

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 23 January 2013

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Witness

Mr G. Sleeman.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Sleeman. We will now resume the public hearing part of your evidence given to us this afternoon. Please continue.

Mr SLEEMAN — That is all right. I am particularly grateful and quite humbled about being here today, because I will be telling you something today that I have experienced for 43 years of my life.

Just a little bit of a brief history about myself, I was born and bred in Sunbury. Unfortunately my family had long and early connections with Rupertswood, which is, sadly, in the media for a rather negative aspect these days, so from a young age I experienced the Salesians of Don Bosco. From the age of 7 to the age of 15 I and the rest of my brothers and sisters actually lived inside the boundaries of the Victorian government's mental health institutes — mainly Janefield out on the other side of Bundoora and then at the Beechworth mental hospital. I suppose I can blame my father mostly for the fact that I have gone into the work of working with the people who are less privileged and less advantaged than us.

After I was at school I joined the Salesians of Don Bosco and studied with them for nearly seven years. I was actually based at Sunbury in 1969, 1970 and 1971, where I was in charge of the agricultural dormitory. That was when I was first exposed to religious abusing young boys, where I observed a number of brothers who have since been convicted of abusing young lads. I relayed that information to the head of the house, who was called the rector in those days, and his response to me was, 'Well, Graeme, you are not really squeaky clean. You go out and play football in the local community, and young girls bring you home'. I will apologise for my lack of political correctness, but you could imagine what I said to him about what he presumed I was doing with the young girls.

I eventually left the Salesians. Because I had been in a cloistered life for a while, I drove trucks interstate. While I was with the Salesians I became a qualified teacher and also a qualified wool classer and shearer by trade. Then for some unknown reason — I must have had a desire to be punished further — I went and studied at Corpus Christi Clayton, and I had the privilege there of first meeting Phil O'Donnell. Sometimes he says that I was a breath of fresh air, because I really was not part of the tea-drinking company. I left there and took up teaching again. I travelled to East Gippsland, because I had played footy and coach football in the local community, and began teaching at Catholic schools again. I became the acting principal at St Mary's, Bairnsdale, and then I was appointed the principal at St Thomas's in Sale.

When I was in Bairnsdale I met my highly supportive wife, who is still with me today — I do not know why, because of the traumas we have put her through. She was a widow with four children and together we had two more. I will acknowledge the fact that my young daughter is here today, who has probably kept us on the straight and narrow. It is those two — my two youngest daughters — who, sadly, I am not proud to say were the ones who prevented me from committing suicide over all these actions that have taken place.

I then came to Melbourne to study, and I was based at St Joseph's, Springvale. I got a call one day from my principal that he wanted to see me. I thought I was in trouble again, because I was always rocking the boat. He asked me would I go to Doveton, because the nuns had walked out that morning. The parish priest in those days was Father Vic Rubeo. I was never told, informed of or enlightened about any of the reasons why the nuns left. I was told that an assessment of the school had been done and the school was very well run. I met Rubeo and I began to work there at Easter — I think that was around 1981 — and then the fun began.

Vic was a little different. I was not aware at the time I was the principal there that he sexually abused young boys and girls. I was very well aware of his relationships with adult women, and I was responsible for removing him from the parish because of his activities with local female parishioners. I can speak quite confidently about that because, believe it or not, I caught him in bed one day with one of them as I used to go over to the presbytery to get stuff and so forth. That is the interesting thing. When I removed him from the parish — and my wife helped me do that; so did my father in getting him a doctor's certificate to go on six months' sick leave — I reported to the vicar-general and pleaded with him to please send someone pastorally minded, because I was aware that Father Wilfred Baker had previously been at Doveton and the people really needed some care. The interesting thing is that the priest from the Franciscan order who was sent there to administer to the people also continued the sexual liaisons with the person that I removed Vic Rubeo out of the parish for.

When Searson was appointed my phone rang hot with people telling me how bad he was, what he had done, what he had not done in Sunbury. I was accused by the independent commissioner of not really enhancing the

beginnings of a relationship, because when I first met him on the first day I informed him that I had all these comments about Searson. 'I do not believe second-hand information. However, if you step out of line' — and I quote myself; I think you will see it in some of the documents I sent to you — 'I'll have your guts for garters', and I was accused by the hierarchy of it not being a very satisfactory way to start a relationship. I said, 'Well, you know, if you got someone who's going to knife you in the back, you sort of give them a bit of a warning that you could be more dangerous than them'.

Then he began his activities. This was a guy who walked around most of the time carrying a revolver. He had strange attitudes to security. I am sure you have all heard about Doveton, one of the greatest places I ever worked, but the community and media aspect of it is that it is a pretty tough place. Yes, we had a couple of murders outside the front of the school, but the people generally were great people. Nothing was ever locked; there were no fences around the school, and in the two years I was there, there was never a break-in. When Searson arrived, a 13 foot 6 cyclone fence was built around the school and he locked the place. I told him about that. The very first night he put locks on the door and the gates, guess what? We had a break-in.

The reason I tell you that is the fact that I would be working at the school, we would be having meetings with parents and he would lock everyone in the school. This bizarre behaviour went on constantly. He had what I will put as a fetish for confessional. He was constantly wanting classes to go. He demanded class lists and he would tick off who had been to confession. He would come over to me and say, 'You know, there are 28 children in this class; I have only had 8 come to confession', and I would argue with him. Bear in mind that I had a fair knowledge of theology and I would argue with him about what the situation was regarding reconciliation confession.

