



Royal Commission
into Institutional Responses
to Child Sexual Abuse

Statement

Name Julie Stewart
Address Known to the Royal Commission
Occupation Used vehicle/wholesale clerk
Date November 2015

1. This statement made by me accurately sets out the evidence that I am prepared to give to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The statement is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.
2. My full name is Julie Stewart. I was born in 1975 and I am 40 years old. I was born Julie Stewart to Bill and Helen Stewart. As a small child I lived in Doveton, Victoria. I lived with my parents and my brother, Michael, who is four years older than me. My mother was Catholic but my father was Protestant. My mother wanted to raise my brother and me as Catholics and my father agreed. My mother, brother and I attended Holy Family church in Doveton every Sunday. The parish priest when I first started attending Holy Family church was Father Victor Rubeo.
3. I was always a happy, carefree little girl. I had really long hair down to my waist. I loved dancing and horses.
4. At the age of five I began to be sexually abused by a family member. The abuse continued until I was eight years old. The abuse caused me to wet the bed and to have horrible nightmares. I hated being away from my mother and I did not want to go anywhere without her. I hated being left alone with any man, even my father.
5. One day, when I was about eight, my mother asked me 'is anyone hurting you?' I told my mother I had been abused by the family member. She told me she would speak to my father about it. Later that evening my father asked me if I had been abused by the

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family member. I told him I had. He said to me 'you should have known better'. I said 'Yes, Dad. Sorry.'

6. When I was older, my father told me that he had gone to speak to the person responsible at the time. He told me that the person admitted what they had done. My father told the person never to touch me again. He never did. As far as I know, my parents did not tell anyone else and the matter was not reported to the police.
7. I started at Holy Family School (Holy Family) in Doveton in Prep in 1981. I was five years old. When I started school the principal was a nun. She was there for a year or two, then Graeme Sleeman (Mr Sleeman) became the principal.

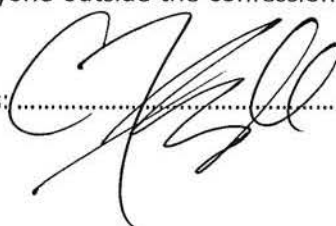
Father Searson

8. Father Searson (Fr Searson) replaced Father Rubeo as the parish priest at Doveton when I was in Grade 3, in 1984.
9. Fr Searson lived in the presbytery, which was located on the school grounds. I often saw him inside the school. In Grade 3 Fr Searson visited my classroom a lot. When he visited, he often hugged me and I saw him hugging other children, girls and boys. At first, I loved the attention that Fr Searson gave me. He was a priest and it made me feel special.
10. I first remember going into the confessional in the Holy Family church in Grade 3, in 1984. I went to the confessional several times to practice reconciliation in preparation for my First Communion. I was taken to the church with my class and Fr Searson was there. Each of us was given a script to read, which began 'It has been two weeks since my last confession'. Fr Searson told us to go in to the confessional, read the speech and to practice confessing our sins.
11. The confessional was a room located to the side of the altar in the church. It was not a big room. It was about 2.5 metres by 2.5 metres. There was a door at the front to the left. Even if the door was open it was not possible for anyone outside the confessional

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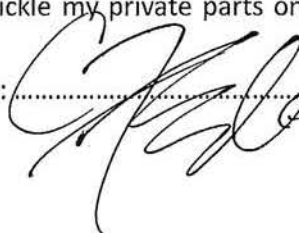
to observe what was happening inside the room because of the way the door was positioned. The room was divided in two by a wall that ran most of the length of the room. On one side of the partition where Fr Searson sat there were two chairs. On the other side of the partition there was one chair. I have drawn a diagram of the confessional which I have provided to the Royal Commission. It is marked as IND.0316.002.0002.

