

# How a priest preyed



By  
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**F**ATHER Kevin O'Donnell celebrated the 15th anniversary of his ordination into the priesthood at the Dandenong Drive-In Theatre.

He shared the occasion, on July 26, 1957, with a 14-year-old boy.

In a statement made to police last year, the boy — who is now aged 51 — told how the priest molested him while the film was screened.

"We were in the front seat of his car, a Ford Falcon, which he had borrowed," he said.

"During the pictures he placed his hand down the front of my trousers and masturbated himself."

It was not the only time the predator priest celebrated a special occasion by abusing children — and his position of absolute trust, respect and responsibility within their community.

The night of his 41st birthday was spent doing the same thing to the same boy at the same drive-in, while three or four other boys sat in the back seat watching the movie.

In June, 1958, while the people of Berwick mourned the death of their priest in a plane crash, O'Donnell was directed to spend the night at the neighboring parish's presbytery and conduct Mass the following day.

The same boy, now in his 50s, told police that O'Donnell took him to the presbytery and shared a bed with him. He said the priest sexually assaulted him that night, and again the following morning before saying Mass.

Six months later, the day that the 26 metre cross which still towers over St Mary's was hauled into place with a crane, the boy told police the same thing happened in the



**Predator priest:** as king of the kids, Father Kevin O'Donnell lavished treats on children "but it was all repaid later".

O'Donnell spent 13 years as parish priest at St Mary's in Dandenong.

A book published to celebrate the centenary of the parish observed that when the new priest arrived, in 1956, he "had very progressive ideas, which promised plenty of action".

On his first Sunday he administered first communion to 125 children.

The book described O'Donnell as "a vigorous pastor, full of vitality. Young in spirit himself, he had a special rapport with young people ...".

Several of the boys seduced by the jolly, smiling priest, with the collie dog named Laddie, recalled this week that he was "absolutely expert the way he developed his relationship with kids".

"The things that he did for us as young blokes were astronomical, they were unheard of. You'd have access to driving cars, soft drinks and malted milks galore, hamburgers galore — I'd never had a hamburger or a malted milk in my life," one said.

"He was king of the kids, and he actually bribed the kids. It's alright now saying he was good to us and very generous, but it was all repaid later".

**T**HE parish priest also had a reputation during his time at St Mary's as a property wheeler and dealer.

The published history of *A Parish Carved From The Bush* described O'Donnell as a canny buyer with a feeling for a bargain, who bought

land later used as church sites in Doveton, Hampton Park and Hallam.

Among his other purchases was 29 hectares in Frankston Rd and several parcels of land at Dandenong, including the site for St John's College.

"While some parishioners may have looked askance at Fr O'Donnell's land deals, time has proved the wisdom of his moves," the parish history said.

When O'Donnell left the parish in 1969 for Hastings it was recorded that he "left behind him an outstanding record of achievement, a host of friends and a reputation as a dedicated and understanding priest".

It is now apparent that he also left behind him a host of confused, ashamed, embar-

assed, sexually and psychologically damaged children.

Sadly, his time at St Mary's was just one disgraceful chapter in a litany of abuse which covered at least 35 of his 50 years of priesthood.

The charges O'Donnell was convicted of yesterday occurred in all five parishes he worked in between 1944 and 1992, at Chelsea (1944-49), Seymour (1949-56), Dandenong (1956-69), Hastings (1969-76) and Oakleigh (1976-92).

The 10 men and two women who broke their silence to make official complaints against him in the past two years are believed to represent many more victims.

O'Donnell was born in Clifton Hill in 1916 and educated at the local St Thomas's school, then at Christian

Brothers College in Victoria Parade and St Kevin's College in Toorak.

He entered Corpus Christi College in 1935 to study for the priesthood. He was ordained at St Patrick's Cathedral on July 26, 1942, and said his first Mass the following day at St John the Baptist church in Clifton Hill.

At least four of the victims, who finally made formal complaints to police, say they complained to various church authorities about O'Donnell's behavior between 1958 and 1986 without any effective action being taken against him.

They say complaints were made to several other priests and to senior clergy as highly placed as a Monsignor, who was Vicar-General of the Archdiocese.

**T**HE current Vicar-General, Monsignor Gerry Cudmore, yesterday said there was no record of formal complaints being made against O'Donnell, but said they "may have been handled on a one-to-one basis".

"I don't think we understood pedophilia, or the extent of the problem, in the spirit of the time," said Mgr Cudmore, who said six priests had been suspended since he became Vicar General in January, 1993.

He said he had "no idea" of the extent of O'Donnell's victims.

"I'm frightened to think (how many there might be)," Mgr Cudmore said.

"I am disappointed that so many people have been so hurt, but I think I can hopefully say the worst is behind us," he said.

O'Donnell declined to comment on the record this week, saying he preferred to leave any public comment to his barrister, Brian Burke.

"You don't buy a dog and then bark yourself," said the sprightly 78-year-old at his bedside unit.

O'Donnell indicated that he didn't think his behavior had hurt anyone.

The stories of two of his victims suggest otherwise.