

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 15 March 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

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Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

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#### Witness

Mr K. Houlihan.

**The CHAIR** — Good afternoon. On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr Kevin Houlihan. We 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 committee members will ask questions relating to both your submission and the evidence that you are about to provide to us. Again, thank you very much for being before us. Please commence when you are ready.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I, Kevin John Houlihan, submit the following information in relation to the corporal abuse I was subjected to by one particular priest while I was a form 4 student boarder at Salesian School, Lipsett Terrace, Brooklyn Park, during the 1965 school year when I was approximately 15 years of age. I acknowledge that owing to the long passage of time since these events took place, my recall of specific dates, descriptions, details and names may be imprecise.

By way of background, I was born on 5 March 1950. I am a middle child. I have a sister, Cathy, who is two years and three months older than me, and a brother, James, who is four years younger than me. There was little love shown to us as children, and my childhood was not particularly joyful. My parents did not get along too well. My mother was authoritarian and would often smack us. My father was a strict, conservative Catholic.

My family lived in Mordialloc until 1961, after which time we moved to Harrow, a small town in the Wimmera — about 390 kilometres north-west of Melbourne and about 350 kilometres from Adelaide — after my paternal grandfather died. I attended the local state school where I completed grade 6 and form 1. I then attended Edenhope High School where I completed forms 2 and 3. But my father was not happy with this school, so I was sent to board at Salesian School, Brooklyn Park, to complete form 4.

In 1965 my parents separated and my mother left Harrow to live in Melbourne with my younger brother. In the meantime, my older sister was sent to a boarding school in Sydney. As such, my relationships with my siblings were limited. My parents never got back together, though they kept in contact. They are now both deceased.

Salesian School, Brooklyn Park was an all-boys prep to form 6 school with about 300 enrolled students, including about 65 boarders. I was a boarder during the 1965 school year. I recall it was a 'strict' school. I remember a few of the priests and staff there at that time. There was Father Jennings, who was the rector or headmaster. He was in his mid-60s with dark hair. There was Father Wenting, who was in his mid-50s and bald. We nicknamed him Nudenut. He was the perpetrator of the acts committed against me. Father Cole, an Irishman in his 60s, was a nice guy, and Father Moester, a Dutchman in his late 40s, he was okay. There were also a few brothers and lay brothers at that time: Brother Paul Magree, Brother Anthony DeGroot and Brother Hannaberry. I was much of a loner at school. I only recall the name of one student at the time — Ronald Riley from Glenelg; he was a year younger than me.

The routine for boarders at Salesian school, Brooklyn Park, was quite rigid. We woke around 6.00 a.m., went to mass, then we had breakfast and attended our classes Mondays to Fridays. Weekends we were allowed recreational times on campus as well as time for study. We only went home to our families during term holidays.

This present complaint concerns an incident of severe corporal abuse and brutality perpetrated by Father Wenting around July 1965. At that time I was on a school camp that was a retreat — a religious retreat — at Warooka on the York Peninsula with about 20 other boys. We were accommodated in small huts or cabins. There was a strict lights-out, no-talking curfew enforced after hours.

One night whilst in bed in my hut with other boys — I cannot recall the exact circumstances — I inadvertently swore loudly at one of the boys, the boy in the bed next to me, because he started to speak to me and I think I told him to effing shut up. Unbeknownst to me, Father Wenting was on the watch that night, and he overheard my swearing or talking, immediately took me out of the hut and took me to his quarters and asked me to pull down my pyjama pants, whereupon he caned me 49 times on the bare buttocks. After this my backside was red raw, blistered and aching. I did not receive any form of medical treatment or any compassion afterwards. I felt totally humiliated by this unwarranted punishment. I still feel angry and resentful over the incident and how it changed me and my life.

Other children there at the time will attest to my severe caning. At this time I lost interest in school and purposely failed form 4. I told my father of the caning incident but was reprimanded by him, because he held clergy in the highest esteem and would not hear of my complaints and criticism about me, and he accused me of lying against a holy man of God.

Ever since this time my life has not been the same, and I feel I have never really recovered. I finished my schooling at the end of 1965. I returned to live with my father in Harrow, but relations were strained. For a short period in 1966 I worked with my father doing farm work, but eventually I left Harrow and moved to Melbourne, where I lived with my mother in Albert Park. I found employment as a postal worker in the PMG for two to three years, then later as a shop assistant in Coles, followed by factory work. I had an itinerant lifestyle and moved around from Melbourne to Adelaide and to Brisbane during this period. In Brisbane I worked for a few years as a barman and then moved to Mildura to do fruit picking. Eventually I returned to Melbourne, where I found work as a clerk and floor manager's assistant with the ABC, where my mother worked, and I remained for about 18 months. This was my last job for several years.

In 1974 I got into trouble with the law and spent four months in jail. This is not exactly correct. I have not worked since this time — that is not exactly correct. In 1975 I returned to study and completed form 4 at Taylors College. That was under the Whitlam government's re-education program that they had going on for older people.