Some of the children came to me and said, 'Father's creepy. I don't like going to confession with him'. Boys used to say to me, 'I'm not keen to be an altar boy, father's creepy'. I think it was his second year there when they were all taken over to confession on a particular day and a young girl came out of the church screaming. I found her and asked her what had happened and she informed me that Father had interfered with her. I went and got my 2IC, who was a female, and she spoke to her and then we notified the local educational consultant about what had taken place. There was to-ing and fro-ing and eventually the consultant informed me that he had spoken to Father and it was 'all a blow-out; he's doing such a good job in the parish. People are out to get him'.

One of the issues that Searson had with me was the fact that I had a very, very high profile in the local community and he was very jealous — I use the word 'jealous', but I think he might have been paranoid — about the fact that I was seen as the leader of the parish and not him.

We had young boys in the parish who were the cleaners. He threatened them on numerous occasions. He would come over brandishing his revolver and saying, 'What are you doing here?'. They would say, 'Well, we're the cleaners.' 'Oh, I thought someone was breaking into the school.' As I said before, I could work there late at night and he would lock me in — lock all the doors, lock all the gates.

Things sort of just escalated from then on. He would all the time be trying to organise things, pestering me about children going to confession. In this period of time he had a young girl who was at the local Catholic secondary school living at his house. I reported that to the educational consultant and I said, 'Look, in light of all the other things that are going on, I think this is a pretty unhealthy situation'. Again he went over and spoke to him and came back and said to me, 'Oh, the family's going through hard times and he's looking after the young lady'. Bear in mind this young girl did not have a very good reputation around town about her virtues. This just constantly went on.

He was always very concerned about money, and I had to watch it very closely because it was a disadvantaged school on the disadvantaged schools program. I also had extra funding for extra and special programs that I designed. This was all government money and I had to account for it. Halfway through — I think it would have been about '86 — \$40 000 went missing from the school account. I asked him about it and he knew nothing about it. I was lucky enough to have a very astute secretary and we eventually found cheque butts and receipts and so forth and tracked the 40 grand down. He used all that money for his own personal use.

I reported that through the educational consultant to the Catholic Education Office. After many weeks and months of me pestering about what was the outcome, they came back to me and told me that Father had made a mistake, and he would pay it back. When I found the money stuff, I thought we had him on toast and we could

get him out the door, because up until then I was being told that I did not have concrete evidence and being asked was I sure. Part of the culture that went on was that in the end you almost came to be doubting your own intelligence and your own understanding of young people, how kids function and how they see things.

Over the same period of time there was not a day that went by that I would not have a parent — a mother or father — come to me complaining about Father and the way he treated the children. They were frightened of him; they were scared of him. They did not want to go to confession with him. They did not even want to go into the church when he was there. If we had a children's mass, he would refuse communion to people and children who he thought he did not see at his parish church on Sunday. As they came down for communion, he would say, 'Move on. You weren't at church on Sunday'. He consistently acted outside the parameters of human decency. It just became a nightmare. My wife tells me that I became a little different. I probably became an angry man at home and a calmer man at work. This went on, constantly being challenged by him about me trying to protect young children.

When he molested the young girl in the confessional, eventually with a lot of work and talk with the family — the mother and father — I was hoping we would get them to the police, but unfortunately due to media coverage they said their daughter had already been through enough trauma. That young lady transferred to the neighbouring Catholic school, St Mary's Dandenong, and within two days of her being at the school I was contacted by the principal of that school and asked whether I could see her. I went down and saw her, and she said, 'What has happened to this young lady?'. I told her, and she said, 'What did you do about it?'. I said, 'I've told the authorities. It has gone to the top, and they've come back and said they've spoken to Father'. She was horrified, and I said, 'Well, what can I do?'.

You have to understand that my age group of people back then in the 70s and 80s had this naivety that we were working with good people who stood for justice and stood for the right morals and ethics. Therefore we thought, 'They'll do something. They wouldn't let this happen. They're men of God. They're honourable'. Therefore you kept working for them and thinking that some day, one day, they would do something.

There were a group of parents that went and saw the local bishop — the local bishop in those days before Pell came, if I remember rightly, was Kelly — but he was not interested in doing anything, so on and on it went. It got to the point where in the last year I was there my school was nominated for the school of the year award and I was a finalist. Because I had such a high profile as an educationalist, people were coming from all over the state and from outside Australia to view such things as the share reading program that I established and a whole lot of other ways of addressing truancy and lack of performance at the school. As an aside, we enhanced our literacy and numeracy skills by reducing vandalism, but the CEO continuously paid me 40 grand a year to cover vandalism in the school. We had no vandalism, so I employed a phys. ed. teacher. We used their physical activities to do away with damaging things in the school. I thought, 'Here I go. I've got a chance to get something done'.

I kept pestering the local educational consultant, and any time I met with the bishops and so forth I said, 'Hey, you've got to remove this guy'. My wife was told at a function where Sir Frank Little spoke to her and said, 'Graeme's doing a fantastic job in Doveton; I don't know what we'd do without him'. It was that same nudge-nudge, wink-wink attitude — 'We know there's something wrong, but let's not do anything'. I discussed it with my wife and said, 'We can get something done. I'll resign my position. They surely won't sacrifice me. The church is a good place; it's good people'. I was sadly mistaken. When I went and saw the director and assistant director of Catholic education, I said, 'This is what I've got to do', because I believed that by my staying at Doveton I was validating Searson's behaviour and condoning everything he did, and that was the furthest thing from the truth. I was warned then on five or six occasions at that meeting, 'You have a family to raise and you cannot afford to resign'. Those people who know me know I am pretty direct. I said, 'Don't threaten me'.