12. I remember Fr Searson saying to me and my class in one of those practice sessions that we could choose to sit on the chair on the opposite side of the partition to him, or we could sit in the second chair on his side of the partition.
13. The incidents with Fr Searson in the confessional began in 1984 when I was practising for my reconciliation and First Communion.
14. I went to the confessional to practice for my reconciliation several times. Each time Fr Searson told me I had to sit on his side of the partition and to sit on his knee. I did what he said because he was a priest. I do not recall that anything else happened on those occasions.
15. After I made my First Communion in 1984, I went to reconciliation every two weeks until about the middle of 1985. I would have gone to reconciliation between 12 and 14 times.
16. The first 3 or 4 times I went to reconciliation, Fr Searson told me I had to sit on his knee. On these first 3 or 4 occasions Fr Searson would laugh and stroke my hair. He would say to me 'do you love Father?' and I said 'Yes'. He would ask me to kiss him on the lips. I did. On these occasions I enjoyed Fr Searson's attention.
17. On about the fifth time I went to reconciliation and on each subsequent occasion, Fr Searson also touched me. When I was sitting on his knee he would move his left hand around towards my outer thigh so that it rested partly on my backside and partly on my thigh. I could almost always feel his erection. He continued to move his hand around until it was on my private parts. He would then flick or tickle my private parts on the

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outside of my undies. On these occasions he continued to ask me to tell him that I loved him and to ask me to kiss him. I did as I was told, but I no longer enjoyed it. When he started touching me I understood that what he was doing was sexual and that it was wrong. If I knew which day my class was going to be called to reconciliation I would wear tracksuit pants or stockings or bloomers to make it harder for Fr Searson to touch me.

18. The last time I went to reconciliation with Fr Searson was sometime in the second term of 1985 when I was in Grade 4. On this occasion Fr Searson lifted me from his knee and placed me on his lap so I could feel his erection against my backside. He pushed me hard against him. It hurt. He whispered in my ear, 'You are a good girl. The Lord forgives you.'
19. I snapped. I pushed myself off him. I ran out of the confessional to my teacher, Mrs Barrett, who was standing outside with the children waiting to be called for reconciliation. I was sobbing and hyperventilating. I was making a lot of noise. I do not remember if Mrs Barrett asked me what had happened.
20. In 1997 I was interviewed by Peter O'Callaghan (Mr O'Callaghan) and I told him some of what Fr Searson had done to me in the confessional. Royal Commission officers have read to me parts of the transcript of my interview with Mr O'Callaghan. I have not been shown a copy of that document. I said I did not want to read it in full. I did not want to become upset. From what I have been read, that document does not contain all the details of what happened.
21. Royal Commission officers have read to me the part of my transcript of interview with Mr O'Callaghan which says that I ran out of the confessional because Fr Searson put his hand on my private parts. In fact Fr Searson had done that on a number of occasions. It was the fact that he sat me on top of his erect penis and pushed it against my backside that made me run out of the confessional.
22. Mrs Barrett took me to see Mr Sleeman, immediately. I remember Mr Sleeman trying to comfort me by playing with my plaits. That was a big no-no because that is what

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Fr Searson had done. I would not let Mr Sleeman touch me. I remember he asked me something like 'Did something bad happen' but all I could say was, 'Horrible, it was horrible' or words to that effect. I do not remember saying to Mr Sleeman that Fr Searson 'was doing things that normal priests don't do' but I may have said that.

23. I do not recall being taken to see anyone after I was taken to Mr Sleeman. I do not remember Margaret Goodacre. I do remember being spoken to or counselled by a lady at some point after the last incident in the confessional with Fr Searson. I do not remember what I said.

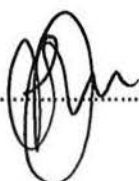
24. I cannot remember anyone from the Melbourne Archdiocese or the Catholic Education Office coming to Holy Family to speak to me about what had happened.

25. I never went to confession again. In fact, there were a few kids who never went again including, I think, my friend BTV and a boy called REDACTED. When the class was called for reconciliation, I would stay in the classroom with these other kids. I recall that a teacher was present in the classroom on these occasions. I remember Mr Locke being there on some of these occasions.

26. I remember a teacher called Mrs Brasher. She took over from Mrs Barrett. I have been asked by Royal Commission officers whether I can remember an incident where I was with Mrs Brasher in the playground and Fr Searson ran his fingers through my hair. I cannot remember that incident, but I do remember Fr Searson touching my hair in the playground on a number of occasions.

