

In today's round of hearings for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Commission heard from Assistant Commissioner Stephen Fontana and began the second-round of evidence from Bishop Peter Connors.

Testimony of Assistant Commissioner Stephen Fontana

Assistant Commissioner Fontana has been with Victoria Police since 1975. His testimony was aimed at providing a description of policies and procedures of Victoria Police based on the documents he had reviewed and his experience of investigations, including investigations of Priests. It was not based on his personal experience of any of the cases discussed in evidence.

In relation to the Searson matter, Assistant Commissioner Fontana discussed the various reports from Victoria Police. In relation to previous evidence from survivor Julie Stewart, who testified that she had been interviewed by Constable Ben Condon alone, Assistant Commissioner Fontana said it would be very unusual that this interview would have been conducted by a sole Police officer, particularly one with the rank of probationary constable (as Condon had at the time.) He said that he disagreed with the conclusion in the reports that no offences were disclosed during the investigation, because he considered Searson's conduct to be indecent. Assistant Commissioner Fontana explained that the Child Exploitation Unit was very small and relatively new division, so possibly lacked the expertise necessary to fully investigate the matter.

He also said that the gravity of the crime, the likelihood of successful prosecution and the wishes of the parents were taken into account when dealing with cases involving child witnesses.

Assistant Commissioner Fontana recalled that the Senior Constable who investigated the knife incident described Searson as "the coolest and the most polished suspect" he had ever interviewed.

In relation to the case of Father Nazareno Fasciale, Assistant Commissioner Fontana said that there was a delay in the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions in providing advice, resulting in charges not being laid before Fasciale's death.

In relation to Father Ronald Pickering, Assistant Commissioner Fontana confirmed that Pickering had left Australia for the United Kingdom before any complaints were received about him. He said that the decision to not pursue Pickering for an interview in the UK was likely due to budgetary constraints.

Testimony of Bishop Peter Connors

Bishop Connors testified about his relationship with Archbishop Frank Little, who he served in the role of personal secretary, Vicar General and Auxiliary Bishop. Bishop Connors told the Commission that Archbishop Little's best friend left the Priesthood after being treated poorly by his Bishop and Vicar General, and he considered this to contribute to Archbishop Little's reluctance to correct, chastise or reprimand a Priest.

Bishop Connors testified that the first time he had ever heard about a complaint of child sexual abuse against a priest was in relation to Father Wilfred Baker in 1978. He accepted the evidence of another witness to the Commission (Bryan Cosgriff, who provided a written statement), that he was

in a meeting with Archbishop Little about Baker, that Archbishop Little's reaction was hostile, and that Bishop Connors gave the impression he supported the Archbishop.

He spoke of the relationship between an Auxiliary Bishop and an Archbishop, and said that the Archbishop of a large Archdiocese relied on the Auxiliary Bishops to support and encourage Priests, and to be aware of health and other issues affecting them. He said that he would always inform Archbishop Little of serious matters, but was not sure Archbishop Little did the same, because he kept his own files about Priests in his Archdiocese.

Bishop Connors was asked to review a number of sets of minutes of meetings of the Archdiocesan Personnel Advisory Board, which dealt with the appointment of Priests, as well as other issues. He conceded that the minutes taken – including when taken by him – were minimalist in nature and did not record allegations of sexual misconduct, partly out of a desire to protect the Church. While he could not recall the details of any of the specific board meetings, or whether the Archbishop had ever informed them of the complaints against Baker, Bishop Connors said that he expected others present at these meetings to have known about the sexual misconduct and alcohol abuse by Baker.

Bishop Connors accepted that he failed to take initiative in the case of Father Peter Searson, and that he and others in Church leadership (including the Archbishop, Auxiliary Bishops and Vicars General) failed to take action in relation to Baker. He agreed that this was completely contrary to the purpose and mission of the Church.

The Commission will continue the testimony of Bishop Connors on Thursday.