I resigned, and it was very interesting. I was a very popular person. I could go anywhere at a church function and I would have hundreds of people wanting to talk to me. The day I resigned was the day I knew who my real friends were in the society. When I resigned I tried to put the points of the reasons I resigned, and the educational consultant sanitised my letter of resignation and also advised me that, if I applied for positions elsewhere, I would not be able to say anything about the reasons why I resigned.

Once I resigned, Searson upped his ante and was wanting to take classes to confession every day of the week. It got too much for me, and near the end of November I actually picked him up by the armpits and told him that, if he did not pull his head in, I would kill him.

You have documents there today, and I was only made aware of them when I went to the independent commission, that show the local educational consultant worked with the CEO and the archdiocese on putting in place a plan to get me out of the parish as quickly as possible. I find that abhorrent from the point of view that I had consistently gone along complaining about a person and nothing was done. I threatened the guy, and all of a sudden there is a different attitude. Bear in mind I would have thought they might have asked, 'How come this guy who has worked there under extreme difficulties is acting in this manner?'. I had no support. I had no counselling. No-one cared about me. When I left there, sad to say, I was picked up by the Salesians at Chadstone to coach football, which I did for 12 months before I really became unwell.

One of the things that the committee needs to look at is the fact that there was a community attitude that the church could not do anything wrong. When I was sick and unwell I told a few people why I was not teaching, and I was treated with total disbelief. The only people who really wanted to talk to me were the media — Derryn Hinch and Mike Willesee — to up their ratings, no doubt, but no-one really wanted to know me.

I then went off on sick leave, and I was eventually put onto WorkCover for a short period of time. I was sent to four doctors. You have a report on that WorkCover that I think arrived with you. Only one doctor gave me any indication that they had any belief in what I had been through. All of them said, 'You expect us to believe what you're telling us: that you went to the archbishop and told him that this was happening, and he did nothing about it. Go home and think of another story if you want to have WorkCover'. It was to the point that with the last assessment that was done on me, which took 4 hours, that day my wife was pretty upset because she thought that was the day I would throw myself under a tram. She knocked on the door after I had been in there for 2 hours, and they did not respond to her. A report then came out that I was only looking for early retirement.

One thing led to another. Bear in mind we lived in Longford at the time, and I was not in very good health. We became virtually bankrupt. A mate of mine talked me into driving horse transports. You have to understand that in my early childhood I rode horses. I now have a reputation — I am not a horse whisperer, because I do not do any whispering; I just talk very loudly to them — for looking after difficult horses. I spent the next six, eight years driving horse transports all over Australia, which really dislocated my family. My two youngest daughters were 13, 14. I am just referring to my little touchstone over there, my daughter. They shifted from a very close-knit family here in Gippsland. We went to Muswellbrook then Grafton, and then they went to study on the Gold Coast. That is where we have ended up now. They did not know, firstly, when I would ever be home or, secondly, where their next meal was coming from.

But driving horses around probably saved me. One of the great things was that I brought Rogan Josh to Melbourne to win the 1999 Melbourne Cup. Some people might like that; some might not.

Mr McGuire — You could have given us the tip.

Mr Sleeman — I had the tip for this year's, but nobody believed me.

I was never home. Probably some people are surprised that I can tell you this story without notes, but I had hundreds of hours where I challenged myself: 'Did I do enough to protect children?'. The cross I have to bear is that so many children who were in my care were abused, and there are some who I do not even know about. That has been highlighted by the fact that my article appeared in the *Age*, and I was contacted by so many of my past pupils to tell me about that.

Now as adults they were able to say that they could differentiate at that young age. I have an email from a couple of them that said, 'You were a very stern principal, but we could talk to you about anything, and Searson was an evil man'. They are relating that. I have actually met with some of these people pupils since my article appeared, and they have been very emphatic about how at that age — it is not a later in life assessment they have made — they were frightened of him. I do not mean this egotistically, but they saw me as someone who would protect them. In some ways that has not really helped me, because I still have that doubt in the back of my head about whether I could have done more to protect the children who were in my care and if I let them down by resigning and leaving them in the lurch, because they saw me — and they are telling me that now — as their leader. I have got to live with that for the rest of my life.

There was all that driving of trucks, and things were not going well for me health wise. I was then contacted by the independent commissioner, who said that the girl who I referred to earlier had come forward and that I was a vital person in the giving of evidence. I was flown to Melbourne to do all that. At that stage I thought all this had not really affected me that much, even though I wanted to end my life, but I always had this belief that I would be all right. That really opened a can of worms for me.

I have to say here that although I have mixed feelings about Mr O'Callaghan, he actually gave me support that I believe nobody else got. He paid me for eight years when I could not work. He said it was out of his pocket. When I challenged him about it he said, 'The church knows nothing about it. I will get into trouble if they find out about it'. I believe in his own way he saw that some injustice had been committed. He interviewed me. He was also the one who approved my getting psychiatric care from my doctor in Grafton, Dr Bryant, who got me on to Dr Anthony Arden. However, there were times when I had doubts about Mr O'Callaghan because he was constantly writing to my doctor, Dr Arden, wanting a report about me. Dr Arden was very emphatic that if he wanted him to see me, he should have told me that he wanted reports about me before he, Dr Arden, started treating me, because he saw a conflict of interest between a treating doctor and an assessing psychiatrist.