I was not coping. I had turned to drinking heavily and was an alcoholic and prescription drug user. I believe my caning and the loss of self-esteem and humiliation consequently suffered had a bearing on my alcoholism and drug dependence and my life subsequently.

At the time that this was written I was continuing to drink heavily, though I no longer take drugs, but I have almost given up drinking and smoking now. It was my birthday last week, so I just bought a few smokes and drinks.

**The CHAIR** — Happy birthday.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I made a New Year's resolution on 23 December 2011 that I was going to give up drinking and smoking in 2012, and I did it by 31 January with the help of my GP. It was hard, but with the stress of this I have just had a few drinks and smokes in the last couple of weeks or so.

I believe my caning and loss of self-esteem consequently had a bearing on my alcoholism and drug dependence and my life subsequently. I continue to drink, though I no longer take drugs, except for what is prescribed for me. I have got quite a number of illnesses — I have got osteoporosis, I have got hep C, and I just found out I have a hiatus hernia and anaemia, so I am on a fair bit of medication. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and was put on medication. I also suffer from osteoporosis and hepatitis C. I was seeing psychiatrists and counsellors for a period of time. Eventually I was put on an invalid pension, which is now called a disability support pension — that was in 1982 — and I continue now on a Centrelink pension.

Though I have only ever been in one long-term relationship, I have generally been unable to form and maintain intimate relationships. I have had a number of nervous breakdowns over the years. I do not have many friends and tend to keep mainly to myself. I have some contact with my sister, who lives in Mordialloc — no more I note, because in the last couple of months I was hospitalised and we had a big falling out and that is the end of that; however, our relationship is volatile, and it is non-existent now. I have only intermittent contact with my brother — I have no contact with my brother; I do not even know whether he is dead or alive. The last I knew he was in Nambour in Queensland and that was about 15 years ago. I feel I have potential but have underachieved owing to my bad experiences at school. I have never fully realised my potential.

As for my desired outcomes from this current process, I feel I need to achieve the following: a formal apology and acknowledgement, and a sense of justice being done in this matter. It has been most helpful to have the opportunity to talk about these matters with the contact person. I would like someone from the Salesian Order to take responsibility for what happened to me whilst at the Salesian school, Brooklyn Park. I would like some formal acknowledgement and apology about what took place and an acknowledgment of the impact it has had on me, so that I can obtain some sense of closure.

Though I firmly believe that money cannot compensate me for the abuse I was subjected to, I nevertheless believe I have some entitlement to an offer of financial compensation and restitution from the Salesian Order. I continue to suffer financial hardship, being on the Centrelink pension. I expect the Salesian Order or church to exercise compassion and understanding towards me in assessing this complaint. I would consider meeting with church representatives and/or Towards Healing personnel in progressing this matter.

Towards Healing turned out to be totally useless. All they sent me was a book, and I have had no more contact with them unless I am initiating contact by phone, so that was a waste of time. I have signed the Towards Healing privacy and policy statements and have had these explained to me fully by the contact person. I am agreeable for the Towards Healing process to continue to the next stage and am prepared to meet with other Towards Healing or relevant church representatives in progressing this matter further. I signed this with Michael Iacovino, the contact person for Towards Healing. That is it; unless I have initiated any contact I have had no contact or support from them at all, except for this letter.

My statement there was made on 16 August 2011, and on 11 October 2011 I received this letter from a bloke named Francis J. Moloney, Salesians of Don Bosco, the provincial, Salesians of Don Bosco Province Centre, PO Box 264, Ascot Vale — —

**The CHAIR** — Kevin, we have a copy of that letter. Did you want to speak to that?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — You do not want me to read that?

**The CHAIR** — I think committee members might have some questions relating to that letter. Have you got any other documentation or anything else you would like to speak to the committee on before we ask you questions?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I believe this letter is a bloody insult. It is just rubbing salt into the wounds. He more or less said to me, ‘Bugger you. Stiff luck, Forget about you’. That is the opinion I get. He says he is ‘surprised to read of this complaint’. I believe I found out that this particular priest had a reputation for violence. This Francis J. Moloney, as far as I am concerned, just completely humiliated me by writing this letter. It would have been better if he had not written it.

**The CHAIR** — Could we perhaps ask a few questions relating to your experience and that letter, Kevin?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Because the inquiry we are looking at is in relation to sexual abuse, and I know that your abuse was corporal punishment or physical — —

**Mr HOULIHAN** — It was not actually sexual. It was corporal, but it was on my bare buttocks. He did not make me remove my clothes.

**The CHAIR** — That is right. This inquiry is looking at child sexual abuse, but you are saying that during your time at the college there was no sexual abuse undertaken by the priest with you? Is that right?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — No, not as such. It was severe corporal abuse.

**The CHAIR** — That is why you have written to Towards Healing, and it made contact with you in the first instance with that document that you cite, which was signed in 2011, and which you also provided to us,.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — This statement here?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, and then the letter that you received — —

**Mr HOULIHAN** — From Francis J. Moloney?

**The CHAIR** — Francis. J Moloney.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — A couple of months later?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes, and I feel that that was a total insult, just not worth the paper it was printed on.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for sharing your story with us, and I know Mrs Coote wants to ask you specifically about some of those aspects in that letter.

