

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Geelong — 15 February 2013

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Mr C. Pianto.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee I welcome Mr Chris Pianto and his friend Ruth. Thank you for your willingness, Mr Pianto, to appear before this hearing.

All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation committee members will ask questions relating to your submission and evidence provided today. We do thank you very much for being before us and we look forward to hearing from you. Please commence.

Mr PIANO — It was 1971. I was 13. I was sexually abused for two and a half years by the same teacher. As a result I was denied an education after the year of form 2. The abuse had a huge impact on my life since then, and it is only in the last decade or so of my life that I have been able to cope without so much alcohol in my system. I feel as if I am speaking on behalf of a lot of victims, some of whom I know, who are unable to say anything, let alone disclose their experiences. One was a mate. He would have loved to have been here today at this inquiry. Wayne was anally raped by the same teacher who abused me. He is not here today because he killed himself, like so many others, because of the horrific experiences of the abuse we had to endure when we were children.

My mum suffered also. Mum was an advocate for victims, and due to my suicidal tendencies and the lack of empathy and acknowledgement from the Christian Brothers, which she pursued vigorously, she suffered anxiety, high blood pressure, shingles, lockjaw and depression. Mum had to have a dental plate inserted in her mouth at night to stop her grinding her teeth in bed. In the end, Mum died of a brain tumour — an aggressive one. I leave the cause of this brain tumour up to your imagination. Other members of my family have also suffered because of my abuse, as I have not been able to associate with them for other personal reasons.

My father was a league football coach, and as a result I was probably the fittest kid at school. We went for runs along the beach and bodysurfing every morning at 5.30. I think the reason he wanted to keep this up was so that he could keep up with the players he was coaching. He was afraid to fall behind if they went for a run. He was also grooming me to play league football. Once alcohol got a hold of me, that went out the window. I have had problems working to my full potential, due to breakdowns I have had throughout my life. One breakdown lasted for approximately two years, in which time I was too afraid to answer a knock at the door or answer the phone when it rang.

I feel I have been denied the chance of a normal life with a family of my own. I thank you for the opportunity to be able to tell my story, and I hope that the victims who are unable to come forward and tell their stories get a lot of satisfaction out of the hearings that are going on here today and for the rest of the time for which they will last. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Chris, thank you for being before us this morning and for speaking on behalf of many victims, as you described. In the submission you provided to us you highlighted a number of changes that you felt should be undertaken in relation to policies, protocols and legal aspects. Do you think that would then be part way towards justice for many survivors of abuse such as yourself? Is there anything else that you think needs to be done by the church hierarchy or the church itself?

Mr PIANO — The way that the submissions were written, I found it hard to comprehend what the actual questions meant, so a lawyer was assisting me to fill out the submissions. I cannot remember — —

The CHAIR — Would you like to describe in your own words what you think justice looks like for survivors of abuse?

Mr PIANO — The man who abused me finished up doing five years minimum in jail. That was something that I needed to see done. Before then, when I first exposed what had happened to me, I was told that I was fantasising by the head of the Christian Brothers in Geelong at the time. When I first told my mother, she told me to wash my mouth out with soap, because it was lies. Finally, my parents believed what I had told them. Mum tried frantically to have an investigation instigated into the abuse upon myself by the teacher. The Christian Brothers failed to return calls or to instigate any action or investigation into the matter.

I desperately needed a judgement to prove that I was telling the truth as there were some sceptics as to whether or not I was telling the truth amongst the Catholic community. A hearing was to go to court, but the judge at the time cancelled the committal hearing, I think it was, because I had no corroborating evidence. When told of this refusal to take this man to court, I shot myself in the leg in protest and in desperation to at least expose this teacher, which worked pretty well in a way, because while the media were not allowed to name the abuser, they were able to say that he was my class teacher and my football coach, and everyone knew.

The CHAIR — It is a very extreme measure to take.