During 1996, when I had been to Melbourne, I got pretty angry about the fact that I seemed to be being used as a bit of a scapegoat. George Pell rang me, because I had sent hundreds of letters — I think I have sent some of them to you people — to the church, to the archdiocese and to the Catholic Education Office saying, 'What are you going to do for me? I have stood up for you, I have kept my silence, and you have treated me like this'. He rang me. He said it was George Pell, and I said, 'Yes George, what do you want?'. He said, 'What do you want?'. I said, 'You won't give me what I want'. He said, 'I don't know'. I said, 'I want you to go on national media and in the national printed press and say the stance that I took in Doveton was the correct one'. He said, 'I can't do that', and he hung up. I have never had a very good opinion of George because he is a bully — I knew him through the seminary — and he still is. You can put that on the record if you like. That was the last time I had contact, and I continually kept writing letters. You have the documents I sent to you, and I have a number of reports from the independent commissioner about where I sit in the scheme of things.

In about 2005 a payment was made to me, which gave me a chance to put a deposit on a house. I have heard all the references to the fact that we had to sign deeds of release, and I was in the same boat. As far as I am concerned I will go to my grave. I had a gun held to my head; we were virtually bankrupt, we had nothing. If someone came to you and offered you a price that was equivalent to the deposit on a house and the only condition was to sign a piece of paper, what would you do? I think I would have been certified if I had said, 'No, I am not going to do that'. It is probably the only time that I have perhaps compromised my values a little bit. I never thought that something like this would happen, so if the church wants to sue me, let it, because I reckon it would make a good story.

We have constantly had the press chasing me, right up until January this year when *Four Corners* tracked me down and told me it was my moral duty and so forth to speak. There would be some people even in this audience today who would question why it has taken me so long to come out. There are two reasons: one is for the protection of my family and my young children, because they were not told until my two youngest children were 19 and I had to come down to the independent commissioner. The daughter, who is sitting here today, said to her mum, 'I just thought dad got sick of being the principal'. We have had to explain that away.

The other reason is that I believe the community's attitude was one of disbelief, and it is only through the *Four Corners* program and the setting up of this inquiry that people's attitudes have really changed. I cannot believe the change in people's attitude towards me since my article appeared in the *Melbourne Age*. I think he is here today, but I have to thank Barney for that, because all of a sudden people put the puzzle together. It is very difficult trying to get a job when you say you have all these qualifications. 'Why are you not teaching?' 'Oh, well', and all of a sudden everyone has a cold feeling towards you.

If there is any other way that I can help in the future, I would be more than happy to because I really want the whole culture of the Catholic Church changed. One of the other things I would like to see changed — and I do not know how we do this — is to see principals are also educated and have the courage to stand up. I sit here today knowing that other principals around the Melbourne archdiocese, and other dioceses in this country, knew or had feelings or had inklings that their parish priest was abusing children, but would do nothing about it. It may be that fear of, 'I cannot afford to lose my job', but if we are gospel people, that is what it means; we have got to stand up for what we stand for.

One of the criticisms the church had against me was that I used to tell them that if we are gospel people, we owe a duty of care to the victims and we also owe a duty of care to the perpetrators. I am not sure how we care for them, but we have a responsibility to them on two counts — one, they are human beings and they care, and secondly, we need to care for them so they do not continuously reoffend. In a roundabout fashion we are protecting our children, we are protecting the community. I leave it up to you people.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Mr Sleeman, for your insights and for sharing your story with us this afternoon.

Mr SLEEMAN — That is all right.

The CHAIR — You mentioned in your presentation that you believed you were working with good people. I think you said they were men of God, they were honourable, they were good people who stood for justice. Later in your presentation you acknowledged the ex gratia payment you received from the independent commissioner and also your request to George Pell for an acknowledgement for the stance you took at Doveton. Could you perhaps explain to the committee what in your view justice looks like for victims, from your experience?

Mr SLEEMAN — What justice was given?

The CHAIR — What justice looks like in broader terms. Is that encapsulated as an acknowledgement? Is it the accountability? Is it a payment?

Mr SLEEMAN — I was just going to refer back to something that I think was said this morning by Phil or the Catholics for Renewal. They were talking about the apologies. I think it is absolutely disgraceful the way George Pell and others have given a toss-away clause of ‘We apologise. It was sad’. It gives me the impression that they really do not mean it. The only way I believe justice could be given would be to open the doors and say, ‘Hey, we know these were priests, employees, who abused children. Now where are the children who can come forward? They are now adults’. They really need to be seen to provide support financially, medically, counselling wise and in all sorts of ways, because that way people will see that they really mean it.

The CHAIR — So not just a public acknowledgement?

Mr SLEEMAN — I can stand here today and say to you, ‘I’ve probably been a bit blunt today, and I apologise for that’, but have I really changed my behaviour? The hierarchy still believes it is infallible. That is one of the things — I might sound like I am lecturing you a bit here — you have to understand. You have to understand that these guys think they can do no wrong: ‘We’ve got this direct line to God’. They have not got a direct line to anywhere. So therefore they think that by standing up and saying ‘I’m sorry for doing that’, all is forgiven. One of the concepts that hangs up a little bit with the confessional bit is the fact that I can go off to Freddy and confess that I did this, and I have been forgiven and I can start again. What went before does not exist anymore. They have these beliefs. There is only one way we can really show people, particularly victims, secondary victims and all those other people who have been affected. There needs to be real retribution, whether it be financial, medical or whatever, or even spiritual direction. That way people will see. I know it is going to cost the church money, but so what?