**Mrs COOTE** — Kevin, thank you very much indeed. In this letter from Francis Moloney in October 2011, he says in the last paragraph:

I notice that you have also asked for financial support. You have lived your own life, and made your own decisions, and they have led you to where you are. All of us must deal with our past. A severe and unmerited punishment in 1965, raised only in 2011, cannot be the cause of the sadness for the rest of your life.

Could you tell me please — —

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I find that very insulting.

**Mrs COOTE** — Yes; that was the point I was going to ask you.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I find that very insulting. As far as I am concerned, what was meted out to me by Father Wenting basically destroyed my whole life.

**Mrs COOTE** — That was my question. Were you really angry at the time as well?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Of course, and I have been ever since. Like I said, I have been an alcoholic most of my life, and I have dabbled in drugs and I have had psychiatric illness. But I am trying to get my life back together again now. Fortunately, thanks to my late mum, I do own a humble little unit. I was homeless for many years. For 20 or 30 years I was homeless, living at St Vincent de Paul and Salvation Army refuges and grotty rooming houses in Fitzroy and St Kilda and places like that. Still I live on the disability support pension, and after all my bills are paid I get about \$150 to look after myself with. I find it extremely difficult. That is why I believe that, due to the pain and suffering that I have gone through all these 48 years since this happened, I need more than just this bullshit apology.

**Mrs COOTE** — Thank you.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Pardon me using that.

**Mrs COOTE** — Thank you; that was very helpful.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — That is the closest way I can describe it.

**Mrs COOTE** — Thank you very much, Kevin.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — This bloke, Moloney, in my opinion is just a bloody hypocrite.

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

**The CHAIR** — Kevin, I am sorry to confuse you; it is Georgie again. I might have misled you before when I inadvertently said that we were looking into sexual abuse. It is criminal abuse of children, and so corporal punishment, that you experienced, is in our terms.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — My apologies; that was my mistake. I know that Mrs Coote and Ms Halfpenny are wanting to speak to you more about that, and also Mr O'Brien. Are you happy to take a couple more questions? Are you happy to take more questions?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — I was going to ask: you said that you had heard later that the priest who beat you, basically, assaulted you, had a reputation for violence? How do you know that? Had you spoken to other people from the school or — —

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I think my sister looked something up on the internet and found something out about him, that he had been shifted around from place to place because of violent behaviour towards teenage boys.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — And after what happened to you, do you feel that the other students or the teachers treated you differently after that incident?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — No-one knew about it. No-one knew about it because this perpetrator, this Adrian Wenting, it was done behind closed doors, and no-one else knew about it. I had to suffer in silence.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Thank you.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Virtually it nothing short of destroyed my life.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Thanks, Kevin. Thanks for coming before us. I just want to understand for my benefit how the statement that you have got here came to be in existence. So you had an interview with Michael Iacovino — an email, I think.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes, I heard about this inquiry in about 2010. I heard about it on the media. I cannot remember whether it was on electronic media or in the newspaper. I do not buy newspapers very often, but I listen to the radio; I have the radio on almost 24/7, and I watch the evening news and current affairs quite a bit, especially *A Current Affair*. And through the media I had learnt in about 2009 or 2010 that this inquiry was finally going to take place, after decades, even probably centuries, of this sort of abuse going on. So I thought, 'After all this time, it's finally my opportunity to have my say'.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — No worries. There was a Cummings inquiry before this; it may have been a previous inquiry.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I only heard about it when my first complaint — my first correspondence — was made. That was the only time I heard about it. I heard about it through either the electronic media or reading it in the newspaper, one or the other.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — That is no problem. So you sat down and told your story to this person, who then typed it up.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — And you have accepted it; that is right?

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Thank you.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — I made some phone calls. I think there were phone numbers given in the media to ring, and I made phone calls, and then these two people came out and visited me and interviewed me. But they were very cold. I found that they were very cold and not very sympathetic at all. To me they were trying to cover the church's backside, as far as I could see. They were trying to make excuses for the behaviour of this bloke. After they left I was shattered.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Kevin. Thank you for detailing and explaining your experience. Can I on behalf of the committee thank you very much indeed for coming before us this afternoon. We do appreciate your time, and hearing from you has been very helpful. Thank you very much indeed.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Okay. What happens now, then, Ms Crozier?

**The CHAIR** — Ingrid or one of the girls will come and help you and walk you out of the room, and we will say thank you very much. They will come and see you. You will get a transcript of what has been said today. That will be sent to you from the Parliament. So somebody will help you and follow up with you.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Will my complaint be brought before the Parliament?

**The CHAIR** — No. We will get the secretariat to assist you with what you can do and how you can take your complaint further.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — So I will hear further from the committee?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, from the members of the secretariat. Once we have put all this evidence together there will be a report, and you will get a copy of the report.

**Mr HOULIHAN** — Yes. Okay then.

**Witness withdrew.**