

John Hunter
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

**Family and Community Development Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002**

NOTE: The Church refers to the Catholic Church in Australia. Recommendations concerning the Church may where applicable apply to all religions and organisations.

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

1. REASON FOR SUBMISSION

I contacted *Broken Rites* after seeing an article (See: Appendix 'A') on their website this month. I thought there was probably little point: the perpetrator was dead; he had been accused by one victim and received a settlement from the Catholic Church. But from my studies, I know that sexual predators rarely if ever attack only one victim (Father Kevin O'Donnell of Oakleigh is estimated by some to have sexually assaulted two children every day of his priesthood).

Broken Rites urged me to contact SANYO, the police unit assisting the enquiry. I did so and enjoyed the privilege of a police member-listener who let me tell my story at some length. This experience helped assuage the anger I had felt since discovering I had been and intended victim of a sexual predator in priestly guise. The SANYO officer urged me to record my experience at the hands of **Father [REDACTED]** as a submission to this enquiry.

I hope that my evidence being on public record may encourage others victims of Fr. [REDACTED] to come forward, report, access counselling, support, compensation. Or at least to help them understand that they were deliberately targeted and are not responsible for their abuse as perpetrators often make their victims believe.

2. THE ASSAULT

At age 12, I was subject to a physical assault by Catholic priest, Father [REDACTED] in 1958 in the sacristy (room adjacent to the altar, where priests donned vestments) of [REDACTED].

This occurred having assisted Fr. [REDACTED] as an altar boy at a weekday 7AM Mass. I had taken of my surplus and cassock in the altar boys room adjoining the sacristy. I had on the school clothes I wore underneath ready for school. The only door led through the sacristy.

My father had been hospitalised for some months at two hospitals. This was troubling but I had no idea he was, in fact, dying of cancer. I would not learn this till after his death a short time later in the same year.

As I hurried out through the sacristy, I noticed Fr. [REDACTED] has pulled up a chair and was sitting in it. Normally priests left for breakfast or other duties. Fr. [REDACTED] was not a regular face at [REDACTED] and older senior altar boys had expressed vague dislike for him. He seemed to generally not interact with us altar boys as other priest did with humour, telling us off when we were chatty on the altar etc.

Fr. [REDACTED] I now had lived at [REDACTED] but his duties were elsewhere and was only seen when acting as relieving priest at [REDACTED] when the Parish Priest or Curate were otherwise occupied.

Hurrying through the sacristy mindful I had to get home, breakfast and catch a bus and tram to get to school by 9AM, Fr. [REDACTED] accosted me, and physically pulled me onto his knee hard up against his flabby stomach and his wobbly cheeks. I felt disgust. I was also in some degree of panic. I wriggled to get free saying I had to get to school. He responded verbally as if none of this mattered, perhaps expecting me to assume that if I was late for school because a priest spent my time, this would somehow be OK. I knew better, fortunately.

Having never spoken to this man in conversation, he had the audacity to say he knew my father was very sick and that he “wanted to comfort me”. If I wanted comfort that was my mother’s or my grandmother’s job, I knew. And I was angry and indignant –though I didn’t say –that this stranger should presume to talk to me about my beloved sick father as if he knew more than I had been told. I had never been subject to force and restraint by any adult in my life, let alone this stranger. I pushed away harder, broke his hold and left, priest or no priest.

I was pre-pubescent, 12 year of age going on 13 (in December 1958). Apart from the revulsion I felt at being in a man’s lap, being seemingly pitied by a stranger who had purposefully set up the chair to intercept me as I crossed the sacristy; and then – frighteningly –used some force to restrain me as I wriggled and protested and made it clear I wanted none of his attention, apart from these feelings, could only see this as strange behaviour. I really knew nothing of adults abusing children.

I don’t think I told my mother when I got home. I had no knowledge or language at that young age with which to deal with what had happened, it was over and I forgot about it.

I don’t remember much more about Fr. [REDACTED]. If I saw him again, I do not recall him ever speaking to me again and there were no repeats of his behaviour with me.