In using one of my analogies, when I am working with really troublesome horses, over here is comfortable and safe and over there I yank you by your head. There has to be that balance between ‘If I’m doing wrong’ and ‘I can get comfort’. We are not giving any real solace to these victims; that is my perception. The church could not care less about me or my family whatsoever, and I am not alone. There are families sitting here today who have been treated appallingly, and no-one seems to care. I am not saying that to the people sitting here in front of me, but it is the way they have been treated and the way they are still being treated. So it is right across the board. Whether St Patrick’s Cathedral has to be sold, so be it, because if we look at the gospel and what it says about the bloke who came 2000 years ago, you never heard about his bank account, you never heard about the buildings he built and you never heard about the high-flyers he mixed with. There are no stories about Jesus mixing with the high-flyers. He mixed with 12 dumb fishermen, the best ladies in town and all the poor people. So I rest my case. I did get into trouble with the archbishop on numerous occasions for my loose use of Scripture.

Mr McGuire — Thank you, Mr Sleeman, for your courage in bearing witness today. It is very important for us to get it on the record.

Mr Sleeman — Can I just stop you there? That is something that I was saying before. I think we have to stop calling it courage. I know people have contacted me and said, ‘Hey, it’s courage’. These are the values we live by. Children are the most sacred thing we can have. Our nation depends on how we nurture those young people to carry on the culture we have. I might sound a bit off the beam here, but it has nothing to do with courage. It is about what we need to do to make our children the most successful things we have. I am sorry I had to cut across you, but that is just a belief I have, and it is something that we do not push enough in this society today. It is almost as though kids come along, and we say, ‘Yeah. Well, yeah’.

Mr McGuire — No, I meant it in the way that the care of innocence is among our highest responsibilities.

Mr Sleeman — Sorry, I might have misinterpreted you there.

Mr McGuire — No. But you have been through a harrowing time, and even in the way you tried to deliver your testimony today, it clearly still has an impact.

Mr Sleeman — I apologise for getting a bit emotional.

Mr McGuire — No, but that is the point I was trying to make to you personally. It was an acknowledgement of respect.

Mr Sleeman — Okay, thanks.

Mr McGuire — Just on that, I want to flesh out a couple of critical issues you raised. Despite all of the whistleblowing attempts that you made, you said the plan was to get you out of the parish but not to get the sexual predator out of the parish. That is really what it came down to, and I know you are saying you are still torn about the idea of whether you did enough for the children because you resigned, but that is the bottom line and what the whole proposition was — it was to get the whistleblower out, to silence your criticism and take you out of the picture.

Mr Sleeman — Do you want me to quote for you? There is a letter, and you can refer to it yourselves, in Mr O’Callaghan’s report, which is a direct letter that he sought. It is probably interesting to say to you that when I was interviewed by the independent commissioner, the first day I was there I started to tell him some things and he said, ‘Just hold on a second’, and he made a phone call, which I presume was to the central office, and he said, ‘I want the files from this date to this date at Doveton’. A conversation took place, and then he said to me, ‘Look, you can stop for lunch, but don’t come back till 3’. That was at about 1 o’clock. When we came back he had obviously been sent documents that he had looked at because he started asking me questions.

The strange thing is that one of the documents he produced — bearing in mind that when I was at Doveton I was getting a bit short in the head about all this, and three mothers came to see me and I just had a rough piece of paper on my desk and I started writing down what they said and I turned it over and I was running out of space so I was writing up the side, and it was pretty much hieroglyphics. I must admit I probably did not help my cause because when I used to send letters off to the CEO in latter days I used to address them to ‘The Directors of the Sheltered Workshop’, and they probably did not like that. But anyway they had this note I just stuck in it and I said, ‘This is what I’m putting up with every day’. I sent that direct to the director of Catholic education in those days, and he was able to produce that. So someone asked this morning about documents being released; unless someone has had a pretty big time in front of a shredder, there will be some unbelievable information around.

Mr McGuire — You said you had mixed feelings about Mr O’Callaghan. Can I just ask you about the payment that you received, the seemingly exceptional payment, and his saying that it was out of his pocket? Could you just take us through and put on the public record what was going on there and what happened there?

Mr Sleeman — Okay. When I came down, when all this came to fruition, I was actually working for — I am a fool, I suppose — the Mercy sisters in Grafton at their youth detention centre for young boys. They could not get anyone to work there, so I was employed because I had developed an equine therapy program for aggressive and sexually abused young people. I was contacted to come to Melbourne. When I was here for that

hearing, and then I was brought down and interviewed by Searson's legal representative, Mr Mulvaney, the wheels fell off my life. I went back home, and I suppose it is that whole thing — I really never addressed the issues I had when I left Doveton, and I virtually had a breakdown.

Where I was working the church in its loyalty made sure; they said, 'Oh well, you can't work for us anymore' and the nun who was in charge of the complex rang Towards Healing, who contacted Mr O'Callaghan, and I was flown to Melbourne. I was interviewed by Professor Ball, who told my wife that I would never work again and that he was recommending psychiatric care. So I was shunted back to Mr O'Callaghan. He said, 'Look, you organise someone to go and see and we will cover your costs'. He flew me back down to Melbourne and home again every time he wanted to see me; I was flown backwards and forwards. When I was there I said, 'Well look, I can't work, what am I going to do?'. He said, 'Oh, I'll see what I can do'. Then I got a letter from him to ask me how much I was earning at the time, and I told him. He then started sending me fortnightly cheques. I kept saying to him, writing to him and saying, 'Yes, thanks very much but this can't go on; I need some sort of stability in my life. I want to know where next week's cheque is coming from'.

So I started writing many letters to him saying I believed I needed compensation. I wrote to him in about 1997. I think the house we were living in at the time in Grafton was being rented and then it was up for sale, and it was going for the price of \$180 000. I wrote a letter to him and said, 'Look surely you could see your way clear, or the church could, for what I've done and for the way I've been treated, to grant me the money to buy that house'. Of course he said no, he did not have the power to do that, and he kept sending me these cheques. Then eventually he said he had prepared a report, because every time I wrote to him he used to say to me, 'I'm still working on a report of how you fit into the scheme of things'.

