

Family & Community Development Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne
Vic 3002

from

R.K.Oakes

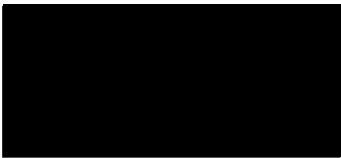

18/8/2012

The Secretary of the Committee

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to make a submission to your committee concerning an incident of alleged abuse by a member of a religious organisation against a junior child namely myself which occurred at a primary school in the early 1950's. The full details are in the attached document herewith. I have no objection against publication of this document & would be willing to appear in person if so requested. I hope I am not so requested to appear as I have a medical condition which makes travel & sitting around difficult.

Yours faithfully

R.K. Oakes, Complainant


Formal Complaint Concerning an Alleged Incident of Child Abuse & Submission to the Committee of Enquiry of Child Abuse by a Member of a Religious Organisation.

Complainant

Richard Keith Oakes

D.O.B

Current Date 18/8/2012

Date of Alleged Abuse Early 1950's, exact date uncertain

Age of Complainant at Time of Alleged Abuse 7-9 years

Nature of Complaint

" I was forced by a nun teacher at a catholic primary school to remove faeces with bare hands from a blocked toilet bowl during a period of an epidemic of poliomyelitis, as an act of punishment."

Supporting Statements

The following statements are made truthfully & honestly to the best of my memory & are the subject matter of my current complaint of personal abuse to myself by a member of a religious organisation, namely a nun, circa early 1950's at St James catholic primary school.

In early 1950 I started primary school at St James catholic school in Brickwood street Gardenvale. I remember my sixth birthday later that year. It was a very happy occasion with many kids from school & nearby streets attending. I don't remember many such happy birthdays after that. My twenty first birthday wasn't celebrated at all. What happened a year or two after my sixth birthday was to change my life in a way which has caused suffering & deprivation throughout my life.

I was a normal child and was sometimes naughty & was an occasional mild prankster. I was unprepared for the punishment which I was to receive on one occasion. I was frog marched by one of the nuns to the boys' toilet & ordered to remove by hand faeces & paper causing a blockage in one of the toilet bowls.

This was just the start of my trauma. Soon a rumour was circulating in the classroom and this led to taunting & teasing by some of the other students. As a result I became very withdrawn & would not play with other students. I refused to sing in the school choir & would not play football with the others. From that time my existence became very solitary. I would stay in my room at home on the weekend & not play with other children. I had no friends. At the time I felt that it was all my fault. There was no feeling in my mind at the time that I should or could tell anyone. Terms like psychologists or councillors were unknown to me. I felt so ashamed I didn't even tell my parents. I also feared that I could be punished further.

At lunch time at school I would leave the playground & have lunch at home or go to a local fish & chip shop nearby if I had the money. My father was concerned about my changed behaviour & enrolled me in the boy scouts which met every Tuesday evening at St James hall. I wasn't happy with this & was allowed to leave. Later I was enrolled in a local tennis school & didn't like the other kids so I left this as well.

In 1956 I left St James to go to a catholic secondary school. My traits of unsociability & solitude continued here. My academic progress was extremely mixed with some good results but many bad ones as well.

In 1963 I started a university course & the pattern of mixed successes & failures continued. I graduated finally in 1968 & managed a few honours.

As I was then to find out my problems were just beginning. When I eventually found my first job I found it hard to fit in. I also found it difficult to form relationships with girls. All of these lasted just for a short time & I wasn't quite sure why. Soon I was asked to leave my job, a pattern which was to repeat itself for the next 20 years with the exception of just one.

This was a job with a medical instrument company & I was concerned for my health due to the risk of exposure to radioactivity & dangerous pathogens. I took the job on in desperation after spending some years previously on the dole. A few jobs followed with more dismissals. Mostly I would be told that they were restructuring & my position was being abolished. Others were more forthright & perhaps honest & told me they were letting me go as i wasn't a good team player. My last job was with an instrument company & I suffered what I assert was a radiation burn to an eye. This was about 1990. I wasn't able to pursue the matter legally due to lack of funds. I also suffered excruciating episodes of eye pain for a decade & this ceased only after eye surgery. During this time I was stricken with cancer & recovered after radiotherapy & chemotherapy but when I asked my oncologist what was the cause of it I was told that they wouldn't be looking for a cause. I wasn't even asked to fill in a questionnaire relating to job history etc.