Mr PIANO — I could not think of anything else. I was not a lawyer. I was desperate. I needed to do something, I felt, that would have the most impact, as the Christian Brothers refused even to investigate or remove the teacher from the school. My father actually fronted up to the teacher one day after school because I wanted him out. My teacher was moving into his class in the next — my brother was to be taught by the same teacher the next year, and I wanted him out, so Dad approached him and told him. He admitted to Dad what he had done and said he was sorry. Dad said, ‘He doesn’t want you teaching his brother’. So he left St Joseph’s College in Geelong and finished up getting a job at St Mary’s, where he taught until, I think, I shot myself.

But I think the most important thing to a victim is to get justice, and for people to acknowledge the suffering, the pain, the guilt and the shame that they have had to live through for, sometimes, 20 or 30 years. I think it was 14 years for me, and it might have been forever, only I was concerned for the welfare of my brother 13 years younger than myself.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Chris.

Mr McGUIRE — Thank you, Chris, for your fortitude in giving testimony today. I would like to get a little bit more information about how extreme the lengths were that you had to take to try to get this issue resolved. Your father is Peter Pianto, a premiership player with Geelong. I am reliably informed that you were an outstanding young footballer, so to take that action — —

Mr PIANO — Yes.

Mr McGUIRE — Why did it get to that extreme, that no-one would believe you? What was the response from the Christian Brothers?

Mr PIANO — It was not so much that, I think. When I look back now — I have had 40 years to think about this — I think that they did believe me, but they did not want it to be spread around the church for fear that other victims might also come forward and expose more abuse throughout the church. I have totally forgotten what that question was.

Mr McGUIRE — Did you hear the testimony from Father Dillon? It was part of this culture of denial and cover-up?

Mr PIANO — Yes, there is not much more I could say after I heard Kevin. Kevin and I are mates now. I consider him a mate now. I do not see him that often, but he is probably the only priest I can trust at the moment, for his acknowledgement of the victims and their suffering, and his backing of the victims.

Mr McGUIRE — Do you think it would be important for this committee to look at whether there should be a specific offence with a jail penalty for covering up or for moving clergy on to other innocent parishes?

Mr PIANO — Definitely. They are just as guilty — almost as guilty — as the offender, and I cannot help but think that the old saying ‘I won’t tell on you if you don’t tell on me’ comes into effect with some cases of abuse among priests or brothers within the church.

Mr McGUIRE — Do you believe that would be an important recommendation from this committee — to try to stop that systemic issue, as the evidence is showing us?

Mr PIANO — Yes.

Mrs COOTE — Chris, thank you very much indeed for being here. I know how hard it is, but it is really important to hear your story. Could I ask about the teacher? It was Swingler, is that the surname?

Mr PIANO — Yes.

Mrs COOTE — How did he go about it? Did he become friendly with your father, with your parents and your family? Is that how he ingratiated himself with you and your family?

Mr PIANO — No, not really. I still remember vividly the trail of events which took place. I understand the grooming part now., As I said before, I have had 40 years to think of how these people operate. The first day I was told to stay after school and approach his desk, I approached his desk and he put his hand down the front of my pants, but no contact was made with anything below my pants, as you can imagine. A couple of days later I was asked to stay behind again and approach his desk, only this time the hand slipped down a bit further and touched my penis. But that was it; there was nothing else for about another week. Now I think of it back then, I realise that if I had said anything to anybody, he would have heard about it and he would have stopped it. He would have said, 'Oh, I just slipped a bit'. But when I had not said anything he realised then, I think, that he had someone to play with and he was not going to say a word. It evolved into oral sex, attempted anal sex, masturbation and whatever he could do to satisfy his desires.

Mrs COOTE — Did he in the general classroom et cetera favour you? We have heard other people have been given — not by him so much, but others — special drinks or sweets or stamps or something. Did he single you out and be kind or give you elevation in the classroom or ask you to do special duties in the day-to-day things?