Now I have this awful, cynical view that I think I was stalled off until I could no longer be a legal threat to the Catholic Church because I am sure there is a statute of limitations on when I could go to court. Bear in mind, I do not think at that stage I would have found anyone. I did go to Slater and Gordon and ask them, and they said, 'Would you like to take on the Mafia, because that would have better success than beating the Catholic Church?'. So all those payments just kept coming weekly, and then when I got the ex gratia payment lump sum, everything stopped.

Mr McGuire — I just want to get to the point: why did the Catholic Church not pay you? Why was it Peter O'Callaghan saying he paid it out of his own pocket? Should it not have been the church?

Mr Sleeman — I reckon so too. I do not know. That could be a good question that you could ask if you are allowed to ask him. I mean, if it were not for his payments I do not know where we would have ended up. That is my gratitude towards him, but it is all a bit — are you having the same suspicions as I am having?

Mr McGuire — I am just asking the question because he was not personally liable yet he paid you seemingly a large sum of money.

Mr Sleeman — Does that say something about his sense of right and wrong?

Mr McGuire — It may well say that. Do you think it may also say something about potentially a rift between the Catholic Church's view and his view?

Mr Sleeman — Say that again?

Mr McGuire — Do you think there was also a rift: the Catholic Church may have not wanted to pay you but he felt that you were owed?

Mr Sleeman — I am fairly convinced. I did have that thought at many stages, and now that you raise it again, I think you could be on the money. My spiritual director constantly kept saying, 'How come this guy is sending you this?' Bear in mind my spiritual director is an ex-priest in the Melbourne archdiocese. He said, 'It just doesn't gel'. I said, 'It doesn't gel with me either, but at this point in time, if this horse is going to come home a winner every fortnight, I'm going to keep feeding him, aren't I?'.

Mr McGuire — Fair enough.

Mrs Coote — Thank you very much, Graeme, for reminding us about proper values. I think you proved that with the actions that you took all that time ago, and I think you painted it very clearly when you said you

did not believe the church would do what they did. I am particularly interested in that, because I am interested in how people go forward as whistleblowers — which is the name that is given today. I am interested in whether you believe there are structures that should be put in place or recommended by our committee to encourage other people who have not been able to be as forthright and open as you have to come forward and whether there are suggestions we could make about broadening — or specifics about whistleblowing in the Catholic Church, and whether you have any recommendations about that that we, the committee, should be thinking about.

Mr SLEEMAN — One of the things that always concerns me about committees that are set up — and you will probably shoot me about this when you get outside — is that we never pick up some of the common people who have perhaps been either victims or involved on the edges. I mean, I know it is great that we have got the royal commission happening in the federal sphere, but why do we not have some women on there that have been either victims or have worked with victims, or something like that? It is the same with this organisation that the church has set up for looking into all these things; I think we need to have a balance of people that are on those organisations. I was the same when I was a teacher; I think at times we sometimes get a bit insular in our outlook. We get focused just on that point, and I do not think we can have a wide enough vision.

The other thing you are asking is: how do we get people to come forward? That is where we have got to work in reverse. I told you today how I had this belief — it was not a belief; I followed blindly. Up until probably 84 or 85 I could have acknowledged the fact I had blind faith. If the church spoke, I walked. If it said: 'jump', I jumped. It was through my experiences in Doveton that all of a sudden I started to question my belief system about the hierarchy — not my belief system about the story, but my belief system about the hierarchy. So we need to, somehow or other, educate people that it was drummed into them that, you know, 'Father's right. Father wouldn't do anything wrong. The bishop wouldn't do anything wrong'. There is this adulation towards the bishop. I still see it today when the bishop comes to town, or the parish; everything changes in the parish. Why? He is just a bloke.

Respectfully to the ladies here, I have some strong views about the fact that the church is going backwards, because behind every good bloke there is a far better woman, and the church would be better off if it had some women up there behind the guys. When he comes, everyone lays out the red carpet and all this stuff. It is just pomp and ceremony. That is what they get caught up in. It is the pomp and ceremony, not the reality. Jesus did not have any pomp and ceremony, so we have got to really go back to the basics of what is important.

I am not sure, and I have thought long and hard about how we get victims to come forward, but all I can say is that I did not think my story would be that influential, but I have started to think now about: do I write a book, or do I find someone who will wheel me around the countryside to speak at venues to tell people my story so that it will give people — and I am using that word that I went crook at you for — the courage or the fortitude to come forward and say, 'Hey, this is what happened'. By them coming forward it may really reinforce the structures that we put in place for the future, so this will not happen again; because we have really got to make those people feel confident and that they did nothing wrong. That is one of the things I went through: 'Am I imagining this bloke's doing these things?' — even though he is holding a gun in his hand. It is the mind games that the church is able to play with people, very subtly, but it is.

Mrs COOTE — And you believe that subtlety is intended and nurtured on behalf of the church to make people, such as yourself, who have been forthright and open in what they see as evidence of abuse, part of the problem and that therefore belittles you? Is that what you believe they do by intention?

Mr SLEEMAN — I am really convinced of that, because the only things that Frank Little remembers of me is going to his office and thumping the desk on numerous occasions and calling him an effing idiot. He actually buried my mother, and after I gave the eulogy, he sought me out and said: 'I think we made a mistake in letting you go'. I said, 'Well, that's your problem, not mine'. But that's the thing; it is very difficult. If I can be of any help to anybody out there who has been through this — because, as I said to you earlier today, we talk about the secondary victims, but as I mentioned in camera, I call those people I spoke to you about the secondary perpetrators, because they are the cover-up men and women.