Today I suffer from other health issues including diabetes 2, high blood pressure & these are gradually becoming harder to treat. My main symptoms are leg cramps which are caused by arterial blockage. I'm also in an impoverished state & don't have many of the comforts which others take for granted. I try to be as happy as possible but have many regrets such as not having had the chance to marry & have a family or a secure worthwhile career.

I have actually worked less than half the time available during my life. Since 1990 I was only able to earn small amounts by doing odd jobs for people such as rubbish removal & minor repairs. Now I rely on the pension. I have no friends.

I often wondered in past years why I had so much trouble relating to others & the thought of getting some sort of help never crossed my mind. I wasn't aware if any professional help was available but now it doesn't matter. I always thought that things would turn out well for me in the end. I even considered suicide on one occasion & was living alone & feeling a bit low after a job dismissal. A visit from my mother & a sister made me feel better & I forgot my worries & any suicidal thoughts.

The original act of abuse by the nun & subsequent mental trauma crosses my mind from time to time & I try to remember as much as possible but the identity of the nun seems blocked in my memory. I recall that she was a youngish nun perhaps in her mid twenties & have some names to hand but without being sure, something which is a bit difficult after about 60 years, it would be unfair to make any hasty conclusions. Except for this one nun I'm grateful to the hard work of the other nuns who educated me in basic number & letter skills & gave me the chance to earn a limited income in my work. The original St James school & toilet block were demolished & rebuilt years ago but they remain vividly in my memory. If that nun is still alive & can remember the incident she may wish to speak out. This may be the only way I can prove my story unless I can locate fellow students who recall the incident at the time & wish to make a statement. I know where some of them live but haven't spoken

to them since.

At the time of the act of abuse I was puzzled & hurt by the strong message in the classroom about the importance of washing one's hands after using the toilet & thought that the nun wanted me to become sick or to be so downtrodden by others' taunts so as to sink to a lowly occupation like a handler of dirt & waste. Given my current circumstances I think this ploy has succeeded.

Recently I have found out that I was placed at considerable risk of contracting poliomyelitis which was an epidemic at the time, the early 1950's & I remember several students at the school having it & wearing leg braces. My own cousin was a sufferer. I referred to textbook "Medical Microbiology" Mackie & McCartney, 13th edition, Volume 1, 1978 pp459-465 where the risk, sources & spread & epidemiology indicate the huge risk I was placed under. Whether the nun concerned tried to have me infected by a bacterium which can kill or cause paralysis is something I can only speculate about. I just think it was a miracle that I escaped this dreadful fate. At the time I knew little about the disease apart from seeing the sufferers in their leg braces. At secondary school in 1957 I was vaccinated against polio with the salk vaccine.

What's important for me now is to have my story heard & recorded in the public awareness before I pass on. I'm unable to answer many questions in the submission guide & have a certain mental numbness about the whole affair. My approach to the incident over many years was to try to forget it ever happened & get on with my life. However this didn't cure the harm which I alleged was caused by the incident to my self esteem & ability to form relationships & I have been ultimately unable to escape the stigma of the act.

I'm not sure if anything in place then or indeed now could have prevented such abuses. From time to time state appointed inspectors & church officials would visit the school. They weren't really approachable, assuming a child wanted to & I remember at that time children were very oppressed compared to today & had a huge fear of all adults including parents & teachers. Mostly kids kept quiet about their grievences.

The only thing I can think of is that every school should have a locked complaint/suggestion box which can only be opened by a suitably authorised government official from time to time. Children or indeed anyone could place letters of complaint into the box & would-be perpetrators of child abuse etc. would know that there was a good chance of them being caught. I don't want to lay blame anywhere except to that one person. I'm not sure what the church or any organisation could have done to prevent incidents such as the one I have related. I would welcome any legislation provided it would be effective.

R.K. Oakes

Complainant

