

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Geelong — 15 February 2013

#### Members

Mrs A. Coote

Ms G. Crozier

Ms B. Halfpenny

Mr F. McGuire

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr N. Wakeling

Chair: Ms G. Crozier

Deputy Chair: Mr F. McGuire

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

Research Officer: Ms V. Finn

Father K. Dillon, parish priest, St Mary of the Angels Parish, Geelong.

**The CHAIR** — I ask our first witness to now join us at the table, and while he does so I will just run through a few housekeeping rules. In accordance with the guidelines for the hearings, I remind members of the public gallery that they cannot participate in any way in the committee's proceedings. Only officers of the Family and Community Development Committee secretariat are to approach committee members. Members of the media are also requested to observe the media guidelines.

On behalf of the committee I welcome Father Kevin Dillon. I thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, 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 this morning the committee members will ask questions relating to your submission, which you have provided to us, and your evidence provided today. Father Dillon, we thank you for appearing before us, and we look forward to hearing from you. Please commence.

**Fr DILLON** — Thank you for the privilege of being here today. I suppose the reference to parliamentary privilege does not bother me too much, because I am hoping what I can present to the committee is not about individuals, personalities or whatever; it is about policies, it is about attitudes, it is about culture and to some degree it is about history as well.

These things underlie, to this moment I guess, certainly in Victoria and the archdiocese of Melbourne, the approach that has been given to the interaction with victims who have come forward, many of whom have suffered unspeakable crimes. There are little children, there are teenagers and there are vulnerable adults. While I suppose to some degree I present what I present as opinion — plenty of people in Geelong would say, 'Yes, we know you have opinions on lots of things' — nonetheless it is based on listening almost on a daily basis, more recently for about 5 years but for over 13 or 14 years, to the experiences of people who have suffered in this way.

The very first victim I ever spoke to was not a church-related victim. It was someone who was a victim of family-related sexual abuse, and I got to know that person initially only over the phone as a random phone call. I got to know that lady. She was a committed Catholic. The abuse had taken place within her family. Ultimately she took her own life. That certainly had an impact on me. Another phone call a little later on was from a church-related victim, and that was my first interaction with someone like that. The phone call started at 8 at night and finished at 2 in the morning. That was my introduction to this sort of extraordinary saga within the church.

From my reading this is something that goes back probably for centuries. I have documents that go back to the 1870s in Victoria of this sort of crime. If I think back to my own time in the seminary, I spent eight years in the seminary, four at Werribee and four at Glen Waverley — interestingly enough, at the police academy — and at no stage during those eight years was the possibility raised that this had even been there in the church, let alone that we should be on the lookout for it, be it in ourselves or in others. At no stage was that ever mentioned. In my own year, out of the 40 students who were in my year — the class of 1969 — two have had convictions, and two years below me four have had convictions, out of a smaller number. As students for the priesthood, and therefore undertaking after ordination a life of celibacy, we were told not to play mixed doubles — this is fair dinkum — and that if we had a female in the car, if we had to, she should be in the back seat, just in case. We could not have anyone falling in love and therefore leaving the seminary to go off to get married — notwithstanding that, many did. The contrast between that sort of advice we were given and the complete ignoring of something that has been a blight on the church for who knows how long is just extraordinary.

I said it is about culture, and I think it is to a large degree; it is a denial culture. When I say 'the church', I am the church, anybody here who is a Catholic is the church and Christian people are the church. But I think there has been an extraordinary denial of just how deep this sears into the human heart and soul. I have spent so many hours with people in tears. I see them shake with just the memory of things that happened 20, 30 or 40 years ago.

There is a human factor to this, and it is our responsibility as an organisation. These things have been done by people who the church has placed in positions of trust. Whether through ordination, religious commitment or something else, these people have been presented as people in whom parents, children and parishioners can

place their trust, and that trust has been betrayed, not only for victims and their families but for the wider church. Indeed, it is a betrayal of the institution itself, but I do not think that has been acknowledged. If it had been, we may not be having this inquiry. If the truly human impact on victims and their families had been fully acknowledged, the scene would have been far different. Much of what is happening here is happening not only because of the appalling crimes themselves but because of the inadequate, to say the least, way — and sometimes perceived by victims as the heartless way — in which the church has responded to them.

Devastation is the word, but I do not believe it has been accepted, nor have the opportunities to lighten the burden that victims carry. We cannot turn the clock back, but we can address victims with compassion, with support, with justice and a sense of recognising their value. Victims feel enormously devalued. That is part of what happens, and they feel more and more devalued if they do not have the opportunity to be comforted within the arms of the church. All these victims — almost without exception — have come from practising Catholic families. It is part of our DNA; it is part of who we are. I imagine that family abuse would be a similar experience. Within the church, the very thing that could be the lifeboat goes down with the ship. Over nearly 44 years of parish experience, a number of people have said to me, through bereavements, sickness and so on, ‘I don’t know how I could have done this without my faith’. Any number of people have said that to me, but an abuse victim cannot say that, because they lose their faith — for some people it is their faith in God, but certainly their faith in the institutional church.

