

AGONY OF SEX SILENCE

THE Catholic Church has asked for forgiveness over a priest accused of molesting children.

It has also apologised for the "pain and anguish" caused by the priest in a Victorian country town.

In a remarkably candid letter to thousands of parishioners, the church expressed regret that no charges had been laid despite official complaints from 16 victims.

The letter referred to Monsignor John Day, who was parish priest in Mildura from 1957 to 1971. He died in 1978. The

author of the apology, Mildura parish moderator Father Pat Mugavin, said: "Personally, I have no doubts as to what took place."

A former detective this week said large numbers of children, mostly boys, had been molested by Monsignor Day.

But he said senior police pressured him to stop his investigation, eventually forcing him to resign, and Monsignor Day was posted overseas before returning to Timboon, near Colac.

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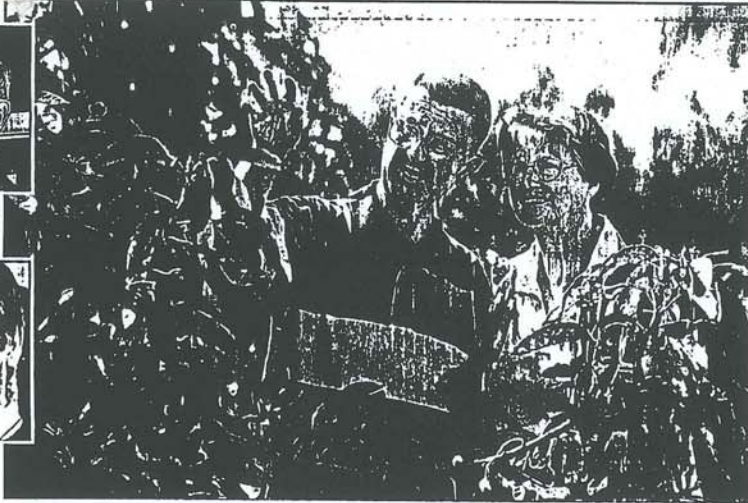
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Monsignor John Day



Father Pat Mugavin



Frustrated Inquiry: Former detective Denis Ryan and his wife, Norma. Picture: DARREN SEILER

Church apology on priest probe

By WAYNE JONES

MILDURA CORRUPTION WAS WIDESPREAD, SAYS DETECTIVE

THE Catholic Church has written to thousands of parishioners seeking forgiveness over claims the church and senior police protected a high-ranking church official accused of molesting young children.

The extraordinarily candid letter expressed "pain and anguish" that a police investigation into complaints against Monsignor John Day, a former parish priest at Mildura, was never completed.

And the detective who investigated the allegations says he was forced to resign when senior police learned who was under investigation.

The author of the letter, Mildura parish moderator Fr Pat Mugavin, said this week there was evidence to support claims that Monsignor Day sexually assaulted a number of young children.

"Personally I have no doubts as to what took place," Fr Mugavin said.

"I would like to offer a sincere apology to victims and on behalf of the church seek their forgiveness for what happened in the past.

"There is deep-seated shock and hurt within the parish, particularly when trust is betrayed by a church leader."

Monsignor Day, Mildura parish priest from 1957 to 1971, died in 1978 aged 69.

In the letter to 2000 parishioners, Fr Mugavin said: "It is with great pain and anguish that I write to respond to the recent allegations of sexual abuse (about Monsignor Day).

"It seems there is substance to such allegations, although, unfortunately, they were never judged by a court of law.

"As a church community we offer our sincere apology to any victims and deeply regret the hurt and pain that has been caused.

"If the response of the church authorities was perceived not to have been adequate, we express regret and sorrow."

Fr Mugavin said the truth had to be uncovered.

"There is deep-seated shock and disappointment in our church community, and beyond," he wrote. "When trust

A SMALL number of influential community leaders in Mildura in the late 1960s and early '70s used their positions to obtain secret commissions and favors, a former detective has claimed.

Their number was made up of some senior police, clergy and court officials, former Mildura detective George Baddeley alleged this week.

