

## Cardinal Pell seeks top silk Robert Richter's over sex claims

JOHN FERGUSON THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM October 15, 2016

Cardinal George Pell has sought the advice of one of Australia's leading criminal barristers and is considering legal action for defamation as police sift through historical sex abuse claims against one of the Vatican's most senior figures.

*The Weekend Australian* can reveal that Cardinal Pell engaged Robert Richter QC for advice after contested claims surfaced this year that he had assaulted children in his former home in the city of Ballarat nearly 40 years ago, where his career began.

Mr Richter, who represented gangland figure Mick Gatto when he was charged with murder but later acquitted in 2005, is considered the standout criminal barrister in Victoria and possibly Australia.

The church did not detail the extent to which Cardinal Pell had sought Mr Richter's advice but said the cardinal would continue to defend his position.

Mr Richter is believed to have been one of several legal figures consulted over the allegations.

"The cardinal reiterated his complete and utter rejection of any allegations of sexual abuse against him at any time," a spokeswoman said. "He is also considering legal action against those organisations promoting these calumnies."

Police are trawling through evidence and a series of accusations against Cardinal Pell from the 1970s through to the 1990s.

Cardinal Pell was furious with the way the police investigation was made public, first in a newspaper report early this year, followed by an ABC story in July. If a complaint is made, police are required to investigate it.

Prosecutors have left it to police to determine whether they charge Cardinal Pell with any offences, putting more pressure on the force when prosecutions for historical allegations are notoriously difficult to undertake.

Informed speculation suggests the majority of the reported allegations would have been struck out, leaving the force to drill down into the detail of what is likely to be considered lower level, but still serious, offending.

This is expected to include allegations by two former St Alipius students, Lyndon Monument and Damian Dignan, that Cardinal Pell touched their genitalia while playing in Ballarat's Eureka pool in 1978-79, offending that is - alleged to have occurred in front of others. Victoria Police said yesterday: "Although we don't comment on individuals, the investigation remains ongoing."

The diocese of Ballarat in western Victoria is at the heart of some of the worst offending in the church anywhere in the world. There has been no substantiated evidence of wrongdoing by Cardinal Pell.

On Monday, *The Australian* will broadcast the first of three podcasts reporting on the rampant historical abuse that occurred in the diocese, beginning with police complicity in the northwest Victorian city of Mildura.

Cardinal Pell's supporters argue that he has been caught in the backwash of deep, understandable, but bitter anger over the church's handling of the sex abuse debacle.

However, victims have been scathing of Cardinal Pell, blaming him for having failed to do enough to address properly the extent of offending in the dioceses of Melbourne and Sydney, where he ruled as archbishop and cardinal before becoming the treasurer of the Vatican, a title known formally as Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy.

The decision to seek Mr Richter's counsel reflects the seriousness with which Cardinal Pell and his advisers are treating the police investigation.

While Mr Richter's headline achievement was extracting Gatto from jail and a murder charge after Gatto shot dead - Andrew "Benji" Veniamin in a restaurant in 2004, he also was instrumental in defending state Labor minister Theo Thephanous in 2009 over rape charges.

The former cabinet minister was charged with raping a female friend on a red velvet couch in his parliamentary office in 1998 after taking her on a late night tour of the Victorian parliament. The charges were thrown out.

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