In my submission I have indicated many of what I perceive to be the gross inadequacies of the different protocols. I am personally more familiar with the Melbourne Response because of dealing with victims who have been through that system, but I believe there is an underlying culture. In racing terms you would ask, ‘What are the riding instructions?’, and I think the riding instructions have been to protect the assets of the church. I would be all in favour of protecting the assets of the church, provided that the assets were seen to be the kids, the teenagers and the vulnerable adults who have been harmed — but they are not. It has been about protecting the material assets of the church. Ironically, as things are developing in this country and in others, the cost in financial terms is proving to be, and will continue to prove to be, horrendous. If only it had been done with compassion, with justice and even, dare I say, with generosity right from the word go, it might have been such a different story for many people if value — to use a financial term — had been put on their lives and on their being.

One of the things that demonstrate that is that there is no advocacy, certainly within the Melbourne Response. No-one is given to them to support them. I believe it has been part of my journey in this whole saga that I have had a lot to do with Vietnam veterans, and one of the greatest honours I have been given, as I think I mentioned in my submission, was an honorary membership of the Geelong Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia. That taught me about post-traumatic stress, and it taught me about structures. I learnt about the Veterans Review Board and federal courts. I have been through the whole gamut.

I also learnt that right from the word go someone who is seeking to find out their entitlement is given an advocate, someone to walk alongside them in that quest. I would suggest, with all due respect to veterans seeking entitlements, that is even more important for someone who comes forward, perhaps after years of denial to themselves, looking for solace and comfort, yet they are on their own. Their introduction to the system is to go to a legal person — a Queen’s Counsel in the Melbourne Response case — often in his chambers, which I think would be a fairly intimidating experience, without anyone to support them. I was told at one stage that I was not able to go to support a victim in a conference, because the victim was told that it would be a conflict of interests. I was gobsmacked by that in the sense that it says there are them and us. It is an adversarial approach — certainly in the perception of the victims — that lies very close to the heart of all that has been so bad.

There are no appeals. Talking about the Veterans Review Board and the policies of DVA, DVA will acknowledge that it has some problems. It does not have it all perfect by any means, but in my view it is streets ahead of the church in terms of process. There is no appeal. This is what we do; this is our decision — take it or leave it. If you do not like it, you can pursue it through the courts. We know how successful that can be; there are all sorts of ties and escape clauses.

There is no pastoral follow-through. A couple of years ago I attended a couple of meetings here in Geelong organised by DVA called ‘How Are You Travelling?’, gathering veterans together to ask, ‘How is your wellbeing?’. It is not to do with entitlements; it is to do with how they are going. When I have spoken to

victims, I have asked, 'Have you had any follow-through? Has anybody ever rung you up to ask how you're going? Have you got through this all right? Are you still okay?' and whatever, but there is never a phone call, never a follow-up.

This is something that should be at the very core of the church's mission. We make a lot of fuss, and rightly so, about things like the good Samaritan and Jesus saying, 'I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. As long as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me'. I wonder where this has all gone; it is so absolutely fundamental to the church's mission.

I visited someone in hospital recently who has been diagnosed with a fairly rare disease. They have been in the hospital for two weeks, and they have already been contacted by two people who also suffer from that disease, asking, 'Would you like to join our support group?'. This is in two weeks — and they are going to join that support group. The offering of support groups is a very basic area in which people cope with difficulties. Whether it is parents who have lost children, people suffering from a form of illness or any number of different areas, people come together to support one another.

No effort whatsoever has been made to bring together victims of church-related abuse, who have a lot in common, to give each other support within what should be the comforting arms of the church. The only place in Australia where that has been done, to the best of my knowledge, is here in Melbourne, Victoria, through an organisation called In Good Faith and Associates, through the Melbourne Victims' Collective, and that was spearheaded by a lady by the name of Helen Last, who I think has appeared before you. I believe Helen has saved innumerable lives through her own individual advocacy and support, but particularly through bringing victims together and making them know that they are not people with two heads, they are not subhuman and they are genuine, valued and decent people. That can only come within a support group.

But in my own parish, just a couple of blocks from here, we have AA and Al-Anon; they both meet there on a regular basis. Support groups are fundamental to the way in which we support wounded people. About 95 per cent — I have picked a figure out of the air, but I think it is accepted — of all the people who come forward to present themselves as victims are the genuine article. It is beyond me as to why we do not embrace people. There might be the odd one or two trying to pull a swiftie, but any sort of reasonable system will expose that. Even if it does not, if it is one or two out of 50 or 100, what does it matter if they get something they are not entitled to if the vast majority of the others do so? I had a discussion some years ago with the independent commissioner, and I asked him that question. I asked, 'How many would not be genuine?'. He said, 'Very, very few'. He said three words that I have always remembered, and I gave him great credit for understanding where it is at. He said, 'Why would you?' — of all the things we could come forward to complain about. This is why so many people for years and years will just keep it inside themselves.

Just a few weeks back I had a visit here for a couple of hours from a Melbourne person, who as a result of this inquiry being announced found himself listening to a radio interview with a victim from Ballarat. He was on the road, he pulled over to the side of the road and just sobbed for half an hour, because he said, 'That is me'. He had not acknowledged that even to himself for over 30 years. When he went to the Melbourne Response his comment to me was that he was surprised at how quickly compensation was raised. He said, 'I do not want compensation'. He said, 'I want my life back'. He is a man in his mid to late 50s now, and he has been carrying this for nearly 40 years. I hope that through the efforts of this committee that maybe he might be able to get his life back.