Mrs COOTE — I have just one very small question. What is a 'broadie'? You said George Pell was a broadie. What does that mean?

Mr SLEEMAN — A bully.

Mrs COOTE — A bully. I was thinking, ‘What does he mean?’. Thank you very much.

Mr SLEEMAN — He believes that because he is 6 foot 4 — he is a bit smaller than me. See, that is one of the things; you were talking about the concept that the church has of me — and I apologise about my political incorrectness when we first started — and that was one of the things that the church could not handle. I mean, does the local principal dress up as the Easter Bunny and visit all the houses and throw Easter eggs, and does he dress up as Santa? Then we have a papal opening of the school year, and we have a guy come dressed as the pope, and Mary MacKillop comes and happens to be the local principal dressed up. They saw me as very irreverent in many cases. That is something they hid behind. I just think you have got to put it in context, because I think when you speak to some of the people who come from higher up the tree they will give you some of those negative things.

Ms HALFPENNY — I want to check on something you were saying, just as a bit of a comparison. You were saying that you were able to remove a priest who was caught having sex with a woman by consent, but you were not able to do anything about a priest where there was clear evidence — —

Mr SLEEMAN — You are really asking me about some strange concepts that I have. I did not, and I still do not in some ways, have a problem — —

Ms HALFPENNY — Sorry; it was not that. It was more about that you were able to have action — —

Mr SLEEMAN — Yes. I will tell you how that happened.

Ms HALFPENNY — The hierarchy took action in one case where it was by consent, as opposed to — —

Mr SLEEMAN — Okay. You have missed what happened. The hierarchy had nothing to do with the removal of Vic Rubeo from Doveton. I solely did that on my own. Because I experienced paedophilia when I was at the Salesians, I still to this day — and it is one of the problems I had when I was under psychiatric care — cannot get my head around how you could do it: abuse young, innocent children. I did not have a problem if a priest had a girlfriend, because they were really only doing something natural, weren’t they. Phil is right in what he said this morning: when we went to the seminary, we got nothing about celibacy. What we got you could write on the back of a postcard.

When Rubeo came to me with his issues — and bear in mind he had numerous girlfriends when he was in Doveton — I said, ‘You’ve got to go; you’ve got to nick off’, and he said, ‘I can’t’. I said, ‘Watch this’. I rang my father, because my father was originally the head of the Mental Health Authority here in Victoria and had some pretty good contacts, and I said, ‘Dad, I need a doctor to give a medical certificate for six months leave, and I don’t want any questions asked. I’m calling in a favour’. He said, ‘Give me 20 minutes’. He rang me back in 20 minutes, ‘Tell the guy to go to this address, ask no questions, and it’s done’.

Rubeo came back in 3 hours time and he said, ‘What do I do now?’. I said, ‘You go over to the presbytery, you pack your bags, you pack everything you’ve got. You need to write a letter to the people, that you’re going on six months sick leave because you are unwell to keep up your duties. I’ll handle the rest. Be ready at 1 o’clock in the morning to leave Doveton’. I had a van, because I had a large family. I took my van over. I drove the school bus, and my wife and I removed him over to East Malvern to the parish priest over there, who was a close friend of his.

The archdiocese to this day have never ever asked me anything about the removal of Rubeo from Doveton. Even though I went to them and said, ‘What are you going to do about sending a decent priest to us?’, they never asked me, ‘Why did Rubeo leave?’. The only other way I could have got rid of Searson was to physically — and I knew what was going to happen there: they would not have backed me.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We are fast running out of time, so just keep that in mind, if you would not mind, for Mr Wakeling’s and Mr O’Brien’s remaining questions.

Mr WAKELING — Thank you, Graeme, very much for your presentation. We have had a lot of evidence over this inquiry about the Catholic Church and the operation of priests, but we have not had a lot of evidence in terms of the operation of schools. You are in a very important position where you can give us a bit of an

understanding of the operation of the Catholic education system. I am specifically interested in the relationship of principals and the local priest. As we know, in government schools the principal effectively runs the school, but clearly there is a different arrangement in Catholic education. I would be interested in your view and more importantly in what we should be looking at as an inquiry in terms of that.

Mr SLEEMAN — Okay. I am glad you raised that, because when I heard it spoken about this morning I thought I should speak about that, because I think I have got an insight into all that. When I was first appointed as principal of St Thomas's, Sale, I was only there a few weeks, and I actually set up the first school board that ever ran a primary school — because I believe that we need other people happening. In Victoria the principal is appointed and employed by the parish priest, so your life or your survival depends on the parish priest.

Some people would class me as fairly aggressive. I do not step down if I believe in what I am doing, and so therefore I always had sort of funny relationships with parish priests. There is a culture with parish priests that they want to be popular. I think that is really a reflection of the fact that they have celibacy, because there is no-one that really loves them — and I can speak from both sides on this now. Therefore they always want to please the people at the school. So all the time you have this rub, because the parish priest actually signs the cheques, and he is the one who authorises. If you go to him and say, 'I want to paint part of the school', you have to convince him. For anything you want to do in the school you have to go and get his permission, so even though I am the principal and I am making educational decisions, I have got this other person above me who knows nothing about it. That was one of the reasons I set up school boards, because then there would be weight of numbers that would be able to convince him that perhaps what we were suggesting was the way to go.