40 years later, returning to La Trobe University for a post-graduate Bachelor of Social Work, I mentioned this incident to a visiting lecturer during an elective study on Child Abuse. He instantly labelled Fr. [REDACTED] as a child sex offender. Even then I wondered if Fr. [REDACTED] had perhaps only been trying to be fatherly in my own father’s absence in hospital.

I continued from time to time to wonder about the incident. Working with adult survivors of childhood sexual assault in my counselling practice often raised the incident for me and I had on two or three occasions visited the *Broken Rites* website a looking for evidence of reports against any Catholic priest named “[REDACTED]”.

On 14 May this year (2013) I returned to the *Broken Rites* website to discover a recent article of 22 March 2013 (See: [Appendix ‘A’](#)). The article dealt with one, **Father [REDACTED]** [REDACTED] who died in 1968. Allegations were published that this priest had indecently assaulted a male numerous times when the informant was aged between seven and 11 years. The article stated that the Sydney archdiocese signed a settlement with the victim. The article detailed that this same **Father [REDACTED]** had lived in Melbourne parish houses in

Sexual frustration and loneliness are not inextricably and deterministically linked to the sexual abuse of children. Some came to terms with the issue of celibacy without any crime against children. Other priests and religious have had consensual sexual liaisons with other adults

So much was made of the priesthood, that to question it or to leave it required courage and a thick skin. In the 1970s, priests and religious left their orders and found partners, married and parented their children.

Adult child sex perpetrators groom children, parents, parishioners and fellow-priests then conduct sexual assaults on their child victims. Accusations and convictions of perpetrators divide parish, school or any other institutional communities more or less equally: one half of people saying they always felt something was not quite right about the offender, the other half decrying the accusations have been made.

3.4 ABSOLUTE POWER WITH NO ACCOUNTABILITY

As I grew up priests held tremendous sway, especially with Catholic children. Nuns would fuss over and tell their pupils (like me) that visit to the class room, a visit to your home by a busy and important person like a priest was an incredible privilege. To my young mind it seemed the parish priest was only a short step away from the pope in the authority with which he spoke; and, in crude terms, the pope was just about god on earth.

The power and influence priests and religious have held over their congregations, and the respect given them as “shepherds of the flock” meant that children were prone to the overtures of priests and brothers. The very idea of a priest, for example, of all people to conduct sex –not to mention with children, would have been incomprehensible and unbelievable to many church-goers. The hypocrisy and betrayal is among the greatest imaginable.

School mates of mine left school for work at 14 with only 8 years of education. Post-Depression and Post-WW2 education was elementary level by and large. By comparison, priest had been privileged to be sponsored by the Church in six or more years of study. These were educated, skilful men, a great advantage for a perpetrator; not to mention religion and hell being powerful tools.

3.5 WHO CHOSE PRIESTHOOD etc.?

Nothing in my experience suggests that perpetrators of sexual crimes against children made up a majority of priests, brothers and nuns. I was educated by nuns at St. Joseph’s primary in Otter St, Collingwood; by a Christian Brother in Year 7 at tiny St. Patrick’s one grade school in Young Street Fitzroy (where ACU now stands), and De La Salle brothers from Years 8 to 11 at De La Salle College, Malvern. I knew a number of priests personally in my 20’s and 30’s, all decent men.

It may be possible that a number of clergy chose that path with the criminal intent to exploit vulnerable populations of “believers” protected by the collar and habits they wore. If they did, they were looking at up to six years of study including Latin. But all who wanted to serve the church had no choice but to accept the Church’s mandatory condition of celibacy with varying outcomes.

Perhaps underlying evil emerged over time. A perpetrator had a huge population of children of both sexes and vulnerable troubled parishioners to prey upon, all believers, all steeped in the tradition of the power of the priest. To strike a priest was another of those “mortal sins”.

By comparison, the police can only charge an attacker, perhaps resulting in jail time, not quite the “everlasting fires of hell”.

I reject the notion that criminal sexual offenders in the Church are all paedophiles. I believe this is an easy out as it ascribes criminal abuse of children as partly due to a “psychological condition or illness”. There may be such people, but I believe the majority are opportunists whose motivation is the experience of power and control at least as much as it is sexual gratification.