Post-traumatic stress is something which is at the core of so much of this. Even in interviews, victims can shoot themselves in the foot, because they themselves are in denial. I have seen it in veterans, and I have seen it in victims. For example, out of respect for this gathering, I thought I should put on a jacket and Roman collar, as I would normally do for formal gatherings, but I am conscious of the fact that there are people in this room who have been extremely wounded by the church. Sure, I have crosses on my collar, and I wear that as a sense of my commitment to Jesus Christ in and through the church. But it is like the chopper going over in the old Redgum song — 'the Channel 7 chopper chills me to my feet', I think was the line, that even the sight of a priest in a Roman collar can be enough to certainly offend, if not really disturb, people who have been so badly hurt within the church.

One thing that I did put into my submission, which I wanted to make a special mention of — and it is not sour grapes — is that I did make a submission to the archdiocese for the consideration of a pastoral fund to be

established for victims. I talk to people, and I talked to one already this morning before this hearing, and they cannot put food on the table. I am meeting another one on Sunday, who is driving a car that — I hope the police are not watching — should not be on the road. It is a clapped-out Commodore from 1986 or something. This particular person and others like them are really struggling. Their earning life has been affected and their capacity to save and manage money, and yet even if compensation, so-called, is given, what we do?. We give it in a lump sum. In some circumstances, perhaps many, that can be sheer lunacy. That can be gone within a week, and where are they then? That is all PTSD. There is no awareness or knowledge of ‘This is what we are dealing with’.

I put forward this idea of a pastoral fund. It was not going to cost the archdiocese anything, because the idea was to have each parish contribute between \$20 and \$50 a week, initially for two years just to see how it went. Let the parish choose; even the poorest parish can put in 20 bucks a week. Across the diocese, that would raise between \$250 000 and \$400 000. That is a lot of money to be able to just pay for the fridge to be repaired, fix up the gearbox when it has blown up or pay for private health insurance. I have one victim who I am constantly in contact with who suffers from, through stress, diverticulitis. Because of all the bowel things and so on associated with it, the thought of going yet again into a public hospital — this is a very private person — really just freaks them out. Private health insurance would make all the difference. I was able to manage that that would be provided. When I told him, you would have reckoned I had told him he had won TattsLotto. He was so relieved and so delighted. It breaks your heart. This is the human side of things.

In regard to the way forward, I just have a few thoughts, and I am no expert, but I believe the current protocols, certainly the Melbourne Response and probably Towards Healing — although I am less experienced with that — have lost all credibility with victims. I believe they are beyond repair; those would be the words I would use. The only way forward, I believe, and I would hope that maybe this committee can direct and enact this, is that through the community a totally independent and skilled committee be established with people who know about post-traumatic stress, people who have genuine social work and welfare skills and people who have good knowledge obviously in the law; it is still important to work within all of that. You could have a member of the church to represent the church. I think it is important that the committee actually sit in judgement on that membership and see whether that person was an appropriate member to represent the church within that committee.

For the church itself to operate and manage its own system, I think those days are gone. The people who have come to me in recent times, what do I do with them? Why would I refer them to a protocol that is now under investigation with other things by a parliamentary committee in Victoria and a royal commission throughout the nation? Why would I do that? It does not make any sense at all to do that.

There is a song, interestingly enough, in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, of all things, ‘Could We Start Again, Please?’. I would hope that everyone who has been through either system, particularly those who have signed a deed of release, can have that reviewed independently. I would hope that all victims who can be identified, or certainly those who want to come forward, can be asked what we need to do to help. My dear mother who died seven years ago used to have this little phrase that as a family we always laughed about, ‘Help me the way I need to be helped’. I think if we are trying to help victims, surely they are the first people who need to be asked, ‘How can we help you? What do you need? You have been through one of two systems. Were there any good things there that need to be retained?’. The failings have been pretty well documented, but maybe there are some good things and good strategies that could be incorporated into something totally independent.

In the long run, and here is the crunch, with this committee, the church would have to foot the bill. It is our responsibility as a church. How do we do that? We are good at running raffles, and we are good at running fetes and whatever. That is our problem to work out, but these people and their families are our responsibility. We had the ball in our court, and I believe we let it go and we let it go very badly indeed. Even within an independently established committee, as I mentioned before, there also need to be several levels of review because, as I said, victims can shoot themselves in the foot. You interview someone with post-traumatic stress and they say, ‘No, nothing wrong with me’. Denial is always there, and they may not necessarily present themselves as well as they should. Later on they think, ‘Why in the world did I say that?’.

I think the experience of people experiencing post-traumatic stress, the experience even in DVA, could be something worthwhile to draw on. But it is my hope, that this committee — and I am delighted to learn there is

another four months — will continue to be as thorough as it needs to be because a lot of people have waited a long time for this to happen, and I certainly thank God that it has happened.

**The CHAIR** — Father Dillon, thank you very much for your insights. As somebody who is working in the current system, as you say, your church, can I ask with that in mind in your view why has not the real impact that you described by victims been acknowledged by the church hierarchy?

**Fr DILLON** — I suppose I go back to the riding instructions. These things are hard to pinpoint. I think if the riding instructions had been protected, the church's good name — —

**The CHAIR** — Are the riding instructions built in?

**Fr DILLON** — Yes, to protect the assets and that sort of thing, and protect the church's good name. You have to look at it now and say, 'That's worked well, hasn't it?'. Interestingly enough I was telling someone before the meeting that a couple of years ago I bought a book in Borders bookstore, just before it closed down. It was a book written by a guy called Jim Collins, who is a business guru in America. He wrote a book called *Good to Great* about how good companies become great companies. It has been the bible to some degree of the resurrection of the Geelong footy club. He also wrote a follow-up book called *How the Mighty Fall*. The irony is that I bought it in Borders when it was closing down.