When I went to Doveton the same process existed. I do not know why, but Rubeo gave me a free hand. I do not know whether that was because he may have realised I was a bit sharper or something, but when I first went there, when I was first interviewed by him, I told him, 'I don't want to know what went wrong before I arrived, but we must present a united front'. I told him the same thing: if he steps out of line and does the wrong thing, he is in strife. So I was virtually able to talk to him on a fairly professional level about how to spend money and who to employ as staff.

When Searson came, that was all taken away, to the point — and this is probably relevant to what you were saying — that he even appointed staff, other teachers, to the school. I was allowed to interview them, and then I had to send them over to him separately on their own and he interviewed them, to the point that a guy I ended up eventually employing was questioned for about half an hour — he was married — about what birth control he used. So that guy came to my school in a pretty unbalanced way.

It is a strange way of operating, because every time you think you are going to make a decision he can walk in and change it. Probably another aspect of the relationship I had with Searson was the fact that we were arguing and fighting all the time over basic stuff. An example was that we had a crazy phone system. I organised stuff to happen for it, and he just curtailed it. He said, 'We won't spend money on that', but he went and used that money to buy tyres for his private car.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you, Mr Sleeman. Just in relation to your answers to the Chair, we had a bit of discussion about the question of whether the church have been genuine in their public apologies or their private apologies, and I note on page 4 you refer to the phone call that you had with George Pell and your request for a statement. The words you use there are:

It appears that once again the church is only concerned with the words not the actions of justice.

Do you feel that you have received, in a sense, a confession about what happened to you privately from either Archbishop Pell or any of the current church leaders? You are shaking your head. We need a verbal answer from you for Hansard.

Mr SLEEMAN — Sorry; I have had no communication, even when I was told to sign a deed of release, that I would be given an audience with the present archbishop. I have requested that, and it still has not been granted to me.

Mr O'BRIEN — Would you be seeking that still: a private statement to you initially?

Mr SLEEMAN — No, I want a public statement.

Mr O'BRIEN — That is the next thing I was going to ask; it is a separate thing. In terms of whether a public apology is genuine — and confession in the church is generally a private matter. But if it is to be a public apology for the crimes the church has committed — —

Mr SLEEMAN — My integrity and my good name have been destroyed by the Catholic Church.

Mr O'BRIEN — That is why I am asking you this. If I could just ask you: would you be seeking a full public statement of what the church knows now, even if its members claimed ignorance at the time, especially in the context of evidence from Phil O'Donnell this morning of the complaints that had been made about Searson to Frank Little — or Archbishop Little as he then was — in the 1970s? Would you think a full and frank confession, as opposed to a blank, generic apology, is something that should be forthcoming?

Mr SLEEMAN — That is what is needed to be done; that is, for my integrity. But added to that — and this might be the selfish part of the whole thing — my family needs some sort of remuneration. What my wife has been through, and my children, but particularly my wife, has been unbelievable. I don't think anyone in the church — George Pell, Hart, any of those guys — have got any concept. I know the same thing applies to some of the people who are sitting here in this audience today, but you would have no idea. As I say, one of the great things that has happened from the article in the paper is that for the first time since 1987 in my company my wife has cried about these events. She believed that she had to be the one to stay strong to keep me alive and keep me focused.

Mr O'BRIEN — The other important aspect to confession was always penance, and that can be physical penance.

Mr SLEEMAN — I am glad you raised that. That is what I was saying before when someone asked me about how we look after the victims. Have you seen any penance done by the hierarchy at this stage?

Mr O'BRIEN — It starts with a confession, does it not? If you do not say what has happened publicly and with full accountability under a genuine mea culpa that is not a one-liner but a full statement for every victim in every parish in this state, past or present, then how can you go to the next step of saying, 'We've dealt with it', if you have not taken the very first step of 'Forgive me, Father' or 'Forgive me, people; I have sinned'? Is that what you feel?

Mr SLEEMAN — I strongly feel that, and I think that is why I am probably cynical about what you are saying.

Mr O'BRIEN — Would you still seek that?

Mr SLEEMAN — I will seek that until the day I die, because my integrity has been destroyed.

Mr O'BRIEN — I don't think it has. I think your life has been damaged, but I see a man of integrity before us. I am just saying this in relation to that.

Mr SLEEMAN — I hear what you are saying. My response was — I do not want to sound grateful for what you are saying, but I cannot get a job with the qualifications I have, and what I have given up and where I am at now. When my heart stopped four years ago I rang the archdiocese here and asked them if they could assist me in any way because I could not work. I was told by their legal representative, Mr Leder, that the church owed me nothing. Sorry; I was not attacking you. I might have sounded forceful.

Mr O'BRIEN — No apologies for you.

The CHAIR — No, I think you have clarified those points Mr O'Brien was asking of you. Thank you very much. Before we conclude this session are there any final comments that you would like to make to the committee, Mr Sleeman?

Mr SLEEMAN — Yes, I would like to thank you for the opportunity and for inviting me here. I would like it recorded that if there is any other way that I can help this committee, in whatever way you think is best, I am more than happy to come. I know I live in Queensland, but this is something I began 43 years ago, and I want to see it completed, hopefully in my lifetime, because I do not want my children or my grandchildren, of whom I have thirteen and a half, to go through the same thing. It would be a blight on my efforts in life if that happened.

Just one other thing I would like to say is that the sad part about all this is that my mother died before I could be vindicated. She disowned me because I should have kept my mouth shut, and that is the saddest thing. Even though my mum thought I was the most educated no-hoper, she still did not believe that I should have done what I have done. I thank you very much for being here today.

The CHAIR — We thank you, and we do appreciate your making the effort to come down and be before us. On behalf of the committee, thank you again. Your evidence has been most helpful.

Witness withdrew.

Proceedings in camera follow.

Open hearing resumed.