

30<sup>th</sup> January 2013

To the Parliamentary Committee,

Please accept my submission for the '*Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisation*'. I am comfortable having my submission made public and I would like to appear before a public hearing if called upon to do so.

Name:

James Fitzpatrick

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

## INQUIRY INTO THE HANDLING OF CHILD ABUSE BY RELIGIOUS AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Currently 45 years old, I was born and raised in Thornbury, Melbourne, along with my two older sisters. We all went to St Mary's in Thornbury where I started grade prep in 1973.

As a young boy, I felt that I was doing well in my first year in Primary School. I liked school, got along with the other kids. St Mary's was a Catholic school and I remember there being nuns and normal teachers, but this was common. Towards the end of my first year at St Mary's, around 5 years of age, I recall all the kids were waiting out front of the school for the bus. Instead of joining them, I decided to go sticky beaking around the school and walked across the netball court. I remember being amazed at how empty the school was, because I had never seen it like that before. I probably shouldn't have been there, and should have been waiting for the bus with the rest of the kids.

An older kid came up to me suddenly and enticed me to go and play in the school hall. I agreed and when we got there, he shut the door behind us. I said a couple of things to him because I was angry and didn't feel safe, then I ran off, trying to get away, but he ended up catching up with me. Once he did, he shoved me under the stage where the chairs and sports equipment was stored. I realised immediately that there was somewhere else under there waiting. I was trapped under the stage, unable to escape and I was very scared. I heard an adult voice and I knew immediately who it was. I was asking to be let out of there and I was saying to him that my sisters will be looking for me because I was expected on the bus. I don't know how I was able to come up with this stuff being so young, but I knew that I needed to do whatever and say whatever in order to get out of there. He tried to grab me and tried to pull my pants down. I fought and kicked like a lunatic, and kept saying that my sisters are going to know that I am missing.

I finally got out of there, and I remember being so angry that once I got around to the front of the school, the very first person I came across was this big kid and I started punching and kicking him because I thought he was an adult, but it was actually one of the kids from year 6. Well he just kicked me to the ground.

I got on the bus and my sisters didn't know what had happened and I'm sure that they just thought I was carrying on like an idiot. I remember getting home and just trying to block it out and didn't bother to tell anyone.

The man under the stage was Father Bongiorno, the school priest at St Mary's. I understand that he is now deceased, but I know that it was definitely him. I am not sure exactly who the older kid was, but he was assisting him. I'm not sure if he was also being abused, but he was definitely involved.

Trying to forget the incident, I returned to school and for a while everything was normal. One day when I was 7 or maybe 8 years old, I was approached by a school teacher named Mr [REDACTED] who had a go at me for not wearing the right school jumper. I was probably being a little cheeky (this became normal behaviour after the first incident). Now I remember Mr [REDACTED] being this big obese man, and he grabbed me by the arm, then tried to force my hand down his pants. This immediately took me back to the first incident with Father Bongiorno. I tried to wrestle my way free from him, and even as a young boy I knew that this was wrong, that someone shouldn't be touching you like this and trying to force you to touch them. It made no sense to me whatsoever. How could these adults entrusted with the responsibility of caring for and teaching children be acting in this disgusting manner.

## INQUIRY INTO THE HANDLING OF CHILD ABUSE BY RELIGIOUS AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

I tried to carry on with life like nothing had happened, not telling anyone, including my parents. Shortly after, we moved to Tasmania where my dad was a truck driver and my mum was a bookkeeper. We were there for two years, but unfortunately my dad had a heart attack and we had to move back to Victoria.

When we returned to Victoria, I was enrolled into St Bernard's Catholic Primary School in East Coburg where I completed grades 5 and 6. Things were going ok at this school, but I remember one day the school mentioned Father Bongiorno's name over the loud speaker about a church service or something, and remember flipping out. I thought to myself, there is no way in hell I would be going along to that service.

I was then enrolled into Trinity Regional College in Brunswick, which was a Catholic brother college, equivalent to high school. Shortly after, I found out that Father Bongiorno was the priest for Trinity College and Ambrose's parish. I couldn't believe that he was now at this school and all of sudden those thoughts and feeling came rushing back. Things that I thought that I had left behind. I remember telling the teachers that I didn't want to be anywhere near him and that I thought he was gay. They just thought I was being stupid and didn't realise that this was the only way I could express how much I didn't want to be around Father Bongiorno. To them I was just playing up and so they started to see me as the disruptive, naughty kid.

I got into many fights around this time, around 14 and 15 years old. I remember being confused and wondering if these fights had something to do with what was going on in school, and whether this was part of life. I just couldn't make sense of what was happening to me.

I remember before all of this happened, that I was good at school and was getting good grades. Then suddenly my grades got worse. I was so angry and confused about what had happened, I just gave up on school and was acting out. Any time I would bring it up, the teachers would think that I was talking rubbish. Shortly after, the kids at school started a rumour that I was gay. The other boys started picking on me and I was getting into a lot of fights.