The first stage of the mighty falling was an examination of about 20 American companies that had gone into oblivion when they never should have done so. The first was hubris — and I had to look the word up — which is arrogance borne of previous success. The next one was denial that things are as bad as they are. The one in between was expansion when it should not be happening. Indeed, the church expands its mission without looking at something which is fundamentally tearing at its very heart. I picked up that book in Borders and thought, 'I don't believe this'. It has been a bit of a bible for me.

I think if only the church in its official capacity could truly get that message — get away from its arrogance of what it has done in the past, and get out of its denial of how widespread this has been. This has been in almost — as I know — every religious order and every diocese, certainly in the Western world. Whether it is western only I do not know, but it is the Irish, the English, the Belgian, the French, the German and the American — it has come out here, there and everywhere. But we are concerned at what has happened to our own people in Victoria, and that is our responsibility. It has happened on our watch and our turf.

**The CHAIR** — Why do you think, though, that there is that widespread denial?

**Fr DILLON** — Two things; I think that often the church operates on a lack of accountability. It runs its own show. It is separate from everyone else, and that is not healthy. We all should be accountable, including parish priests. I do not think that is built into the church's operation nearly enough, and I think because the church's mission is in spiritual things, there is in essence an idea that maybe it is above everything else — but they are mere mortals in other things.

As I see it, that is not what the mission of Jesus was all about. He was a little kid in a town in an occupied country. He kicked the footy with the others kids. He went to school, became an apprentice and became a carpenter. Only in the last three years of his life did he take to the roads, and even then it was with great humility and nowhere to lay his head et cetera. He was giving examples and teaching that came from the grassroots of his own experience. We are not above anybody else, and nor should we be. If you kid yourself that you are, you get things completely out of kilter.

**Mr McGUIRE** — As a practising priest, your evidence, testimony and insights are important to this committee. I want to go a little further on the culture of denial, as you have called it. Is the fact that the Catholic Church says that you are not employed by the Catholic Church part of that denial? What is your response to that view?

**Fr DILLON** — There has been a statement that priests are not employed by the church. On the one hand I have never seen my relationship with the church as being just a hierarchy with a worker and an employer, getting my pay packet on a Thursday et cetera. It is genuinely meant to be a vocation and a sense of calling. To be told by the institution, 'No, you are not employed; you are self-employed or a contractor', is disengaging. I use that word because it comes up a lot in conversation. There is a sense of being cut off: 'If it doesn't suit us,

we really don't want to know you'. I have been a priest for 44 years. I started studying for the priesthood in 1962. I have spent all my life in parishes, and I am grateful that I have. I would not call it an insult to be told that I am self-employed or a contractor, but I would call it disengaging. There is a sense of not belonging.

I made a promise of obedience to the bishop and his successors, and I try to be as faithful to that as I can be, as my conscience allows et cetera, and hopefully I have done that. I have been entrusted with the leadership of one of the most important parishes in the country, let alone the diocese, here in Geelong. I am honoured to do that, and I have been doing that for 12 years. Interestingly enough, while I am grateful to the committee for asking me about my thoughts on all of this, those thoughts have never been sought by any of the officialdom in the church. No-one has ever come to me and said, 'You're in contact with a lot of victims. Are we getting this wrong? Even if we don't take any notice of you, we're still interested in what you have to say'. That is not about me at all, but it is about listening. It is a great church word — 'We're listening people' and so on — but there has not been much listening going on in all of this.

**Mr McGuire** — I know it is a personal slight, but it is not a realistic assessment of the relationship, is it? How does the ATO view the relationship?

**Fr Dillon** — I am no tax expert by any means, but I understand that the tax office sees us as employees. I am not a tax officer's bootlace, so I have no idea how these things work out, but it seems that we are employees on one hand and we are not employees on the other.

**Mr McGuire** — Is this not part of the culture of denial? Why would the church take such a position, which is not actually a reflection of the fact of the matter?

**Fr Dillon** — I understand that it has been the case in England and it has been challenged in the high or supreme court in England. In Britain this approach has had to be demolished because it did not stand up in law.

**Mr McGuire** — Is it not the fact, though, that the church would be saying this? Is it the fact of the matter that the church would be saying this because it means it then does not have to take accountability for the actions of the priests?

**Fr Dillon** — There is legal self-protection in the whole thing. As I understand it, if an individual priest commits an offence, this means that the church itself cannot be held responsible, because it did not employ them.

**Mr McGuire** — How do you view that? It is a personal slight and an insult to you, but is it farcical? Is it a joke? How would you describe it?

**Fr Dillon** — I think it is an abrogation of basic responsibility, let alone the mission of the church. I do not think it is good citizenship. I think it is leaving victims to hang out to dry, and it is putting victims in the space of being told, 'We've got charity, but we're not giving justice'.

**Mr McGuire** — Does this go to your other proposition that what the church was really trying to protect was its good name and reputation and also money?

**Fr Dillon** — That is certainly the way it comes across to me in terms of my analysis of it, and that is based on my listening to many, many victims over many hours. I am saddened by this, and I am saddened by being in a public forum and saying this about my church. I love my church. I have given my life for my church, and I continue to do so, but I also put too many people in the ground every week. I do three or four funerals a week, and when you do that you know you have to be true to yourself. There was no way, given that the committee has given me the opportunity, that I was going to beat around the bush and say things I did not believe to be accurate.

