

SEX ABUSE IN VICTORIAN CATHOLICISM: THE RONALD CONWAY CONNECTION

By R. J. Stove, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. The opportunity to give submissions to the Victorian Parliament's enquiry into child abuse by religious, and other, organisations is one for which all true Catholics – I am myself Catholic – should be grateful. Most of them, indeed, are grateful.
- 1.2. At the same time, in studying the truly vile cases of sexual abuse within Victoria's Catholic parishes by priests, we must not fall into the common media error of imagining that they are isolated phenomena. They are not.
- 1.3. To appreciate the gravity of the situation, it is insufficient to concentrate on individual Victorian clergymen's crimes, however heinous. The circumstances which enabled them to *become* clergymen in the first place, and to commit these crimes in repeated abuses of public trust, need also to be examined.
- 1.4. A question therefore has to be asked, and asked aloud. How did men so obviously unfit for Holy Orders – which the Catholic Church considers to be nothing less than one of the Seven Sacraments – get to acquire Holy Orders to begin with?
- 1.5. In many cases, we shall be able to trace the problem back to faulty admissions processes within the Melbourne Archdiocese. This problem proved especially acute between 1967 (the year Archbishop Justin Simonds prematurely died) and 1996 (the year Archbishop George Pell was installed).
- 1.6. With those processes, the name of one sinister figure recurs. That figure is Ronald Conway (1927-2009), who during the relevant period was employed, on a part-time basis, as archiepiscopal consultant vetting seminary candidates, and also advising on marriage annulment procedures.

- 1.7. Conway was also a prominent non-fiction author, at the height of his fame during the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. He contributed regular articles to *Quadrant*, *The National Times* (now defunct), *The Advocate* (now defunct), *The Weekend Australian*, *The Age*, and elsewhere. Several of his sociological books – notably *Land of the Lost Weekend*, *The Great Australian Stupor*, and *The End of Stupor?* – sold very well.
- 1.8. Unfortunately Conway totally abused his position of trust as (unqualified) “therapist”, as will be indicated in the pages that follow. These pages draw largely upon the Broken Rites webpage concerning Conway (<http://brokenrites.alphalink.com.au/nletter/page196-conway.html>), and upon subsequent revelations in a Catholic magazine called *The Remnant*, based in Minnesota. Attempts to get journalistic and diocesan action within Australia have been thus far totally in vain.

2. THE BROKEN RITES FILE ON CONWAY

The following remarks are taken, verbatim, from the Broken Rites report on Conway's doings. They supply a good deal of biographical information, as well as other details well attested in print but not otherwise all that easy to track down online.

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Ronald Conway – the hands-on psychologist who helped the Catholic Church's trainee priests

Broken Rites Australia helps victims of church-related sexual abuse to obtain justice.

By a Broken Rites researcher

For thirty years a prominent Australian Catholic psychologist, **Ronald Conway**, had a part-time role in assessing and helping trainee priests in the Melbourne seminary. Conway also worked as a consulting psychologist in psychiatric hospitals and in private practice, and some of his male patients say that *Conway touched them sexually* when they consulted him for professional help.

These former patients say that, during "therapy", they were masturbated by Conway, who encouraged the patients to touch him sexually in the same way as he touched them.

These disclosures throw new light upon the church's problem of clergy sexual abuse, as Conway was regarded highly by Australian Catholic leaders.

The seminary was preparing the trainees for their future life of so-called celibacy. In articles that he wrote for newspapers, Conway pointed out that being "celibate" merely means not being married. Furthermore, he pointed out, "clerical concubinage and clerical homosexuality have been commonplace in church history".

Conway himself never married. So, by his own definition, he too was "celibate", even when he was sexually touching one of his private patients.

We will return to Conway's hands-on therapy later in this article.

Praised by archbishops

Conway died on 16 March 2009, aged in his early eighties. On 26 March 2009, he was commemorated by a requiem mass in Melbourne's cathedral.

Cardinal **George Pell**, of Sydney, sent condolences. Before becoming an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne in 1987, Pell had been the head of the Melbourne seminary and he is said to have liked Conway's work in assessing trainee priests.

At the requiem mass, Melbourne Archbishop **Denis Hart** gave a homily praising Conway. Hart acknowledged that Conway had been an adviser to the Melbourne archdiocese on priestly vocations. He paid tribute to Conway's "immense contribution to the evaluation of seminarians, the ongoing assistance given to clerical and religious [people], helping people to discern their vocation."

