

A plea for an inquiry and a tale of the one who got away

Nick McKenzie and Richard Baker
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A **MANAGER** from the Catholic Church's social welfare arm has accused the church of mishandling its response to sexual abuse by clergy and is urging the state government to launch an inquiry.

Alan Baker, who works for CatholicCare, has revealed how he unsuccessfully fought church officials for three years to improve the support given to victims of clergy abuse.

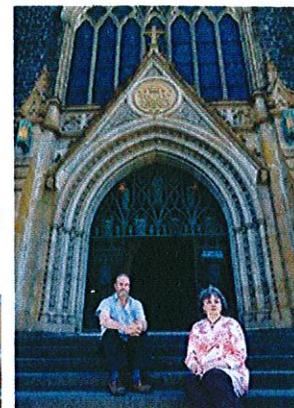
Mr Baker's fight is revealed in a series of emails sent between 2008 and 2011 that detail his lobbying of senior church officials — including Victorian CatholicCare CEO Father Joe Caddy, Melbourne episcopal vicar for social justice, Tony Kerin and now former Catholic Social Services Australia chief Frank Quinlan — for CatholicCare to take a support and advocacy role for victims.

Mr Baker's story comes as a Melbourne victim of sexual abuse, Mairead Ashcroft, spoke out about her battle to hold to account the Catholic brother who abused her as a child in Victoria in the 1970s.

Despite admitting his conduct to church authorities in 1999, Brother Bernard Hartman has never been interviewed by police and continues to work as a brother in America, where church officials have put him on a "safety plan" to keep him away from "children, adolescents or vulnerable women".



Brother Bernard Hartman, still practising in America.



Catholic mediator Alan Baker with sex abuse victim Mairead Ashcroft outside St Patrick's Cathedral. Photo: Mal Fairclough

In July 2008, Mr Baker first emailed his boss, Father Caddy, about his "deep anger at how terribly badly the church is responding to the clergy abuse issue". Mr Baker told Father Caddy the church dealt with victims of abuse in an overly legalistic, intimidating and often closed-shop manner - an approach he compared to the conduct of big tobacco firms - rather than utilising the church's welfare resources to offer a more compassionate and contrite response.

He feared that "unless Centacare as a welfare arm of the church comes out with a strong response, our credibility to speak on any social justice issues will be irreparably damaged."

In April 2009, Mr Baker - a lawyer turned CatholicCare mediator, who is married to a lawyer specialising in clergy abuse cases - wrote again to Father Caddy, saying: "I see it as essential that ... [CatholicCare] advocate for fairer structures in the manner in which the church responds to the victims. At the moment, those structures are terribly unfair."

In August 2009, Father Caddy emailed Mr Baker, telling him he should seek a meeting with Father Kerin.

"While the matter of the church's responses to allegations of abuse is of utmost concern to us all, I do not want ... [CatholicCare] to get caught up in the internal workings on how the church sets up its complaints mechanisms," Father Caddy wrote.

In October 2010, Mr Baker wrote to one of the church's most senior welfare advocates, Mr Quinlan, who conceded in a reply that he shared Mr Baker's frustration that the church has not always treated victims of sexual abuse with justice or fairness and has, on occasion, compounded their original abuse through mismanagement of their complaints." Mr Quinlan also said Catholic welfare organisations were not well placed to lead a reform process.

Mr Baker told *The Saturday Age* he had been told by his bosses to stop pushing for reform.

He said the church's response to the clergy abuse scandal was "being fundamentally driven by damage control - a desire to protect its own name, reputation and wealth."

"My reason for going public is to urge the state government to institute the parliamentary inquiry it is considering. My experience is that the Catholic Church will not review itself. It will continue to gravitate towards its fallback position of a conspiracy of silence. Review needs to come from outside," he said.

Church spokesman Peter Mahon said Mr Baker was entitled to his opinion but "I do not agree with his claim that CatholicCare could have done more on this issue".

"I do agree, however, that victims of abuse by church workers need to be offered every support. While that support should be resourced by the church, I believe the best efforts will be delivered at arm's length from the church where there is no perception of conflict of interest," he said.

He said it was "totally inappropriate" for Mr Baker to go public with his criticisms.

A spokesman for Attorney-General Robert Clark said the government was awaiting findings from the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children inquiry "before deciding whether or not there should be any further inquiry into child sexual abuse within church organisations".

Ms Ashcroft's sexual abuse allegedly occurred when she was around eight years old and when Brother Hartman was working for the Marianists in Victoria, including at St Paul's in Altona North.

She told *The Saturday Age* the church authorities she complained to in 1999 failed to refer the matter to police or encourage her to do so - despite Brother Hartman apologising to her in a signed letter.