**Mr McGuire** — On a personal level, have you suffered any rebuke, backlash or criticism for standing up and bearing witness?

**Fr Dillon** — No. I did get a call once, quite some years ago, from a lay official in the archdiocese. They said they were disappointed that I appeared on *Lateline* one night. I had been to visit a victim in his home and met his wife. I heard the story of his experience. He was a victim of a priest who was the chancellor of the

archdiocese of Melbourne and, for a long time, the chair of Catholic Church Insurance, ironically. He is a man whose life — his wife, his family situation — has been devastated. I went out to visit them.

Two days later, I received a call asking me about the call for a review of the Melbourne Response. That is a call that I and others have been making for many years and it has never happened, and that is part of the fundamental problem. A genuinely external review would have revealed ages ago many of these things that have come out, and that is what you good people are doing, and I thank you for that. I was asked whether I would go on *Lateline*. I had 2 seconds to make up my mind. I thought, 'This won't go over too well if I say yes, but if I say no then I'm betraying those people who I spent three hours with on Sunday'. I was not prepared to do that, so I said yes, and a few hours later I got this phone call saying, 'We're disappointed'. I must say in fairness that from then on I have not been rebuked, sent to Coventry or anywhere else. Nonetheless, I would have to say that it is not a comfortable journey on any number of different levels. I do not like having to take a position at odds against the official position of my church, but you do what you have to do.

**Mr McGuire** — To sum up, is your proposition that the Catholic Church has put its good name, reputation and money ahead of compassion and people?

**Fr Dillon** — Basically, yes.

**Mrs Coote** — Father Dillon, thank you very much. You have given us an enormous amount of very forthright information in both your written submission and here today. I would like to take up the issue about the Melbourne Response particularly and your suggestion for a model going further into the future. Could you clarify for me that in your eyes the Melbourne Response itself was set up with a primary consideration of avoiding financial remuneration of victims?

**Fr Dillon** — I think that somehow or other — and this is where you get back to culture — there is the sense of protection. Similar things happen in footy clubs, dare I say, in this day and age — not pointing the finger at any footy clubs. It is an institutional thing. It is the nature of institutions to protect themselves when their wellbeing is threatened from the outside, to circle the wagons. Had there been a broader view of saying, 'We have a responsibility here. It might cost us a bit in the beginning, but in the long run we have to do what we have to do', because what the church has in terms of its assets and its buildings has all come from ordinary people putting their hands in their pockets and putting something in the plate on Sunday morning. This has happened over hundreds and hundreds of years. I have not made that money for them and others have not made it; it has been ordinary people. We are the custodians of that for the time being. I think there is a sense that somehow or other it belongs, almost, to a small group of people. Sure, it is in trust. I am not saying that people are dishonest. I am certainly not inferring that at all, but I think that sort of thinking can take you over.

**Mrs Coote** — In your submission today you have said the church has been heartless in its response to victims and in the way that the Melbourne Response, particularly, has let people down. You have indicated in your written submission as well that you feel it is an outdated model and it should not go further forward. You have given some very powerful evidence today, and there was the example of the veterans affairs arrangements. But in your submission you also talked about not wearing your collar and jacket today because many people would feel uncomfortable. Will people feel uncomfortable with the very amount of money that you are speaking about going into even an independent body to be redistributed to victims, or do you believe that victims are seeking for the church that has damaged them so much to make that sort of reparation?

**Fr Dillon** — I think to a large degree in terms of this committee and its inquiry maybe you do not even realise how much you are doing just by doing what you are doing. Because it is not about money. I have yet to meet the victim for whom it is about money. They may have to put food on the table or pay their health insurance and so on, but even that, even those practical realities, are far outweighed by the emotional, the spiritual and the psychological burden they carry. It is the fact that people care and people worry. They want a church that bleeds for them and bleeds with them. The fact that financial consideration should come into it — as I said, I have yet to meet a victim for whom it is about money.

I am not saying that we should set up another compensation panel. That is why I put on the written notes, 'Could we start again, please, and have a look at this from a totally different perspective', first of all by asking the victims what they need. They will not say, 'We need money'. They will say, 'We need care'. If that care costs money, so be it. If they have a broken-down jalopy where the gearbox has fallen out, it needs to be fixed

and their life is being upset, let us go ahead and fix it. That does not make it about money. It is about quality, it is about being valued and it is about being recognised. So many people — it does not matter whether it is children, adults, teenagers or whatever — carry so much guilt. Catholics are great at guilt, and they carry so much, saying, ‘What did I do?’. Even little kids of six and seven do, and they can hardly remember. They think, ‘I must have done something’, and they did nothing. We have to remove that guilt, by embracing them with every sense of compassion we can find. That is what has got to happen.

**Mrs COOTE** — I agree with you. We have had many witnesses here say to us that it is not just the money, but indeed that would be useful and helpful in helping their lives go forward. We have spoken of a change of the culture. Do you think the Catholic Church here in Victoria is ready to contribute to a financially independent fund that would in fact do exactly as you have said and be administered by an independent body?

**Fr DILLON** — I am not a lawyer, but I do not think they should have any choice.

**Mrs COOTE** — Thank you very much indeed.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Father Dillon, are you the only priest who is supporting and advocating for victims of child abuse within the church? I ask that because you gave an example of a man from Melbourne ringing you up, and you are here in Geelong. Also this committee really has not heard from very many practising priests. Are others doing what you are doing?

