

FairfaxDigital

NEWS | MYCAREER | DOMAIN | DRIVE | FINANCE | MOBILE | RSVP | STAYZ



THE AGE
1788-2002

Research, invest and monitor
your portfolio in one easy location

Home > National News > Article

Friday June 14, 2002

- ▼ news
 - [breaking](#)
 - [national](#)
 - [world](#)
 - [opinion](#)
- ▶ [business](#)
- ▶ [technology](#)
- ▶ [sport](#)
- ▶ [entertainment](#)

- [classifieds](#)
- [jobs](#)
- [property](#)
- [cars](#)
- [place an ad](#)

- extra
 - [personal finance](#)
 - [travel](#)
 - [education](#)

- subscribe
 - [home delivery](#)
 - [eNewsletter](#)

- [archives](#)
- [keywords](#)

- [go](#)

- today's edition: [am](#)
- [last 10 days](#)

- [site guide](#)

Ballarat's good men of the cloth

By Peter Ellingsen
June 14 2002

It was a triumphant homecoming. The tall, gangly figure, once a sickly youngster, was back with credentials that marked him for greatness. At 30, George Pell had not only proved his sporting prowess, trying out for champion football team Richmond, but had been to Rome, and earned an Oxford doctorate. It was a combination that made the young Father Pell a glittering prize when he returned to the Ballarat diocese in 1971.

In those days, priests, especially in Ballarat, the most devout of Victoria's four dioceses, were all-powerful, and Pell, who would go on to be archbishop of Melbourne and then Sydney, was not only a priest, but a priest blooded in Rome. Few doubted he was a prince of the church in the making.

But as he went about his first Australian appointment, the diocese in which he had grown up, and to which he was returning, had much to hide. While Pell prepared to hear confessions in Swan Hill, some of his colleagues in the diocese were sexually molesting young boys in the classrooms of East Ballarat's St Ailpius primary school. In 1971, the year Pell returned from Oxford, a disturbing number of the school's male personnel were paedophiles. Indeed, they were part of a flowering paedophile ring that would go unchecked by the church for more than 20 years. By the time the church faced up to it, hundreds of lives would lay in ruins, a policeman who tried to break up the ring would be out of a job, and Pell would insist that he knew nothing of the abuse until it was too late.

The story of the gifted archbishop and the gutter lives of Ballarat's paedophile priests and brothers is a study in contrasts. It is not just that Ballarat, built around the old gold mining town, is - according to current bishop Peter Connors - probably the worst of Australia's 32 dioceses for sexual abuse. It is also that while Pell came back from overseas full of moral entreaties, men he knew, serial child abusers such as Father Gerald Ridsdale, denied the faith by systematically sodomising young boys.

The pattern continued for decades. As Pell rose through the ranks, due in part to his tough, conservative moral stance on sex and schooling, his Ballarat colleagues talked saintly and behaved sadistically. And through it all, the church went on placing criminal clergy where they could prey on children, while at the same time frustrating police inquiries and persuading complaining families to remain silent.

It was the kind of hypocrisy and manipulation that can, and did, drive victims and their families to the edge, and over it. Pell, who was never bishop of Ballarat, says he did not know the extent of Ridsdale's evil until

× George Pell

As Pell rose through the ranks, his colleagues talked saintly and behaved sadistically.

In this section

[Working to the rules of the family](#)

[Urban jazz hits a sour note](#)

[From song of pain to murder counts](#)

[Wrongly convicted man loses bid to sue officials](#)

[Four caught drinking on night sailor vanished](#)

[PM official knew about false photos, inquiry told](#)

[Victorian Architecture Awards](#)

[Inquiry told of illicit drinking session](#)

[Scud out to grass after Queen's Club loss](#)

[Workers lift picket at BHP](#)

[Staff shortage blamed for baby's death](#)

[Endangered food seeds 'banked'](#)

[Melbourne home price boom fades](#)

[Congress speech the highlight of 28 years in politics, says delighted PM](#)

[Prime Minister shows why it pays to praise](#)

after a parishioner had complained about Ridsdale he "immediately removed" the priest.

Like other Catholic bishops at that time and later, Mulkearns did not, however, keep the paedophile priest away from children or report him to police. After "psychological counselling", he was given a new job and he continued to offend.

Mulkearns' 1994 letter to Ridsdale's sister says: "It could, therefore be said that I was aware of a problem, but I was certainly unaware of the extent of that problem and I did endeavour to do something about it."

