

St. Thomas More's Parish

PERSONAL

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Dear Gerry,

12th June 1996.

This will be a rather lengthy and difficult letter on a matter of major importance to our community, our church and me. The topic is child sexual abuse by clergy.

A fortnight ago a Melbourne priest phoned me with two allegations about another Melbourne priest - one general and one specific.

I mulled over this information for a few days and then decided I must act in accordance with the protocol that abliges a cleric to inform the competent ecclesial authority if he has knowledge or the possibility of a complaint of child sexual abuse by a cleric.

I wrote a "Private & Confidential" letter to you. I decided not to send it immediately, to give it a cooling period. That night I faxed my letter to the informant who modified it slightly, but agreed to the substance of the complaint. Early the next morning the informant rang with a changed version. The general allegation had become so general it was not worth stating, and the specific allegation was a mistake - it was another priest, not the formerly named person.

There are at least five possibilities in the switch:

- that an honest mistake was made;
- that the cleric got "cold feet";
- that the cleric's sources got "cold feet" and didn't want them or their children involved;
- that the mentioned priest was a victim of clergy gossip; or
- that the mentioned priest was a target for malicious attack.

My continuing difficulty is that the priest mentioned is known to me as a child sexual abuser. This priest still is on Archdiocesan appointment.

I wish now to move away from this specific instance to some general background knowledge. I presume you will be aware of most of the following, but I believe it should be placed on record.

Unfortunately, this area of child sexual abuse has been an aspect of my priestly ministry for over twenty years.

I start with my first appointment to Gladstone Park in 1976.

The Parish Priest, at that time, was Fr. Bill Baker.

I had known Bill previously in his role as chaplain to St. Kevin's College, Toorak.

In January of 1978 a parishioner came to me with a specific complaint about Fr. Baker in relation to his teen-age son.

A Magistrate and a Lawyer went to the Archbishop's residence with the complaint.

The Archbishop invited the boy's parents to visit him at Raheen.

The boy's family were being visited by a senior Archdiocesan official who assured the parents that Bill would be shifted when the new Church had been completed.

The new Church was blessed on June 3rd 1978 and Bill was immediately shifted to Parish Priest of Eltham, taking effect on 17th June 1978.

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As part of the process of investigating the complaint the parents asked me to speak to their child ⁽¹³⁾. In an effort to protect the child it was decided to tape the interview. This was done with the explicit permission of both the child and the parents. During this interview there were, at least, two specific allegations mentioned. Again, the first was more general but the second was specific and explicit. At that stage, I chose not to continue the interview because the matter was already of grave substance and I thought it unnecessary to delve further into such personal matters with a young boy.

I skip a couple of years and come to 1981 when I was appointed as Assistant Priest for three years to the parish of Sunbury. The Parish Priest, at the time, was Fr. Peter Searson. I regularly communicated with the Archbishop on matters of grave misconduct that reflected upon the well-being of Fr. Searson. These ranged over a wide subject matter but did include the anxiety of the then Principal, parents and myself of Fr. Searson's practise of conducting individual sex education in the privacy of his own Office/rooms.

I did not have specific allegations against Fr. Searson, but had serious reservations about the propriety of his behaviour.

Fr. Searson was shifted to Doveton in the January of 1984 after his refusal to implement a directive of the Archbishop on a technical, but specific, issue - the request for a fair and reasonable Mass Roster.

I leave my voluminous file on Fr. Searson to speak for itself and will proceed no further in this correspondence with the many specifics that clearly pointed to a disfunctional personality.

In my current appointment of Belgrave I have become involved with victims of Fr. Kevin O'Donnell. One evening a young couple rang me for an appointment. They left four hours later having outlined to me the specific allegations that were later proven against Kevin O'Donnell. The young man involved had a suspicion that his former employer could also have been a victim.

As it happens, I knew the identity of that person as he and his family were close friends of mine in my second appointment at Scoresby in 1979-80. The Belgrave parishioner had no idea that I knew his former employer.

