

**Introduction**

- 15.1 Fr Vidal was ordained in the 1960s for a diocese in the UK. He served in the Archdiocese of Dublin for approximately ten years in the 1960s and 1970s. He died in 2004.
- 15.2 Almost immediately after he was ordained Fr Vidal began to experience problems with celibacy and he had affairs with a number of women. He moved away from the UK diocese apparently to try to escape one of his entanglements. He applied for laicisation in the late 1960s but did not go through with the process. He then decided that he wished to remain a priest.
- 15.3 He contacted Archbishop McQuaid to see if he could get work as a priest in the Archdiocese of Dublin. His bishop wrote to Archbishop McQuaid saying “*As you will appreciate, it will not be advisable for him to work in this diocese again*”. He did not elaborate on the reason but it would seem that the Archbishop McQuaid was aware of a problem and the nature of it. It was hoped that he could eventually be incardinated in Dublin but that never happened.

**First complaint, 1973**

- 15.4 Fr Vidal began work as a priest in the Dublin Archdiocese in 1968. In 1973, a nun reported to the Archdiocese that Fr Vidal was involved with both an adult woman, who was a teacher, and a girl aged 12 – 14. He had started these relationships sometime between 1968 and 1971. The nun had letters which suggested that the relationship with the young girl was sexual. In an undated letter to another nun, with whom it appears that the priest was also friendly, the girl said she was in love with Fr Vidal. During his laicisation process in 1979, Fr Vidal accepted that there was a physical relationship with this girl from the time she was about 13.
- 15.5 When this report came to the Archdiocese, the Archbishop’s secretary, Canon McMahon, correctly noted that “*the most serious aspect is the age of [the girl]*”. It would appear that Archbishop Ryan asked a parish priest to

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This is a pseudonym.

investigate. In his report, the parish priest said: “*Basically, I think we must accept that [Fr Vidal] has been at least guilty of conduct which was indiscreet, improper and open to grave scandal*”. He went on to say: “*It is not necessary to accept everything that has been said against him – the details are of little account - but there is sufficient evidence to justify a warning to a priest accused of such attitudes and conduct that he would seem to have gravely compromised his priesthood.*”

15.6 The parish priest then set out his views as to how the matter should be dealt with. Fr Vidal

*“should be seen and informed that His Grace the Archbishop has received a report concerning his conduct with a very young girl. No charge should be made, no details given and the source of the information should not be disclosed... No matter how the interview goes or how he reacts, he needs to be handled firmly, but with kindness and patience...he has been accepted on a temporary basis in this Diocese, which in itself is a great kindness. Finally, he should be instructed 1, not to visit the [young girl’s] home ever again or to meet [the young girl] and 2, that he must be extremely careful in future with his relations with women.”*

15.7 The parish priest then met Fr Vidal. Fr Vidal denied any impropriety. He stated that he was fully aware that the young girl had a crush on him but that it had not been reciprocated and that his relationship with the teacher was entirely platonic. He agreed to keep away from the young girl. The parish priest told him that he expected that his assurances about his future conduct would be accepted by the Archbishop. It does appear that these assurances were accepted as nothing further was done.

#### **Application for laicisation**

15.8 In 1977, Fr Vidal was granted leave of absence because of a “*growing spiritual and vocational crisis*”. About a year later he decided to apply for laicisation. Bishop O’Mahony sent him for a psychological assessment. This assessment was unequivocal. It recognised that he was promiscuous and that he “*never did, never could and never will*” sustain a life of celibacy. The psychologist recommended that it would be in the best interests of the Church for him to be laicised.

15.9 Accordingly in 1979 the petition for laicisation was put in motion. The process was handled by Bishop O'Mahony. During the laicisation process, Fr Vidal admitted to his various relationships with women. He said that he had never ended the relationship with the young girl. She was now in her early 20s and he was planning to marry her. Despite his earlier denials to the Church inquiry, he admitted that they had had a physical relationship since she was about 13.

15.10 The laicisation petition was sent to Rome in October 1980. No decision was made because, when Rome sought further information, the circumstances had changed.

15.11 The couple did marry in 1980. The ceremony was conducted by a priest of the Archdiocese even though it would appear that Fr Vidal was not free to enter into a Catholic marriage. It was, however, a valid civil marriage.