**Fr DILLON** — I am probably the noisiest. That is a matter of history, I suppose, in the sense that I wrote a piece in our parish bulletin a couple of months back. I called it ‘The Tale of Three Phone Calls’. I have mentioned two of them already. The first was the lady who called me 20 years ago. I picked up the phone at 3 o’clock in the morning, and she just shrieked into the phone. I thought, ‘What have we got here?’. Something made me hold on. It would have been 5 minutes until she settled down, but then she told me who she was. I have a little statue of Mary she gave me, and that is in my office at the moment. I attended her funeral after she took her own life. That was family related.

The next one was a 6-hour phone call, and she was a vulnerable adult who was in hospital and abused by a priest. It was 10 years before I actually met her in person. The third one, which is important, happened about five years ago when Chrissie and Anthony Foster, who I think are here this morning —

**The CHAIR** — They are.

**Fr DILLON** — Sought an appointment or an interview with Pope Benedict, who was here for World Youth Day. They were told by the bishop — and told publicly in the media — that they were people dwelling crankily on old wounds. One of their daughters had taken her own life just six months before. Anybody who knows anything about these things knows that six months is worse than six days after these things. A, you never get over it; and B, six months to two years is probably the worst time of all.

I heard that comment on 3AW when I woke up, and I just went cold. I am not too much awake at 6 o’clock in the morning, but, boy, did I wake up when I heard that. Neil Mitchell got onto it at 8.30. Something overtook me, a rush of blood to the head, and I did not even have to look up 3AW’s number — 9690 0693; I still know it. So I rang up, and I identified myself. I said I was a Catholic priest. When they put me through straightaway, I did not know what I was going to say. I told him who I was, I gave him my name and I said I was in Geelong. I said, ‘Neil, I just cringed. I feel so bad for those people, that somehow or other our leaders just don’t get it’. I did make the point about the bishop who had made the comment. I said, ‘Look, he is not a bad fellow, but he has never been in a parish in his life. He is an academic, and he is a very clever academic, but you have to have that day-to-day experience in interaction with people’.

As a result of that first and only time I have ventured proactively into the media, means, I suppose, that I am the go-to person in terms of media as recently as this morning. You have asked the question, ‘Are there others?’. I believe there are many other priests who would agree with everything I have said, and they may well have spoken very well, wisely and courageously in their own parishes. But just by accident, it has fallen to me to simply, maybe from that single phone call, be a bit of a spokesperson in my own way.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — I have just one other question. As a supporter and advocate of people who have suffered this terrible criminal rape, abuse, whatever, are you aware of people who have made complaints to

Towards Healing or the Melbourne Response in cases where the perpetrator, priest or other person in the church is continuing to practise their duties within the church?

**Fr DILLON** — Yes, there have been some. I suppose it is a matter of how well this investigation has been made. A lot has been said in the context of this committee and so on of the non-interaction of police. As a priest I am vulnerable. Somebody could make an accusation against me. I would want to be investigated by the police because they know what they are doing. I would not want to be investigated by a church committee because whatever it was it was a crime. If I get investigated because I put on the wrong vestments last Sunday and someone has written into the archbishop about that, okay that is all right, the police are not interested in that. But these things are crimes and they should be investigated by police.

We have here in Geelong something that I went to the opening of last year. It is a magnificent multidisciplinary centre, as they call it. It is a funny name. It has child protection, a centre against sexual assault and the police all working together. I might be wrong, but I understood from the police submission to this inquiry that the church was offered support from that and it did not take up the offer. I am not quite sure how accurate that was, but that sense of investigation needs to be made because people need to be protected.

The reality is that I and every other priest are vulnerable, not only because of what has been done by our brothers in ministry, but we are vulnerable even more so in terms of suspicion because of the appalling way it has been treated. If people can be moved on and retained in ministry, what is there to say that somehow there is not something lurking in my past that has not been brought, or maybe has been brought to the notice of some and not to others. So people would not trust me nor any other priest the way they used to.

**Mr WAKELING** — Father Dillon, thank you so much for not only your submission but your appearance today and the actions that you are taking on behalf of those victims. Can I talk about the culture of the hierarchy within the church? I would like to just talk about an extract of a speech that Cardinal Pell made in Cork in 2011. In it he says:

Let me now explain what I have tried to do in Australia. First of all I had to deal with the abuse scandal and in this I was given some very good advice from a former Supreme Court judge. He told me that the scandals would bleed us to death year after year unless we took decisive action. I was also summoned by the Premier —

that being former Premier Jeff Kennett —

at the time who made it clear that if we did not clean the church up, then he would ...

Then I would like to conclude with this quote from Cardinal Pell:

So we did clean it up; we set up an independent commission, we set up a panel to provide counselling and a system to pay compensation — and please God the worst of it is behind us.

That is a statement from 2011 by Cardinal Pell about the way in which the church is dealing with the child abuse. Can I ask, in terms of the hierarchy of the church, your views on that statement as to whether or not the church has put a system in place to ensure that the worst is behind us?

**Fr DILLON** — I read that statement. We can all be guilty of poor choices of words — who knows, I might have done it a few times this morning — but the scandals would bleed us dry? That is the first thing. When I read that, I thought, ‘Hang on, is this really saying it is about money?’. That is the phrase you use when you talk about bleeding us dry. You might say it will bleed us dry morally or whatever, but that is what we say when we talk about dollars and cents, bleed us dry.

