking to actually became a monsignor. When we were going through our cases they rang him and asked him: did he know who we were; and he said no.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — And who was the priest?

**Ms HIGGS** — I cannot think of his name.

**The CHAIR** — That is all right, if you cannot remember.

**Ms HIGGS** — He has died now anyway.

**The CHAIR** — If his name does come to you and you feel it was — —

**Ms HIGGS** — O'Regan.

**The CHAIR** — O'Regan?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. Sandra, are there any remaining remarks you would like to make to the committee?

**Ms HIGGS** — Yes, I would like to read something out, if that is okay.

**The CHAIR** — That is fine.

**Ms HIGGS** — My dear people, I am here to talk to you about being a victim of sexual abuse by clergy. I am not asking for your pity. What I am asking for is your compassion and prayers, not just for myself but for all victims. The process we go through in presenting to the church the story of what happened to us is very traumatic and debilitating, and it demands that we have to relive the trauma again, sometimes over and over. I know some victims have taken their own lives because they cannot cope with the pain of the whole experience and process. They need your prayers and very much your understanding.

With God's help, I have been able to find forgiveness for my perpetrator, as well as compassion for his family. Like my family, they are victims too. I am very blessed to have conquered my demons and moved on with my life. But I too strayed along the way. I stopped going to mass, and I did not pray anymore. But along the way something strange was happening. Eventually I felt myself being drawn back to mass.

God gives most of us crosses to bear in life and lessons to learn. I realise this was my cross to carry. I found my faith again and I found peace within myself. It really is a good feeling. Our faith is a gift from God for all of us, so please pray for all victims of clergy abuse so that they can find peace in their lives. I am no longer a victim. I am a survivor, and with the grace of God go I.

**The CHAIR** — Sandra, thank you very much for those final remarks. On behalf of the committee, I thank you very much. We do appreciate you being before us, and your evidence has been most helpful.

**Ms HIGGS** — You are welcome.

**Witness withdrew.**