I can recall having to go to Friday mass and seeing Father Bongiorno at the front giving his sermon and thinking, "no way am I going to believe the rubbish coming out of your mouth, when I know what sort of a person you really are". It made me angry. I found myself getting angry all the time with these things on my mind and it would come out in tantrums from practically nothing, but my family or teachers had no idea why I was feeling the way I was and acting the way I did.

It was also during this time that I would visit St Joseph's youth group after school with friends, which was like a youth centre where you could play pool and table tennis. Father [REDACTED] was in charge of the kids that went there to hang out. I remember feeling uncomfortable around Father [REDACTED] because he would always be trying to touch me and cuddle me, and making inappropriate comments to me. I remember one time he commented on a hole in my shorts and proceeded to try to put his hand down my pants. Just like the other two incidents, I couldn't believe that these adults that were in charge of looking after young people would act this way. I am confident that this grouping of men must have been working together, going from one school to another. I'm confident that I couldn't have been the only one, but no one ever mentioned or talked amongst themselves about what was happening. I went home after that incident and told my mother that I wasn't going back to school because all of the priests were gay.

## INQUIRY INTO THE HANDLING OF CHILD ABUSE BY RELIGIOUS AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

I started thinking to myself, am I just unlucky. Why is it that throughout my childhood, these men always tried to take advantage of me. I never went so far as to make a formal complaint. All I could do was tell the teachers that these priest were gay, but they just treated me like I was being stupid and being a trouble maker.

I recall suffering at school, feeling alienated. Throughout my schooling my grades were dropping and I was getting picked on all the time. I would at times act out because I was so angry and I would get the strap. Still to this day I can remember the pain that I suffered from the strap and the welt marks that it would leave on my hand and arm. I never wanted to speak up because I never thought that they would believe me and thought I would be punished.

I often wondered if others I went to school with were going through what I was going through, but I never spoken to anyone about it, nor did any of the other boys ever say anything. During this time I ran away from home a few times, and also started drinking. When the police would return me home, I would make up excuses as to why I would take off, but would never tell them the truth or what happened to me.

My only way of rebelling or letting it out was in a joking matter, like "don't leave me alone with him, he is a poof", so that everyone could hear, and it was those sort of comments that were getting me into trouble. It's the only way I knew how to let it out.

I recall there being a teacher there that was good to me and his name was Mr [REDACTED] I think that he knew what was going on, but at no point did any teacher approach me to talk about what was happening. No one really took me or my comments seriously. I felt like when I would speak up this way, I would be knocked down. I felt like they were doing everything they could so that I would leave school. I was constantly knocked down until I had no confidence and no self-esteem. I was hurt and I was angry.

By the time I had finished school, I had gone from being relatively popular, being in the swimming team, cross country and playing football, to the last day at school in Form 3 and I was in assembly and remember running out of there because I thought I was going to be punched and beat up.

After Trinity Regional College, I went to Coburg Tech for a short period of time before getting numerous jobs in different trades.

When I think back on the impact these events have had on my life, I look at who I was growing up as an adult, how I had difficulty trusting people because I would think that they were trying to take advantage of me, being shifty. To this day I still find it challenging to trust people and find it hard to form relationships, and let people close to me. I end up pushing people away.

For most of my life I have turned to alcohol to try and forget the past, overcome my issues and cover how I was feeling. I have had good jobs and lost them, either due to the alcohol or going off at authority figures or people who would upset me. I often doubt myself, feel like I am on the outer. Often feeling like I am not worthy of good things, of happiness. I think that when things are going well, then I may self-sabotage and things start to unravel.

I have grown up thinking that I was a bad person. I have made some mistakes in my life, but I know that I'm not a bad human being and that what happened to me in the past has left me feeling

## INQUIRY INTO THE HANDLING OF CHILD ABUSE BY RELIGIOUS AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS

empty, alienated and lonely. It has lead me to make some bad life decisions, but I want to take this step to help work through some of these issues and perhaps want a better life for myself - one that I believe that I deserve.

Until recently, I have never told anyone about what has happened to me. I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to be labelled and probably felt ashamed. And something that stuck with me was hearing people at the time reporting and saying that people who were victims of abuse, would go onto abuse people themselves. So I remember thinking there is no way I want to tell anyone, because I didn't want people thinking that I could ever do such a thing. I didn't want them looking at me like I was going to turn into some sort of monster.

I often think back to that day when I was 5 years old and how my life forever changed after that day. I continue to ask myself, what if I had stood out front waiting for the bus instead of walking around, perhaps my life could have been different, and perhaps I could have done something with my life. I constantly think about those awful events and I'm disappointed with myself that I didn't speak up, that I didn't say anything. If I had spoken up, and told people that they were molesting other kids, then they could have put a stop to it.

I truly believe that this is my chance to get past this and do something better with my life. I hope that speaking up now helps towards putting a stop to child abuse and helps develop a system that would allow people to report this behaviour.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for receiving this submission and hope that my experience helps to ensure that perpetrators of abuse and those that harbour these deviate criminals are brought to justice and that such atrocities like this are handled appropriately in the future.

Regards,

James Fitzpatrick