

Appendix 15: Priest “banned,” allowed 15 years access to children.

On Monday 17th September, The Age, Forum, published the story by Barney Zwartz, “The Price of Paedophilia.”

Former Principal, Graeme Sleeman, came forward to tell of his heartbreaking battle with the church to keep the paedophile priest away from the students of Holy Family School, Doveton. Initially he begged the Archbishop not to send the known offender to the school, but in spite of his pleas the Archbishop did so. Graeme Sleeman not only had to contend with the priest but also with the Archbishop and representatives from the Catholic Education Office to whom he appealed on many an occasion, to get the priest out of the school and away from children.

In 1986 parents and parishioners sent a petition to the Archdiocesan hierarchy asking for the removal of the priest within a fortnight. Nothing changed.

In the end, when he resigned in 1986, Graeme Sleeman expected his resignation over the matter would force the church to do something. But nothing was done by the church to help the parishioners or the children of Holy Family School, Doveton. Nothing changed. No matter how many times Graeme appealed to the Catholic Education Office (CEO) Area Consultant, or to the Archbishop, nothing changed.

In 1987, I was recommended by the local CEO Area Consultant for a position at Holy Family School. He knew of my work on a government project on Migrant and Multicultural needs in Education conducted in two schools nearby and had provided letters of recommendation at the end of that project. However he did not inform me of any problem at Holy Family School, just happily filled one of the gaps in staffing when a number of teachers moved on around the time Graeme resigned.

As soon as I started at the school in 1987, teachers explained how vigilant we all had to be to keep the children safe. A representative from the CEO came and spoke about the matter at one of our staff meetings informing us we were to report all incidents of concern regarding the priest, to the principal, whose duty it was to report in turn to the CEO.

A teacher impressed upon me that teachers had to stand guard outside the confessional with the door open when children went to confession to the priest. Something very strange and concerning was going on.

In later 1991, three year five and six teachers, with the blessing of the then Principal, [REDACTED] went to Pell and reported concerns about the priest’s behaviour towards the children. This was prompted by many things but especially the priest frequenting the boys’ toilets. At the time Pell was the bishop directly responsible for the south eastern area. In spite of their reports to Pell the children were still left vulnerable. Nothing changed.

The following year, 1992, in my first year of teaching year five and six children, I found myself confronted head on by the problems the altar boys were having with the way the priest was touching them. I had reason to be particularly concerned about several children in relation to the priest. Parents, police, local community health centre staff, a Cottage Parent/Social worker, other teachers and students were all coming to me complaining. Police advised us they could not act because parents would not press charges.

From the moment I took my concerns to the new principal in 1992, I was warned to “c.y.a.” and not to say anything. When asked for care for the teachers and students in this situation none was forthcoming, in fact I was told there wasn’t any. Yet in teachers training in the early eighties, we were in- serviced on “Pastoral Care in the Catholic School.” Any appeals I made on behalf of the children to the new principal in 1992, CEO staff and a priest with a public profile in the Melbourne community, made no difference. Nothing changed except I was bullied quietly out of my job by the principal and CEO Representatives early in 1993. In spite of my appeals to the Vicar General, nothing changed and the children were still left vulnerable. The priest was left in the position for another five years till he was convicted of a physical assault, and stood down.

According to a Herald's Sun article by Wayne Jones Published on 23rd March 1997, the priest “had been removed from a previous parish after teachers and parents complained he was taking children out of school for one-on-one sex education classes.” Police interviewed him in 1982, but parents “decided against taking action and charges were never laid.” The article goes on to report that “the priest conceded to a ban which prevented him from taking children into the confessional and into his presbytery.”

The priest was then transferred to the Doveton parish with a ban. Yet when I started working at the school I was not told anything about the “ban”. This was the first I heard of it in March 1997, long after I had lost my career. I have never met Graeme Sleeman but checked with him on the morning, “The Price of Battling Paedophilia” was published. He knew nothing about such a ban till I advised him that morning-Sept 17th 2012.

My point is that the responsibility rests with the Archbishop or acting bishop for transferring a priest. This is culpable negligence on the part of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, putting a ban on a priest, banning him from taking children into the confessional or into the presbytery, then letting him loose amongst innocent children to do whatever he wanted, for another fifteen years.

And who was responsible for not even bothering to pass on the information about the ban? The hierarchy of the Melbourne Catholic Church were obviously not the least bit concerned about the safety of children.

Graeme Sleeman points out that the priest was warned again and again by CEO Representatives, yet he still continued on his way spreading destruction around him. More

children were abused in the confessional and there is evidence of more victims and suicide. Again, I am appalled at the culpable and deliberate negligence on the part of the Hierarchy of the Melbourne Catholic Church.

In July 1993 I approached the Vicar General, Monsignor Cudmore over the danger the children were in at Doveton, providing him with documented evidence, including written statements by the children, and begged he remove the priest from the vicinity of children and from the school. I put my concerns and requests in writing. The Vicar General advised me in September 1993 that the priest had now been medically assessed and diagnosed with psychopathic tendencies. Nothing changed. They left him exactly where he was till 1997. In spite of multiple complaints over many years, of allegations of sexual abuse of children and of weird behaviour, and now with a medical diagnosis of psychopathic tendencies they left him there.

Several months later, at my request, the Vicar general wrote to the Director of Catholic Education requesting an appointment for me to see him.

Nothing changed except I now battled to survive without my job and career. No matter whom I approached in the system I was fobbed off and left to wear it on my own. I spoke with people in the CEO in and in the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau but it was a fruitless exercise. All it achieved was a trail of very interesting memos that reached my file via the Archdiocesan headquarters.

In October 1996 the priest, Searson physically assaulted a child. A meeting between [REDACTED] the Vicar General, [REDACTED] who had a pastoral response role in the CEO, and [REDACTED] the school principal, records that there had been a formal warning previously. The memo records the statement "I have sent a fax to Father Searson and to Mr. Adams indicating that he was not to request young boys to come and serve mass during the week." What sort of a response is this? Again and again the Archdiocese had been informed of abuse of children in one form and another, and yet they let him go back to do it all again.

Shortly after Pell instituted the Melbourne Response late in 1996, Peter O'Callaghan interviewed me and took a copy of all my documented information. Soon after Searson was stood down in March 1997, I made more attempts to get some help for myself in the hope of reinstating my teaching career. But I was met with a brick wall in phone calls. [REDACTED]

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The Hierarchy has just admitted their submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry is about facing the truth. Let none of us be fooled by this statement or their explanations, nor excuse of their lack of understanding of sexual abuse. Certainly society is becoming more informed of the suffering, death and destruction caused by criminal sexual abuse, however the hierarchy has had masses of input about what has been happening to our children and preferred to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear.

Just as the hierarchy appear to not care a fig about the real message of Jesus, their track record of disdain, minimisation and denial, and practice of shooting the messenger, is not a good omen for their undergoing a true heartfelt about-turn to genuine true compassion, honesty, or faithfully carrying out best practice for safety of children.

Any real change for the safety of the children of the future, our children, grandchildren and their children will only be achieved by the people and the government making the changes, and monitoring them. We need to change our laws so that this country becomes a country where no paedophile will want to be, and where no Vatican laws can take precedence over Australia's laws.

Sept 21th , 2012.CR