I think he goes on to say, ‘If we didn’t do something decisive’ and ‘We did do something decisive’ — and that is probably true. That action was taken, and it may well have been at the time. We are talking, what, 18 years ago now, or 17 years ago — my arithmetic is not very good this morning. But surely along the way you would stop and have a look and say, ‘How is this going? Okay, we’ve been in operation for two years, what did the people think of this? How did they find it? Were they comforted? Were they supported?’. And that was never done. There was I, like back in 2009 or something on *Lateline*, still appealing for a review.

We run a very successful fete down here in Geelong. It is on 2 November, Derby Day, this year, if you are free. But after the fete I will write to the stallholders and I will ask, ‘What was good? What was bad? What can we do better next year? What worked? And what did not work?’. It is a fundamental part of what we do: go back to

the people who are experiencing it. I do not get around to all the stalls. I am the DJ actually, so I do not get to see everybody. I need to know from them what was good and what was bad. It is a fundamental thing. We have never done it. I have no understanding why it has been resisted so strongly. It is something which any business, any organisation, any scheme at all always has. It asks, 'How are we going? Are we doing this right?'

It could be okay to say that was set up back in 1996, maybe within the culture of the time, and say, 'This is going to cost us heaps', or whatever. But as you get to talk to the people, the fundamental element of all of this for the hierarchy, the one thing that has made the difference for me, has been these conversations one on one with so many people and learning of their hurt, their sadness, their sense of being devalued. That is at the core of it. The first thing the people that are dealing with this — and that would be true of any committee that was set up — would have to do is to sit down or go out for a coffee or something with these people and say, 'Tell me your story', and just listen; say nothing, just listen.

**Mr WAKELING** — Father, on the back of that, clearly a major issue, as we have heard from the testimony, is that a major cause of the scandal is the fact that so many priests were moved with the full knowledge of the hierarchy, putting further children at risk. Can you provide any commentary as to where you think that is today? Can you your community, can the Catholic community of this state feel any more certainty that this action is still not continuing?

**Fr DILLON** — I think I would be confident that that lesson, if no other, has been learnt. If anything, probably like pendulums, they move the other way and maybe at the first hint of anything like this the sword of Damocles can come down. But I think that is something, if nothing else, that has been learnt. That it has not been learnt in the past is tragic, because so many people who have become victims need not have become victims had that not been in place. Again, it is not just about me, but that puts suspicion on every priest because who knows if a priest is someone who should have been drummed out of the regiment but is still somehow or other hanging on to ministry, the police have not investigated them, or whatever. It is a mess. It is an absolute mess.

We will never get it 100 per cent right, but I am hoping that through this committee and its recommendations and findings and the testimony of so many people who know this problem intimately, with the best wisdom that we can get from all over the world and from our own sources, like good psychologists and psychiatrists that know PTSD and how it works and so on, we can get a system that is so far in front of what has been in place that it is not funny. That is why I think it is beyond the church's capacity to do this. There is too much history. There is too much difficulty that goes into the back of all this.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Thank you, Father Dillon, for your testimony and your work in all your capacities. I would like to take you to the issue of legal costs, which you raised in a letter to the archbishop in your submission dated 31 March. You eventually then wrote to David Curtain in his capacity as head of the board. It is the issue of whether legal costs as an item should be separately compensated. Could you outline your views on that issue and your response firstly?

**Fr DILLON** — Basically the Melbourne Response, as it has been, and almost as it is, because I think it is unchanged to date, is a legally based response. People are introduced to it by an interview with a Queen's Counsel, and it moves along its path and ultimately concludes with a legally binding — it has never been challenged, so presumably it is legally binding — deed of release. It is often said that only a fool has himself for a lawyer. So that means if a victim is entering into this legal process with QCs, lawyers, deeds of release and so on, they need legal advice along the way. There have been some legal firms who, to their great credit, have provided this, almost always pro bono, but it is an enormous burden for the victims to think, 'This lawyer and this firm have guided me, helped me and supported me', and they get what is a relatively small sum, and if the legal firm has demanded what is their right, the whole thing could go on legal costs.

The suggestion I made was that if someone was found justified in their complaint and they were awarded, say, \$30 000, which is more than the average, I understand, a third would be added to that for legal costs, given the fact that it is a legal system and they have to have the advice of a lawyer. That was passed on to the then chair — he may still be — of what is called the compensation panel. In his response he indicated that he did not feel that suggestion had any legitimacy. He also interpreted the letter, notwithstanding the fact that I reread it after his reply, as if I was talking about legal representation at the hearing of the compensation panel alone, but

of course that is half an hour or an hour at the most. I was suggesting, and I think the letter made it quite clear, that legal representation all the way through should be compensated.

I must admit that at that stage I was not feeling too resilient. I was going to write back, and I thought, as we all tend to, 'What's the use?'

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Can I just pause you there, because I just want to take you to another matter. I was a lawyer for 15 years, and I worked in land acquisition and compensation. In that statutory scheme, when your properties are taken by the government you are entitled to a separate legal fund for your legal expenses. Section 41F of the act talks about any legal valuation or other professional expenses necessarily incurred for obtaining advice. In fact you are given a regulatory letter when your land is taken that advises you of this and your right to obtain professional representation. You may not be aware of that.