Mr PIANO — That is an important question, and it has prompted my memory in that he would confiscate cigarettes off 6th formers and give them to me in form 2. He supplied alcohol at parties — beer. He would set out homework for the night, and before the class was finished he would have stood next to my desk in the class and actually filled out the homework for me. Favours like that at the time I appreciated, because everyone hated homework, but it did not get me anywhere with my education. Due to, I would say, a combination of not having to do schoolwork in his classes and the abuse, I never really got to learn much at school.

Mrs COOTE — Do you think that his giving you the alcohol started your relationship with alcohol?

Mr PIANO — No, there wasn't that much alcohol. He might have supplied a few stubbies at a party or something or a football break-up. I started the alcohol myself. I would have flashbacks from the oral sex. I used to dry retch. When he would take out his erection he would peel back the foreskin. It is at the end of the day, there is crystallised urine on the end of his penis and he has put it in my mouth, and I can taste it and smell it. I used to dry retch while he was making me suck his penis.

Mrs COOTE — I guess those flashbacks would do it.

Mr PIANO — Oh, that is where we were, yes — back to the alcohol again, my saviour. Especially at night time in bed on my own, I could not help it. It just came to me every night, nearly, and sometimes I would wake up in a sweat, punching my pillow. The nightmares were myself trying to escape from someone who is trying to get my pants down. I might get up at 1 o'clock in the morning without a chance of getting back to sleep, and it would be nothing to drink half a bottle of port or half a dozen stubbies of beer to calm my nerves and settle down, get back to sleep or get some more rest.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you very much.

Mr PIANO — You're welcome.

Ms HALFPENNY — I understand that when your parents approached Brother Howe at the school he went and approached, I think it was, Brother Chappell in Melbourne, and there was some suggestion that you could be sued for defamation. That was the response — rather than wanting to know further information, there was this threat made. Could you explain a bit more about that or what your parents told you about that?

Mr PIANO — I signed a confidential agreement, I think, for payout for \$32 000. That was in Melbourne. I got back to Geelong. I think it was the same day, or it might have been the next day, I went straight to the *Geelong Advertiser* and told them and they published that I had received compensation when I was not supposed to say anything. They then sent a letter to myself through the lawyer, saying that they were thinking of suing me to get the money back. I was not concerned because I thought they would probably be more

embarrassed by doing something like that to a victim. Also originally I thought that I was the only victim of sexual abuse. After finding out that there were a few other victims coming forward, in a way I wanted them to know that they could get compensation for what they have been through. It is part of the reason why I went to the newspaper — so that other victims would hear about compensation and claim compensation for themselves if they needed.

Ms HALFPENNY — I know you mentioned earlier to that you needed to be proven because you wanted to prove to the community as well, that there was a bit of doubt there. Were the local parish and the, I suppose, church representatives in the area very supportive or did they in any way try to help or talk to the community about what was going on?

Mr PIANTO — There were a few genuine people who were concerned, but by that time I did not have much to do with the church anymore. As I said, the only person I can trust within the church now is Kevin Dillon.

Mr WAKELING — Chris, thank you very much for your presentation and the courage that you have shown not only in speaking here but also for those who could not be here, and you know who they are.

Mr PIANTO — Thank you.

Mr WAKELING — Can I just ask how you have dealt with this over recent years? I am reading an article here from *Geelong Advertiser* in 1995, which you have provided, that is headed 'Relief as a chapter closes', which talks about the sentence. It reads almost as though that part of your life has finished and now you can just get on with the rest of your life. I am interested if for you, as someone who has been through this process, that sentence provided you the relief and, if it did not, what else would you be looking for to provide that support for people in your position?

Mr PIANTO — After the case, and hearing that the teacher was jailed for a maximum 7 years, minimum 5, it was a great relief. I felt like a lot of weight had been lifted, although for about six months after the court case it seemed a bit like an anticlimax. But I realise now that once it was all over and all the attention that I was putting on the case in the build-up to the court date and the case was over, I could not help but think, 'What now?'. I had a bit of a spell for about six months after that. I was seeing a psychiatrist in Melbourne for that time, but then things came back to normal again. So it was a bit like an anticlimax after the case, but the case was the best thing that had happened to me for a long time.