I then suggested that he contact his former employer the next day and be specific about his fears of possible allegations. His worst fears were realised (in fact his former employer was not the only victim of Kevin O'Donnell. All his siblings and all of his wife's siblings claimed to be victims - with the exception of the wife.)

These two men immediately began to contact young men in the Dandenong and Hastings area and within two days had a list of over 70 alleged victims. It was at this stage that I contacted you to inform you of the possible extent of the problem.

As you know, we then had a meeting of about a dozen of the victims at a meal in the Belgrave Presbytery. You were in attendance that night to be available to those who wished to speak with you.

Through my pastoral care of the Belgrave parishioner and his family, I have been exposed to the operations of a group to which he belongs - "Broken Rites".

REDACTED

REDACTED

This parishioner still sees me regularly. He is in a severe depression and there has been significant damage within the family relationships. As you know, he is one of the 3 O'Donnell victims currently pursuing litigation against the Archbishop and the Archdiocese. As it happens, his lawyer is the son of the Magistrate who visited the Archbishop with the original complaint against Fr. Baker, and the lawyer grew up as a close friend of Fr. Baker's alleged victim.

Demand Garrett.

About a month ago a person associated with "Broken Rites" made an appointment to see me. In a three hour interview he named a list of Melbourne priests who "Broken Rites" suspect of child sexual abuse.

This list contained few surprises, and was about the size generally regarded in priestly circles as the extent of the problem. Needless to say, this is not the forum for specific naming of suspected clergy. However, it is worth you noting that "Broken Rites" are actively investigating these priests.

The person from "Broken Rites" had both Fr. Baker and Fr. Searson as his two prime targets!

He informed me, inter alia!!!:

- that a complaint has been made against Fr. Baker from his days in Jordanville; 1962-1966
- that a complaint had been made against Fr. Baker from his days in East Brighton; and 1966-1968
- that both complainants were unaware of the other's allegations.

He then went on to name a Police Officer with the Child Exploitation Squad who has been given the file to investigate Fr. Searson.

REDACTED

Then last night I had a meal with the father involved in the Gladstone Park incident (his wife has since died). I maintain a personal friendship with him and his family and we rarely even allude to the events of 1978.

However, he informed me that he was recently contacted by a Police Officer over the 1978 allegations. He has no idea how the police had knowledge, but believes it was probably through "Operation Paradox". He was surprised that they knew his son's name and had his phone number. The son, now living in Western Australia, agreed to speak with the Police Officer. Obviously, I have no idea of what was discussed.

What is important is the fact that both Fr. Searson & Fr. Baker are currently under police investigation over possible child sexual abuse.

This leads me to yet another dimension of this tragic scandal.

I find it difficult to reconcile how the Church Authorities have, or at least should have, specific allegations against priests, and that these priests are still on active Archdiocesan appointment.

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I do have to question whether the competent ecclesial authorities have the will to address the sad reality of clergy child sexual abuse.

Do we just sit and wait until the Police get enough information to lay formal chargers ?

Do we wait until "Broken Rites" amasses enough information to go public

Do we wait for the Media to slowly, but surely, expose each clergy child sexual offender as they come to court ?

Do we wait until shows like "Four Corners" make a case for cover-up against the Catholic Church ?

Every time an individual priest is exposed in public the credibility of the Church and its priests is lessened.

I liken it to having each tooth extracted one at a time - without an anesthetic !

What worries me in the Fr. Baker situation is the legal and moral implications of knowledge and responsibility.

If any external source can substantiate a specific complaint against Fr. Baker after his removal to Eltham it opens . . . frightening possibilities.

It also worries me that this issue seems to be largely driven by lawyers and issues surrounding litigation.

Whereas these obviously have great implications there are also many other aspects of the scandal that are not being addressed.