PAEDOPHILE OR OPPORTUNIST, ALL PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ALONE MUST ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ACTIONS. SO MUST THE CHURCH OR OTHER AUSPICING ORGANISATION. THERE IS NO EXCUSE. THE LAW MUST APPLY TO ALL.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY, CRIME, THE SEAL OF CONFESSION

The Church’s insistence on the inviolable confidentiality of confession is based on the notion that only the sacrament (a ritual) of Confession –going to a priest, confessing, with the sincere intention of not repeating your sin –only this can guarantee god’s forgiveness. However, we were also taught that telling god you were sorry with the same sincere intent meant god would forgive you. So the insistence on then going to confession really serves the Church in holding its members. It is not based in the Churches gospels which claim to record the teachings of its founder, Jesus Christ.

I believe **priests should be required to offer only the same limited confidentiality which other professionals such as doctors, nurses, and teachers do.** The limit is disclosed to each new counselling client in my practice before the first session begins: namely that confidentiality is subject to my not reasonably believing self-harm or harm to others is indicated. I also make it clear that clients are free to leave at that point if they wish to do so, no questions asked, no fee charged. The privilege enjoyed by the Church’s priests seems to me to have no place in modern Australia.

The only argument the Church put forward for its absolute confidentiality – the so-called “seal of Confession” – is that without this protection, members of the congregation who committed murder, rape, child sexual abuse would not come forward. I have already rebutted the Church’s notion that it has some holier than god exclusive power to forgive. There is no evidence advanced that disclosure to a priest of serious offences results in greater safety for the victims or wider community; however, **there is ample evidence that police, Department of Human Services, and child and parent agencies achieve greater safety for some victims and the wider community.**

5. LEGISLATION NEEDED TO REMOVE CHURCH’S IMMUNITY FROM BEING SUED

I have heard in the media this week that the Church cannot be sued at law because it is not such an entity (?). In 1968 no one could sue government in Australia. It was likened to “someone suing all of us”. This, of course, is no longer true. **Justice can be rightly sought against government in the courts.**

We rightly complain when companies such as James Hardy fought against compensating employees whose exposure to asbestos was killing them. **To allow the Church to be immune from such civil suits is completely unjust.** Surely this is an historical anomaly. We do not live in a theocracy. Our secular government’s already gift millions to help the

Churches run religious schools. We do not tax church land. These issues deserve consideration as well.

When criminal cases fail, the aggrieved may apply for redress and compensation in the Civil Courts. **People who fail to get justice in cases of criminal abuse or other injury caused by the Church or its members, must be able to pursue their claim through civil legal channels.**

LEGISLATION MUST BE BROUGHT INTO LAW WHICH PUT CHURCHES ON AN EQUAL LEGAL FOOTING WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS, BUSINESSES, GOVERNMENTS AND ENTITIES IN AUSTRALIA REGARDING THE ABILITY OF THEIR BEING THE SUBJECT OF CIVIL LAW SUIT.

The Melbourne Catholic Archdiocese self-set “capping” of compensation to victims under the so-called *MELBOURNE RESPONSE* makes this crucial if victims are to have equal access with other citizens to legal process.

6. TIPS

6.1 It occurs to me that *CATHOLIC CHURCH INSURANCE* and other insurers providing cover for the Church would hold files of financial settlements paid confidentially by the Catholic Church to victims. I suggest the Inquiry notes this as a source of information about the number of cases the Church has covered up. As they say “follow the money trail”.

6.2 The Catholic Church’s “*MELBOURNE RESPONSE*” requires victims to sign **non-disclosure agreements** as a condition of receiving Church payout. I imagine this is illegal as it amounts to “**Church cover up**”.

[REDACTED]

Declaration:

I make this submission in good faith. It is as accurate an account of the assault on me as I can make. If I can be of any further assistance in bringing justice to the victims of sexual and physical abuse of children and others by certain members of the Catholic clergy or other organisations or bodies, please contact me. I do not require any level of confidentiality concerning my disclosure. I claim any protections the Enquiry offers to persons making submissions against prosecution by the Catholic Church or any other person or organisation on the basis of my submission.

Signed:

JOHN HUNTER

3 [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]