Hart added: "We shall never know how much following up he did with these people – in some cases, over many years."

A bachelor advising on marriage

Archbishop Hart said that Conway also helped the Melbourne archdiocesan **Marriage Tribunal** – where Catholic couples must reveal their marital (including sexual) problems when asking the church for an annulment of an unsuccessful marriage.

Hart said that the Melbourne archdiocesan records "contain many psychological evaluations, especially in our Marriage Tribunal", written by Conway.

In an article in the *Weekend Australian* on 21 March 2009, federal politician Tony Abbott (who himself was originally a trainee priest in a Catholic seminary in New South Wales) wrote about Conway: "He never contemplated joining the priesthood (as might have been expected of a bright young man of his temperament in that era) and never seems seriously to have considered marriage. He seems largely to have come to terms with any demons of his own and, in any event, chose not to make a spectacle of himself."

To what "demons" was Abbott referring? And what did he mean about Conway not "making a spectacle of himself"?

Conway's career

Ronald Victor Conway (born in either 1926 or 1927) came from humble beginnings. Educated at Catholic parish schools in Melbourne, he left school early but later returned to studies, eventually working as a secondary teacher. From 1955 to 1961 he taught English and history at De La Salle College in Malvern, in Melbourne's inner south-east.

In 1988, aged in his early sixties, Conway published an autobiographical book, *Conway's Way*, in which he tells some things (but not everything) about his rise to prominence as a psychotherapist.

He had a Bachelor of Arts degree which included studies in psychology. In the 1950s,

psychology graduates were not as numerous as in later decades. In 1960 (according to Conway's autobiography), Melbourne psychiatrist **Dr Eric Seal** (a fellow Catholic) needed a psychologist to help provide counselling to patients. Seal invited Ron Conway to share Seal's consulting rooms in Collins Street in central Melbourne. From about 1960, with help from Seal, Conway also developed a role for himself as an honorary consulting psychologist at a large Catholic hospital in Melbourne, **St Vincent's**. In 1964, Seal became the head of St Vincent's psychiatric department, giving Conway a further boost in a psychotherapy career. Seal and Conway also saw patients at the Catholic Church's **Sacred Heart Hospital**, Moreland, in Melbourne's north.

Conway developed contacts with the Melbourne Catholic archdiocesan welfare agency. Through such avenues, various clients were referred to Conway for private counselling, which provided Conway with an income.

In the 1970s, Conway lived in a house in Torrington Street, Canterbury (in Melbourne's east), and many therapy clients visited him there for private counselling. In the early 1980s, he moved to a house in Swinburne Avenue, Hawthorn (also in Melbourne's east), and he continued seeing clients there.

A number of his male clients say that Conway befriended them during therapy. He continued associating with them socially, in some cases for many years after the original consultations. Occasionally, Conway would arrange for a former male therapy client to move into Conway's house as a live-in friend.

Conway and the drug LSD

Beginning in 1963 (according to Conway's autobiography, page 98), he was involved in experimenting with psychedelic drugs on patients. He says these drugs eventually included **LSD** (lysergic acid diethylamide, which has sometimes also been known as "acid") and "the milder psilocybin (derived from the **magic mushroom**)". He says that such drugs were "stocked in the special restricted cupboards of the hospital pharmacy".

Conway writes: "[At St Vincent's psychiatric department] we helped many a patient with LSD when all other resources, counselling, medication, psychotherapy, ECT [electro-convulsive therapy] and even thoughts of psychosurgery, had been abandoned. From my own work I concluded that no more appropriate substance for the treatment of obsessive-compulsive neuroses existed than LSD in resourceful hands.

"Its virtual abandonment due to hippy excesses and irresponsible and ignorant reporting remains one of the great tragedies of modern psychiatry [pages 98-99]."

Newhaven private hospital

Conway's autobiography says that he began his LSD experiments at St Vincent's Hospital. And former patients say that Conway also administered LSD to them at

the **Newhaven** psychiatric hospital which was situated at 86 Normanby Road, Kew, in Melbourne's inner east.

In the late 1960s and during the 1970s, Newhaven hospital was owned and managed by Marion Villimek, a member of a "New Age" sect called the Santiniketan Park Association, also known as "**The Family**". A leader of the sect, **Anne Hamilton-Byrne**, was also an administrator at the Newhaven. Conway, Eric Seal and other therapists hired consulting rooms there on a sessional basis, and were not involved with the sect. Newhaven ceased being a hospital in 1992.