STRATEGY

①

I was impressed by the Australian Foreign Minister recently when he announced an internal investigation into possible child sex offenders within his department. By publicly being pro-active in the internal forum he will both expose offenders and clear the good name of the vast majority who are "tarred with this brush".

Very simply, why can't we as an Archdiocese do the same ?

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Each year society conducts the "ring-in" named "Operation Paradox" where people can name possible offenders. This has obvious problems such as privacy issues and possible vindictive naming of innocent people. But it appears to be the cost the community is prepared to accept for the greater good - the protection of our children against adult sexual offenders.

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I strongly request that the Archdiocese initiates an internal investigation through a Confidential Memo to each priest requesting specific or possible information.

As with "Operation Paradox" a pattern may emerge and some names might consistently surface. At the very least these priests can be internally confronted and given the opportunity to admit to the truth of the allegations, or otherwise.

There are problems involved in being pro-active, but I suspect they are not as great of sitting back and waiting for the next public disclosure.

I'm sure you could receive professional legal advice on how to go about such an internal investigation to minimise damage to individuals.

③ Psychological Examination of Suspects. *Unfit for office S. i.e. sick leave.*

And so, I repeat the request that the competent ecclesial authorities in the Archdiocese of Melbourne take the initiative and conduct an internal investigation of possible child sexual abuse by priests of this Archdiocese.

This action alone could begin to re-dress the appalling image we now have in the general community, and it would assist in re-building the bonds of trust that had previously existed between a priest and his people, as well as restoring some pride in being a Catholic priest today.

And yet these benefits pale into insignificance to our responsibility to ensure the well-being and protection of innocent children from adult sex offenders.

Whereas there is anger towards the abusers, it is not primarily vengeance that must drive the response. It is justice, responsibility and care.

The sad reality is that some of these child sex abusers are multiple and repeat offenders. We have seen this in the Ridesdale and O'Donnell cases. We also know that what actually went to court is "the tip of the ice-berg".

Fr. Canice Connors, while addressing the priests of Melbourne on this issue, held out hope that priests with this behavioural problem could be rehabilitated by proper therapy.

However, if these men are not challenged there can be no hope of behavioural change. This appears to be an area where "a leopard does not change its spots" unless there is some intervention and therapy.

It is naive, and I believe irresponsible, to believe that priests in active duty who have this problem are not continuing to violate children.

We all know how difficult it is to re-dress the damage of the past. At least, we can do something to minimise the possible (using the language of the protocol) or probable present and future violation of children in our care.

It appears that patterns of behaviour emerge in the lives of these disfunctional men that result in continuing offending. Perhaps the problem is so deep that they are incapable of not re-offending. Somewhere, somehow there must be some intervention to stop the violation that can be hidden by secrecy.

Some argue that a person is innocent until proven guilty. There is no doubt that that is a correct point of law. However one of the difficulties is that it is often impossible to get a conviction against a child sexual offender.

Very often the child is too young and too confused on what was happening. Sometimes the victim feels guilt and believes they are part of the problem. Sometimes it is not possible to get corroborating evidence - it is simply a child's word against an adult's. Sometimes victims of the past don't want the emotional pain of re-visiting what happened years ago. Sometimes they simply can't face their offender. And, often, it is the parents who wish to protect their child from further damage caused by the legal process and public disclosure.

And so everything is in favour of the child sexual offender, and more often than not he is free to continue his damaging behaviour.

Although the catalyst for this correspondence to you was the telephone call from the priest with his allegations, I am pleased to have had the opportunity to express some of the difficulties associated with being exposed to this particular problem since my very first days as a priest.

It has been an issue that has negatively coloured my understanding of priesthood.

I also have to add that it disappoints me that the competent ecclesial authorities have not been seen to be addressing the real problem - let alone the real underlying issues!

I would appreciate an opportunity to talk with you.

Obviously not all can or should be put on paper.

Hoping that we, as Church, can address the total problem which has caused so much damage to both our children and our Church.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Phil O'Donnell". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Phil O'Donnell.