

# Sunday Mail

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## Go home and pray

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A PEDOPHILE priest went to confession more than 1500 times to admit sexually abusing boys . . . but was told to go home and pray.

Michael Joseph McArdle's weekly confessions were ignored by Catholic priests and hushed up by the church hierarchy which, according to new evidence that has come to light after his jailing late last year, was intent on protecting the church's image at all costs.

In an affidavit, the former country Queensland priest claims to have made confession over his pedophile activities on a weekly or fortnightly basis to about 30 priests over a 25-year period.

In Queensland, information divulged by priests in confession is admissible in court proceedings.

The remorseful 68-year-old says he even drove great distances through the night to reach a confessional when his assaults on children as young as eight had been particularly bad.

In October last year, McArdle pleaded guilty to abusing 16 children over a 22-year period and was sentenced to six years in jail.

He could be free in two years, however, after a recommendation during sentencing that he be eligible for parole after serving just a third of the term.

The former priest, who was ordained in 1962 and resigned his ministry in 1988, molested children throughout the state when he was posted to such areas as Mackay, Longreach, Biloela, Bundaberg, Rockhampton, Monto, Gin Gin and Fraser Island.

McArdle's new revelations give added weight to civil actions against the Catholic church by his victims who are seeking a multimillion-dollar compensation payout.

Nine McArdle victims have already settled their claims out of court for a group sum believed to be about \$500,000 but a further three are now suing, seeking \$1.5 million each.

Simon Harrison from the Brisbane law firm Quinn and Scattini, who is acting for the victims, said: "While we don't wish to be drawn on these matters, this is a new and potentially significant development in relation to these claims.

"We believe our clients may be able to achieve more peace as a result of these recent developments."

In his new affidavit, McArdle says he elected to make his admissions after a long consideration "in the church's interest and perhaps more importantly those of the children, now adults, that I assaulted".

"I have had time to reflect more and more over the past few years . . . and whilst I can offer no excuses for what I did I believe that it's important for the church especially that lessons are learnt," he says.

"This may assist those who have already been abused to hear the following which is a

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genuine, heartfelt and truthful account of matters."

McArdle says that between 1963 and the mid-1980s the compulsion to abuse children "became significant".

"As the children would leave after each respective assault, I would feel an overwhelming sense of sadness for them and remorse, so much so it would almost be physical.

"I was devastated after the assaults, every one of them.

"So distressed would I become that I would attend confessionals weekly and on other occasions fortnightly and would confess that I had been sexually assaulting young boys.

"Each of the confessions were held with me sitting face to face with priests . . . I would inform the priest exactly what happened.

"There was no misapprehension by the priests that I was a pedophile.

"However, the only assistance or advice I was given was to undertake penance in the form of prayer and step up my prayer life."

He claims that after each confession "it was like a magic wand had been waved over me".

"On some occasions, too many to mention, I would not be able to sleep after the assaults. This would happen when the assaults had been particularly bad.

"At those times I would travel whatever distances it took to have someone hear my confession . . . I could end up returning home in the early morning after travelling great distances to have my confession heard."

He further says he was twice summoned by different Catholic bishops but was simply moved to another parish after allegations arose.

He says that at one meeting – called to discuss child abuse by priests – he was told by church lawyers that their aim was at all costs to protect the bishop and the church.

Last night, one of McArdle's victims – molested when he was an altar boy in the 1960s and now aged in his 40s – said the pedophile priest's admissions had given him a sense of closure.

"Right from the very start, our whole aim in this was to make that man accountable," he said.

"After all these years, I'm thankful I suppose that the man's finally showing some remorse and at the end of the day it will help us get the truth out there.

"I think he genuinely does have some remorse . . . he's a man with a sickness and he's trying to get something done about it.

"But for the church it should mean they should stand up and admit their wrongs and try to fix things and get back to the business of being a church."

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