#### **Return to ministry**

15.12 In 1985, Fr Vidal contacted Bishop O'Mahony and told him that the marriage had broken down and that he wished to return to ministry. Bishop O'Mahony told the Commission that he shredded his file on Fr Vidal after the priest's death so there is no documentation available about his dealings with Fr Vidal in the 1980s. In 2006, Bishop O'Mahony recounted what had happened to the priest delegate of the Archdiocese. The bishop said that he sent Fr Vidal to a monastery to consider his situation. After a month there, the monks were supportive of his wish to return to ministry. Bishop O'Mahony then sent Fr Vidal and his wife for counselling and they formally separated.

#### **Diocese of Sacramento**

15.13 Bishop O'Mahony arranged for Fr Vidal to go to the diocese of Sacramento, California. He wrote a letter of commendation to that diocese. The diocese of Sacramento has confirmed to the Commission that this letter made no mention whatsoever of Fr Vidal's previous activities. There is no evidence that Bishop O'Mahony told anyone else in the Archdiocese of Dublin about the arrangements he had made at the time (1985) nor that he was in contact with Fr Vidal's UK diocese. Such evidence may have been in Bishop O'Mahony's shredded file. Subsequent letters from Fr Vidal's UK diocese suggest that it was not aware of his going to Sacramento but this is not

absolutely certain. The decision to allow him to resume ministry was made in spite of the earlier unequivocal view of the psychologist about his incapacity to maintain celibacy.

15.14 Fr Vidal's wife subsequently married another man in a Catholic Church ceremony. In order to allow her to have a church ceremony, she was given a statement in 1991 by Monsignor Stenson that the 1980 marriage was not, in fact, a valid Catholic marriage. She got a divorce from Fr Vidal after the divorce laws were introduced in Ireland in 1996.

15.15 Bishop O'Mahony remained in contact with Fr Vidal. In 1991, the bishop of the UK diocese was in contact with the Archdiocese because Fr Vidal now sought to be incardinated into the Sacramento diocese. There is a series of correspondence in the archdiocesan files between Sacramento, Dublin and the UK diocese as to how and when Fr Vidal should be incardinated as he had never been incardinated in Dublin. Finally it was decided that the UK diocese would excardinate him and that Sacramento would incardinate him directly. The Archdiocese provided Fr Vidal with a statement outlining his involvement in the Archdiocese. This statement included the information that he had become involved with a girl whom he had civilly married. It did not mention her age when he first became sexually involved with her.

15.16 Fr Vidal got a divorce in California in 1992. The diocese of Sacramento was unaware that he was civilly married when he went there. He continued to minister as a priest in Sacramento. There were no complaints of child sexual abuse against him in this diocese. He retired to Ireland in 2003 and he died in 2004.

#### **Bishop O'Mahony documents**

15.17 The Commission's analysis of this case was hampered by the absence of records of the communications between Bishop O'Mahony and Fr Vidal.

15.18 Bishop O'Mahony told the Commission that he started to shred documents in 2001 when he was ill. These were documents which had arisen while he was dealing with a confidential matter: "*Any document that a*

*priest came and spoke to me in a private, confidential capacity, about a spiritual matter of conscience, I felt that no one had a right after I was dead to see those documents. I shred them”.*

15.19 He also told the Commission that the only documents in relation to child sexual abuse that he shredded were the documents relating to Fr Vidal. He shredded these because the priest had died:

*“I felt that I had a duty to protect his good name and protect the good name of [the girl he married], who had subsequently married. Her marriage is recognised by Church and State. So I regarded the [Fr Vidal] case as very much a good news story. That the priest went back into active ministry and the girl in question, who was a young woman when I met her, married happily and her marriage is recognised civilly and canonically. [This reference is to her second marriage.] So for me that was a good news story”.*

#### **The Commission’s assessment**

15.20 The Commission does not consider that this is a “good news story”. The Commission finds it extraordinary that nothing was done about Fr Vidal’s relationship with a teenage girl other than to ask for an assurance that he would end it.

15.21 The Commission is very concerned that Fr Vidal was allowed to return to ministry in spite of his admission of child sexual abuse. It is particularly concerned that Bishop O’Mahony did not provide the diocese of Sacramento with any information about Fr Vidal’s adverse history. It also has concerns that little weight seems to have been given to the fact that he was civilly married and had responsibilities associated with that state. The fact that there are no further reports of abuse and that he subsequently divorced his wife without the knowledge of the diocese of Sacramento and reached an amicable settlement with her does not detract from these concerns.