Celibacy and abuse

Ronald Conway became one of Australia's most prominent Catholic intellectuals, writing books and newspaper articles about Australian society. He also appeared in radio and television discussion programs as a psychologist and social commentator.

When the church's sexual scandals became news in Australia in the 1990s, Conway sometimes commented on the issues of celibacy and sexual abuse.

Judging from articles he wrote in the 1990s, Conway evidently believed that the incidence of actual *abuse* – that is, church personnel committing a breach of professional ethics in their pastoral relationship with children or vulnerable adults – was not as serious as many other people thought.

In July 1996, Christian Brother Robert Charles Best was convicted of indecent assault (for repeatedly putting his hand inside the pants of an eleven-year-old boy in a classroom in a Catholic primary school in Ballarat, Victoria). In an article in the *Melbourne Age* (25 August 2001), Conway claimed that Brother Robert Best "was seen by some students as more a nuisance and embarrassment than a threat".

Conway evidently thought that Brother Best's criminal offence and ethical breach were no big deal.

Conway took a similar elastic view towards the professional ethics of a psychologist by developing intimate (and sexual) relationships with some of his male patients.

The story of "Bill"

Conway's autobiography says that one of his leisure pastimes was an involvement in amateur theatre production, during which he met a "sterling young man whom I will merely name as Bill."

Conway says (page 99): "He [Bill] undertook, with the aid of **LSD**, a series of investigative treatments in a private hospital under psychiatric supervision, with myself as assisting therapist. The treatments were remarkably successful and Bill's gratitude

knew no bounds."

Conway evidently developed an ongoing friendship with "Bill". It is not clear how long Bill's LSD treatment continued. After some time, Bill died but Conway says the death was caused by lymphatic leukaemia, not LSD.

Bill's death caused Conway to "suffer a reactive bout of depression."

In the next paragraph, Conway goes on: "The phenomenon known to practitioners as transference – a kind of ambivalent, dependent (and fortunately temporary) 'falling in love' with the mentor – is quite commonplace. The resourceful psychologist does not wholly discourage it, but uses the growing attachment as a bridge between the neurotic personality and more normal relationships. The transference can be of an overtly or latent homosexual kind as well as the more conventional heterosexual infatuation" (pp. 99-100).

The hands-on therapist

Broken Rites has been contacted by several males who received psychological counselling from Conway in the 1960s and 1970s. Conway developed intimate (and sexual) relationships with these patients.

1. "**James**" told Broken Rites on 17 February 1995 that when he was aged 15 to 16 in the 1960s he was having behavioural troubles, so his mother sent him to see Catholic psychiatrist **Dr Eric Seal**, who in turn referred him to Ronald Conway. James had counselling sessions for several years at Conway's home, which was then situated in Torrington Street, Canterbury. Conway also took James to the **Newhaven** private hospital where he was placed under **LSD** as part of Conway's therapy. James says that, on two occasions, Conway masturbated him – once at Newhaven Hospital while James was under LSD and once at Conway's home. During these two sessions, Conway also allegedly exposed his own genitals to James.
2. "**Pierre**" told Broken Rites: "In my twenties I was having difficulty in forming relationships, so I sought help from Ron Conway. He treated me for several years at his house and at the Newhaven Hospital and the Sacred Heart Hospital, including with **LSD**. During several of these therapy sessions, he got me to engage in mutual masturbation with him. Eventually I realised this was not appropriate and I declined to engage in this, although I continued to associate with him as a friend. I know that Conway sexualised the relationship he had with many of his other patients. He justified that behaviour as being part of the therapy. I know of at least four other men who approached Conway for assistance and with whom he ended up having a sexual relationship."

3. "**Roger**" told Broken Rites: "When I was twenty, I needed a counsellor. I heard about Conway and started having therapy sessions at his home. He said that I seemed tense, so he started touching me. At first, it was just holding hands but later it became more intimate – that is, sexual touching. In the late 1970s, Conway arranged through Dr Eric Seal for me to have a number of sessions at the **Newhaven** hospital, where I was given **LSD** to facilitate Conway's therapy. This therapy included Conway touching my body in a sexual manner. He also displayed his own genitals to me. Later I put a stop to this sexual relationship but we kept up the friendship."