Like Pell, he says he had no idea of the extent of the problem until criminal charges were laid. Shirley Mitchell, who was angry with both her brother and Bishop Mulkearns, partly for the damage done to victims, her parents and family, now accepts that church leaders in the '70s just did not understand paedophilia.

Others, like victims' support group Broken Rites, however, question how Pell, who moved to the city of Ballarat in 1973, did not know, at least by 1975, when Mulkearns admits he knew that Ridsdale was a serial sex offender.

Pell says that by 1974, while he still lived in Ballarat, he spent up to two days a week working in Melbourne as director of Aquinas College, Institute of Catholic Education. He said Mass at Ballarat parish at weekends. "I was never chaplain to St Alipius Boys School or worked there," he said yesterday.

It was in late 1975, when Mulkearns moved Ridsdale from Inglewood, that the abuse first came to the notice of police. A Detective Sergeant Mooney was contacted by a prominent Inglewood identity whose son had allegedly been molested by Ridsdale. Inquiries were frustrated, however, when the parents would not allow their son to be interviewed and Ridsdale disappeared.

Mooney visited Mulkearns to tell him what he had learnt of Ridsdale's behaviour. The bishop said he would handle it. In fact, he moved the paedophile priest on. The abuse continued, building up to the point where, by 1995, 20 years after Mulkearns says he was first alerted, police mounted a three-month investigation - Operation Arcadia - examining the bishop's role. They concluded that "it does appear that Mulkearns has had knowledge of events as committed by Ridsdale much earlier than he suggests".

There is no doubt that a cover-up was in full swing, and it ranged to the far edges of the sprawling Ballarat diocese. It is not just that the Christian Brothers spent an estimated \$400,000 defending St Alipius' paedophiles, Dowlan and Best; the diocese was shielding paedophiles as far away as Mildura, on the NSW border.

In 1971, when the St Alipius paedophile ring was taking shape and Pell had just returned, a Mildura detective, Denis Ryan, gathered 16 written statements from 14 boys and two girls detailing child abuse offences against Monsignor John Day. Day, Mildura parish priest from 1957 to 1971, died in 1978 aged 69. Ridsdale had worked with Day for two years until 1964, and was a good friend. Ryan, a veteran detective stationed at Mildura, first came across Day when, as a young constable, he arrested him in St Kilda at 2 o'clock one morning in 1956. The then Father Day was in a car with two prostitutes. He had his pants down. Day was not charged.

Ryan renewed his acquaintance with Day when a Mildura headmaster told him in 1971 that a 12-year-old girl had been indecently assaulted by the priest. It is believed that police notified Mulkearns around 1971-72 about the evidence against Day, but he was not moved, nor taken out of contact with children.

In 1997, the year Mulkearns resigned, Ryan said Day had not been charged with molesting children, despite the sworn evidence he had amassed, including that from a girl aged 14.

Ryan, a Catholic, said at the time that the case had cost him his job, his first marriage and tens of thousands of dollars in superannuation. "When



Doctrine of the Faith - the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog - Ridsdale was packed off to New Mexico, where he was supposedly going to be reformed. In fact, he had a nine-month holiday, during which he did "locums" for the local diocese, and sexually abused children, some of whom have confronted the American church.


Time was, however, running out. In 1992, after being appointed chaplain at St John of God hospital in Richmond, NSW, a victim phoned Operation Paradox, a Victorian police child sex abuse phone-in. Three months later he was charged.

When he made his first court appearance in 1993, Pell was by his side. "My sympathies were always with the victims," Pell said last week, adding that he "had little idea of the full extent and gravity of his (Ridsdale's) crimes". Pell now says his accompanying Ridsdale was a mistake, as it misled people about his position.

Just before the trial, Ridsdale travelled home to Ballarat to tell his family about his crimes. They were deeply shocked. He had, unbeknown to them, sexually abused some of his nephews, including David Ridsdale. David has claimed that Pell tried to silence him when he phoned him about the abuse in 1993. Pell denies this, and says, "David's claims are inconsistent, discredited and wrong".

What is not in dispute is the breadth of Ridsdale's crimes. When he told his family, one asked: "How many, Gerald. Four, or five?". He paused. "Hundreds," was his reply.

 [Printer friendly version](#)  [Email to a friend](#)

 **Search the Fairfax archives for related stories**
(*Fee for full article)

[text](#) | [handheld \(how to\)](#)

[membership](#) | [conditions](#) | [privacy](#)
Copyright © 2002 The Age Company Ltd

[advertise](#) | [contact us](#)