He claimed a small number of people from each group were involved.

The allegations include:

- Sentence rigging at the Mildura Magistrate's Court.

- A phantom teacher being employed at a primary school with the wages being divided each week between three of the group.

- Irregularities in payments

made into the poor box at the Mildura Magistrate's Court.

- Criminals not being convicted on the proviso they pay an agreed amount of money to a church building fund.

Mr Baddeley, who was head of detectives at Mildura from 1971 to 1975, said yesterday it was disgraceful no inquiry into the alleged corruption was held.

is betrayed by church leadership, we all feel betrayed and outraged.

Former veteran detective, Denis Ryan, 67, claimed this week Monsignor Day was not charged with molesting young children, despite police investigators obtaining 16 statements from alleged victims, including girls then aged 14.

Mr Ryan, a Catholic, had been based at Mildura for almost 10 years when the allegations emerged in 1971.

This week he spoke for the first time about the case which he claimed cost him his job, his first marriage and tens of thousands of dollars in superannuation payouts.

"I was first contacted about Monsignor Day by the vice-principal of St Joseph's College," Mr Ryan said.

"Two young girls had gone to the vice-principal after they alleged that Monsignor Day had molested them."

It was not the first time Monsignor Day had come to Mr Ryan's notice.

He said that in 1956, as a young constable, he intercepted a car during a patrol in St Kilda about 2am. In it was a man with his pants down and two known prostitutes. He arrested the man, a Father John Day.

But, according to Mr Ryan, he was not charged. The officer-in-charge at the time had contacted the Melbourne diocesan and arranged to have Fr Day picked up.

"He was rotten drunk."

Mr Ryan had no further contact with the priest until 1982 when Fr Day was appointed to Mildura.

"As soon as I met him I

recognised him as the man I had arrested six years earlier. When I began investigating the matter in 1971 it became apparent that there were large numbers of young children, mostly boys, who had been sexually assaulted," Mr Ryan said.

"But when it was learned by police command that I had begun an investigation into Monsignor Day, I was instructed by some of my superiors to cease.

"I was also given strict instructions not to make any more inquiries.

"Shortly afterwards I was informed I was to be transferred to Melbourne."

After newspaper allegations of a cover-up involving the priest, police command sent two senior investigators.

But, according to police sources, the inquiries were soon dropped.

By then time Monsignor Day had been sent overseas. He was later appointed as parish priest at Timboon, near Colac.

Disgraced former priest Gerald Ridsdale worked with Monsignor Day for two years to 1964 and was a good friend. Ridsdale, 63, is serving an 18-year jail term after being convicted on pedophile charges in 1994.

Mr Ryan, posted to Mildura for family health reasons in 1962, claims he was ordered to return to Melbourne.

Mr Ryan, two of whose children suffered from chronic asthma and could not live in the city, said he was refused any other country posting.

He believes senior police knew he would put his family first and resign.

Former colleague George Baddeley supports Mr Ryan's claims. Mr Baddeley was transferred to Mildura as head of detectives soon after Mr Ryan resigned.

"It is absolutely disgraceful that no inquiry into this whole matter was held," Mr Baddeley said.

Mr Baddeley, who remained in charge until 1975, stayed silent for fear of falling out of favor with some superiors.

"What happened to Ryan was terrible, he said. "The white knights in this matter were defeated. Evil reigned.

"If the people of Mildura knew what was happening in that town at that time they would be shocked."

The then principal of St Joseph's College, John Howden, told the *Sunday Herald Sun* he approached Mr Ryan to investigate Monsignor Day after complaints by two female students.

"The two girls that came to me were very earnest. I believed them," he said.

"If it was not for a core support I had in the parish at the time, I have no doubt I would have been removed from the parish under Day's instruction."

Fr Mugavin described Mr Ryan as a man of "great integrity" and said he and the church would do what they could to assist him.

Police spokeswoman Nicole Hughes said yesterday: "Mr Ryan was transferred because of a conflict between two members and was simply a management issue."

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