Mr WAKELING — But obviously psychiatric support, psychological support and pastoral care are things that you found were important as well, in addition to just the legal case?

Mr PIANTO — Not necessarily psychological or pastoral support; I think it is more important to tell people, even if it is just a close friend or a relative or a family member. I have found the more you speak about it, the more you learn to cope with it, because it just becomes a familiarity after a long time.

Mr WAKELING — Thank you Chris.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you so much for coming forward as you have. I would just like to ask a couple of additional questions about the culture of the Christian Brothers as it existed at the time, because that was not the only priest or lay teacher who was ultimately convicted. You had John Coogan as well at the same school, and we have heard of incidents in Ballarat. Can you tell us anything about what you believed was the culture of that organisation at the time you were there?

Mr PIANTO — There are probably a couple of other Christian Brothers that were involved in abuse of children at the school. They suicided, so I am assuming that they were concerned after my case that there's might finish up in court as well. It has even crossed my mind that the Catholic Church is a club for paedophiles. I just cannot help but think that sometimes, although I believe there are a few good ones involved in the church as well, even though I am not a religious person any more. They do seem to do a lot of good, as Kevin Dillon does himself. I am sure there are others involved as well, honest ones. I cannot help but think that paedophilia was rife and that institutions like the churches, scouts and other institutions actually attract paedophiles, because they are in charge of children.

Mr O'BRIEN — In relation to the church now, or what you have received, have you received any written apology or statement of account from the Christian Brothers in particular as to what happened and why this happened, and how they are sorry? If you have, could you tell us what you have received?

Mr PIANTO — No.

Mr O'BRIEN — You have not received anything?

Mr PIANTO — Not that I can recall, no.

Mr O'BRIEN — Would that be something you would still seek even at this point: a statement of accountability from at least the Christian Brothers or the Catholic Church as to what went wrong at the time, to give you some aspect of that justice?

Mr PIANTO — I would find it hard to believe any apologies from the church. As I recall, when the Pope came to Australia on World Youth Day he took the opportunity to apologise to victims of sex abuse, at the time he was in Australia; whereas I think if he had made a special trip and come over to Australia specifically and only to apologise to victims, it would have had a greater chance of being accepted as a genuine apology.

Mr O'BRIEN — In a genuine apology, what would you think it should entail? That was my final question.

Mr PIANTO — Oh, sorry. I have never really thought about it. I cannot comprehend what to say.

Mr O'BRIEN — Would you seek a detailed account of what had happened or would you accept a shorter, 'We are very sorry for what happened but we do not explain why it happened or how it happened'? That is what I am trying to draw out. Would it be helpful to you at this stage if we were to hear chapter and verse of what went wrong in the Christian Brothers organisation to allow the abuses that have occurred? I need to know if that is something you are seeking, because it would be something I will ask the church to provide if it is something that would be of comfort to you.

Mr PIANTO — I am not really that uncomfortable anymore, and I do not think an apology would make any difference to me, but then I am not speaking for other victims in that regard. For some of them, an apology might help them just from the acknowledgement that they get from the church, in some way.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you — well said.

The CHAIR — Chris, before we conclude there any final remarks you would like to make to the committee?

Mr PIANTO — I don't think so. I think you will get the gist of what I have said without going into any more detail. I understand you have probably heard some pretty rough stories from Ballarat and other places, from other victims. I appreciate you putting your time in. We probably seem like a pretty pathetic bunch of blokes that are desperate for something to happen, but I think they realise that the law is on their side and fighting for them, instead of having the church covering up the abuses of the past.

The CHAIR — That is fine. Every story is important and we are very appreciative of your willingness to give your time to appear before us. On behalf of the committee, thank you very much indeed, Chris.

Mr PIANTO — Thanks for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.