Another ex-patient

"**Damien**" (a patient of Conway in the 1960s), wrote to Broken Rites on 11 May 2010 and authorised us to publish his comments:

"Being alone in country Victoria, aged in my mid-twenties, not accepting of my sexuality and being in the decade of the 1960s, it was not a happy place to be. The local Catholic priest recommended that I see Dr Eric Seal which I did.

"I had the impression from Dr Seal that I was not an interesting enough case for him. He suggested that I saw either Ronald Conway or a certain other psychologist; I chose Conway.

"After several sessions with Conway, it was suggested that I undergo LSD therapy in Newhaven Private Hospital as an overnight patient. It was explained to me that this therapy was a way to fast-track psychoanalysis and would be very helpful in accepting my sexuality. Conway, as a psychologist, had no qualifications to administer drugs. I did not understand this at the time.

"During the last session I came to believe that I had been in the presence of God who authorized me to lead the sexual life which had been chosen for me.

"Conway then suggested that I continue to see him without the use of LSD. I explained to him that my finances were stretched and that it was not possible. He said that it was important that I continue to see him and that if I were willing he would see me at his home in Torrington Street, Canterbury, *gratis*.

"What a shock I got when one night he made advances to me and we ended up on the floor of his sitting room. The room was decorated as if it were the inside of an Egyptian tomb. He said this should not have happened but that, as it had, we should do it properly in his bedroom. It was a Spartan room with the bed covers on a single bed already turned down and electric bar heaters turned on resting on tables either side.

"I was truly shocked as I had no idea of his sexual proclivities. We masturbated each other. He knew I was disappointed and confused by his actions and I said I did not wish to see him again. He then began writing to me. I never responded. I kept his letters for a number of years but destroyed them after our next encounter. We bumped into each other in Collins

Street, Melbourne.

"We had dinner and he invited me home to see his house in Swinburne Avenue, Hawthorn, and it was suggested that I come and live with him. I did not accept the offer and, as far as I was concerned, I wanted no further contact.

"In the early 1990s, when I was 48 years of age, I was a patient in the Freemason's Hospital and woke up one afternoon to find Ron Conway sitting on my bed holding my hand. He had heard from someone that I was in hospital. I made it clear that I was not happy with his presence. He explained to me that he had been following my life through a work colleague of mine, another psychologist.

"Ron Conway never appeared again."

Screening trainee priests

Conway was not "religious" in the common sense and was not a "churchgoer". In politics, he was right-wing and was opposed to political "progressives". He was well known among the followers of the Catholic political commentator B.A. Santamaria. These Catholic connections helped him to develop his career as a psychotherapist.

From about 1969, he developed a part-time role at Melbourne's **Corpus Christi College** seminary, which trained priests for all dioceses in Victoria and Tasmania. He says he "screened" or "helped" men who had applied to train for the priesthood. The church authorities also asked Conway to "help" other Catholic priests or religious brothers who were having problems, especially sexual problems.

After several Catholic priests and religious brothers had been jailed for sexual crimes, Conway wrote, in an article in the *Melbourne Age* on 1 August 1996: "Until about 1970 there was no effective psychological screening for candidates wanting to study for the priesthood or teaching brotherhood. Today that is not the case."

He referred to his own role in the "screening" process in an interview published in the *Age* on 6 April 2002, after the media had been revealing more sexual offences committed by Catholic clergy.

In his autobiography, Conway has told how he came to be involved in this seminary work.

He wrote:

"Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s Eric Seal played a growing role as a consultant to the Catholic Church in matters of psychological or psychiatric importance. And so began, by association, my own growing involvement with the assessment or assistance of Catholic clergy, postulants and members of religious congregations who

happened to be in difficulty. Later I moved towards the role of consultant psychologist for religious vocations, assessing applicants for the priesthood and the religious life. Since 1969 I have been an adviser to the Melbourne Catholic Archdiocese and the Victorian Province in the matter of screening entrants to Corpus Christi seminary" (page 110).

Conway and the strange case of Father Paul David Ryan

It is unclear how the seminary's "screening" worked and to what extent Conway was involved in it. **Broken Rites** has investigated the case of one Melbourne trainee priest, **Paul David Ryan** – and Ronald Conway certainly became involved in this case.

Ryan was originally a trainee priest at the Adelaide Catholic seminary but was expelled half-way through third year. Despite this, Bishop Ronald Mulkearns, of the Ballarat Diocese in Victoria, accepted Ryan as a candidate for the priesthood in that diocese. In 1972 Mulkearns sponsored Ryan for admission to the Melbourne seminary. Despite his poor references, Ryan was admitted and he stayed at the seminary for five years.