Could I just read to you the response from David Curtain to contrast this private system that the church has established, where he says in the first three paragraphs:

Victims occasionally appear represented before the compensation panel, although they are always advised that no legal costs will be awarded.

I respectfully disagree with your statement to the Archbishop of Melbourne that 'it is essential that those who seek to use the process in order to further a complaint will need to seek legal counsel'.

Indeed, I believe that the process is set up so that the opposite is true, that is that victims do not need to seek legal counsel.

The suggestion that you would have a compensation scheme that does not need lawyers from David Curtain, QC, in that capacity — and he is writing in his personal capacity — I can say for my own part is certainly an affront to compensation lawyers in land acquisitions, where it is precisely the opposite. What would you say to a recommendation that that is an example of the fundamental problem with a privately administered compensation system as opposed to a state law?

**Fr DILLON** — I think I have used the word 'gobsmacked' a couple of times this morning, but when I got that reply I really was amazed, first of all that my letter had been misinterpreted to mean that I was talking about legal representation at the compensation panel only, when I was talking about legal representation all the way through. I felt that for someone in that capacity to indicate that no legal advice was necessary in anything that ends up with a legally binding deed of release was quite extraordinary. I wanted to take it up, but again you get back to culture. I thought, 'This is banging your head up against a brick wall', so I did not bother. I included it in my submission. The correspondence was not confidential, and I felt it exposed a fundamental problem in the understanding of what this is all about.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — I feel compelled to ask you this last question, and I ask you, a priest of high repute in your community, as a Catholic myself of some loyalty to the church who is dealing with this with some difficulty. This week we have had the resignation of the Pope, and we have received a number of submissions from Catholics for Renewal that the culture is a hierarchical culture from the top down that it is fundamentally flawed, whilst people such as yourself are truer to the true teachings of Jesus essentially in the parish but not in the culture. Is it time that the cardinals, who are considering the election of a new Pope of the Vatican, considered electing a Pope to lead the church from the ground up — that is, a parish priest, and I would say 'such as yourself', but you would be too humble to put yourself forward, and you are doing too much valuable work here for Geelong. There are thousands of good parish priest all around the world, and I think the historical precedents are there. Is it time that the church looked at itself for reform from the ground up rather than from the top down?

**Fr DILLON** — My passport is still valid, so I have been waiting for the call. It is interesting. I wrote a piece for our parish bulletin yesterday, and it is a groundbreaking decision by Pope Benedict to do this. Where it is groundbreaking is not that he has resigned and nobody else has done it; where it is really groundbreaking is that it is recognised that the difference of the world in which we live, particularly through the internet, through communication, through transport and so on. He really is the CEO of probably the biggest international organisation on the planet, and you just cannot do that at an advanced aged.

Also, taking into account — again, I go back to a bit of a mantra for me — good business principles, the people who do well in business know the people on the shop floor; they know when this guy's wife has had a baby and

they know that this one went in the triathlon last weekend. They have their feet on the ground. One of the things that emerges almost all the time when you look at leadership in the church is that parish experience is minimal, and if it did exist, it was a long time ago. Thirty years ago I was in a public situation and I was asked, 'If you were Pope, what are the three changes you would make?'. I will not go into the other two, but the first one was I said I would make every bishop a serving parish priest — not get them from past parish priests, but actually have them run the place. You know, having to go over, as I did last night at midnight, and fix up the alarm at the church, which had gone off because some wretched spider was going across it. Just those basic things. Picking up the phone and not knowing who is on the other end, and then having to deal with it, whatever it is. These are the fundamental things, and it is about serving the ordinary person.

Sure, we need our canon law, we need our scripture scholars and we need our theologians, but I think in the main there is a lack of value of the ordinary person in the church, and yet they are 99.5 per cent of the people who make it up. If there is any cultural thing that probably needs to be addressed, that is it. I am sounding like a real revolutionary, and I am not. If you asked my classmates, they would say, 'Come on, Dillon?'. They reckon I am one of the most conservative guys of the year, for goodness sake. But you see these things. The world has changed, and the Pope has recognised that. We live in a far different world, and it has to be addressed. Maybe the things that have been happening to victims have been happening, as we say, for decades and centuries and maybe it has been covered up, but now that is changing. It has changed in Ireland, it has changed in England, it is changing in America, and it is sure changing here — and again, thank God for that.

**The CHAIR** — Father Dillon, before we conclude, are there any remaining remarks you would like to make to the committee?

**Fr DILLON** — No. I am just grateful for the opportunity. I am no village expert on any of these things, but I suppose there has been a fair bit of experience. I am a great believer in divine providence and I believe in certain things that have led me along the journey — a few forks in the road for different people where I have had to sort of make a decision as to which way you go — particularly the experience of getting to know veterans and in particular Vietnam veterans and the whole notion of PTSD and those phone calls. I have never believed in a manipulative God, but I do believe he tweaks things every now and again to make things fall into place.

I certainly do not want to be interpreted as bucketing on the church. I love my church, I love what it represents and I love all the enormous amount of good and solace and comfort that it provides, but I do believe in this most critical area of its responsibility as well as its ministry that it has failed very badly. I just hope that perhaps in some small part my offering might go some way towards a much better treatment for victims along the way.

**The CHAIR** — On behalf of the committee I thank you very much for providing the evidence that you have provided today and for your submission. It has been extremely helpful and we do appreciate your time this morning. Thank you again.

**Witness withdrew.**