It is unclear why a reject from the Adelaide seminary was accepted into the Melbourne seminary. It is not known whether Ryan was one of the applicants who were screened by Conway at entry but Conway certainly became involved in issues surrounding Ryan in 1976, as explained below.

Broken Rites possesses copies of church documents, including correspondence between the rector of the Melbourne seminary (Fr Kevin Mogg) and a Father John Harvey in Maryland, U.S.A. (who specialized in helping priests with sexual problems). During his Melbourne seminary training (according to the church documents), **Ryan "had been regularly involved in overt sexual behaviour" with about six other trainee priests**. The acts (the seminary letter stated) included mutual masturbation and also some "more serious acts".

The church authorities went ahead with Ryan's ordination, which took place in Ballarat in May 1976, and he was due to be given an on-going appointment to a parish in the Ballarat diocese for early 1977.

But the news of his ordination alarmed a Ballarat mother, who complained to the diocesan authorities that Ryan sexually abused her teenage son (with disastrous consequences for the son) while Ryan was doing work-experience in a Ballarat parish during in the final year of his course. The church authorities still intended to keep Ryan as a priest but they realised that this mother would go public if she saw Ryan being appointed to any Ballarat parish – and this would damage the respectable image of the Catholic Church.

The church authorities went into damage control. In late 1976 (according to the church

documents) the seminary asked **Ronald Conway** to interview Ryan. Conway then wrote a report on Ryan and referred him to Catholic psychiatrist **Dr Eric Seal**. On 18 November 1976, Dr Seal wrote to the rector of the Melbourne seminary (Fr Kevin Mogg), saying that he [Seal] had received a comprehensive report about Ryan from **Ronald Conway**. Following the reports by Conway and Seal and after further discussions, the Ballarat diocese "solved" the problem of the angry Ballarat mother – the diocese arranged for Ryan to be given a trip to the United States in 1977.

Church documents (in the possession of Broken Rites) state that Ryan was allowed to work in parishes in the U.S., where he committed sexual crimes against a number of American schoolboys. And, after returning to Australia, Ryan was also allowed to work in parishes in western Victoria, where he again committed sexual crimes (consisting of repeated indecent touching) against more boys, one of whom later committed suicide. Paul David Ryan was jailed in Australia in 2006 for his sexual crimes.

It is not known what Ronald Conway thought about the abusive behaviour of Father Paul David Ryan and similar church-offenders. Did he think (as he said in the case of Christian Brother Robert Best who was convicted in 1996) that Ryan's kind of criminal offences and ethical breaches were "more a nuisance and embarrassment than a threat"?

FOOTNOTE

For the full story of Father Paul David Ryan, who was interviewed by Ronald Conway at the Melbourne seminary, see our article entitled ["Church kept an abusive priest – and one victim committed suicide"](#).

4. THE REMNANT FILE (MINNESOTA) ON CONWAY

Despairing of getting any action from the Australian Catholic hierarchy on the topic of Conway's misdeeds – even when Conway was dead and, thus, no longer protected by our ludicrous defamation laws – I wrote a series of articles for a Catholic magazine called *The Remnant* based in St Paul, Minnesota. Here are links to the articles in question. The first two concentrate on Conway; the third refers to him only in passing.

Copies of this material have gone to numerous persons in the public eye, most notably His Eminence George Cardinal Pell, Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, as well as to the Brisbane-based Weekend Australian journalist Tess Livingstone. In neither Cardinal Pell's nor Miss Livingstone's case was serious action taken.

4.1 "But What About the Lay Abusers?" – *The Remnant*, 31 August 2010
<http://rjstove.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Stove-Conway.pdf>

4.2 "Evil, Be Thou My Good: Homosexuality, Therapy, and the Church" – *The Remnant*, 31 March 2011
http://www.rjstove.net/articles/Conway_Evil.pdf

4.3 "No Enemies on the Homintern Left" – *The Remnant*, 5 November 2011. (This article is mainly about Archbishop John Hepworth, but it refers to the whole Conway business briefly.)
<http://www.rjstove.net/articles/Hepworth.pdf>

I can only hope that the Victorian parliamentary enquiry will succeed in putting an end to the cycle of denial which has been so obviously exhibited by the Catholic Church's hierarchs, not to mention those mass-media journalists who have been apprised of the situation and who have done nothing about it.

R. J. Stove, [REDACTED]