27. I cannot remember discussing the detail of what had happened with Fr Searson with anyone at the time. The fact that I had previously been sexually abused by the family member is one reason why I found it difficult to talk about the incidents with Fr Searson. At the time I felt that there was something wrong with me because things had been done to me by two different people. I blamed myself.

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28. My mother knew bits and pieces. She did not like to ask about Fr Searson or the abuse by the family member. Occasionally my mother and I would discuss the abuse by the family member and I would mention that Fr Searson tried to do similar things, but that was as much as I revealed. It is only very recently, in the last few months, that I have told my family all of what really happened.

29. I do not recall anyone ever suggesting that I go to the police to report what happened with Fr Searson in the confessional. I have spoken to my mother about that and she has told me that she cannot recall that anyone suggested it to her either. When I spoke to Mr O'Callaghan in 1997 it is possible that he may have told me that I had the right to go to the police, but I don't remember discussing that issue with him.

30. I do remember that I told my friend ^{BTV} about Fr Searson. I don't recall what I said or whether I went into any detail.

31. I have been asked by Royal Commission officers whether I remember a girl at school called ^{BTY} I remember ^{BTY} We were friendly. I think I stayed at her house a couple of times. It is possible that I told her what Fr Searson had done to me but I do not remember doing that.

St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Dandenong

32. In September of 1986 I changed schools to St Mary's Catholic Primary School (St Mary's) in Dandenong. I was so relieved. I could not wait to leave Holy Family. I had isolated myself from my friends and felt like a weirdo. I never went back to Holy Family again.

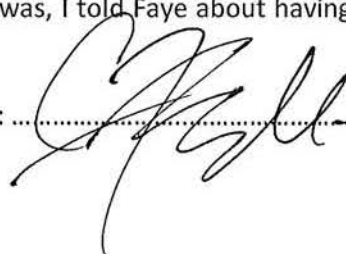
33. I remained at St Mary's for the rest of Grade 5 in 1986 and for Grade 6 in 1987.

34. The principal at St Mary's was a lady named Faye Chandley (Faye). I felt that Faye was looking out for me. I had become quite rebellious. I would sometimes get sent out of class to see Faye. When that happened Faye never spoke sternly to me, she would just talk to me normally. One day, I do not remember when it was, I told Faye about having

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to sit on Fr Searson's knee and kissing him and telling him that I loved him. I did not provide any other detail. Faye arranged for me to see a counsellor, who I saw a couple of times.

Police Interview

35. In late 1990, I was contacted by Detective Condon from the Victoria Police. I would have been about 15 at the time. I believe Detective Condon was from Dandenong police station and I think he was from the child abuse squad. Detective Condon wanted to interview me about Fr Searson. He told me that someone had put my name forward as a possible victim. I think Detective Condon did tell me who named me but I do not recall who it was.
36. I agreed to meet with Detective Condon at my parents' house. He came on his own. Mum and Dad were home and they went in the lounge room and just he and I sat at the kitchen table.
37. I remember him as being young, tall and nice. I initially felt comfortable with Detective Condon, so I told him that I had also been sexually abused by a family member. He said to me, 'Oh my God, what, were you wearing a neon sign above your head saying "come and get me"?' When he said that I shut down and I felt I could not tell him all the details of what happened. I felt that he was blaming me which was hard because I blamed myself.
38. He wrote out my statement by hand and I signed it. I think he gave me a copy but I do not have it anymore. Royal Commission officers have read to me parts of my police statement. I have not been shown a copy of the statement. I said I did not want to read it in full as I did not want to become upset. From what I have been read, the statement does not contain all the details of what happened.
39. At some point I had a conversation with Detective Condon in which he said to me 'unfortunately there's not enough here for me to go by'. I understood him to mean I had

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not told him enough to enable him to proceed with charges against Fr Searson. That conversation may have been at the end of the interview, or he may have phoned me sometime afterwards. I remember he did tell me that if I ever wanted to proceed in relation to the family member I should get in contact with him.

40. I never told Detective Condon (or anyone else) that I did not want them to proceed with charges against Fr Searson. I would not have agreed to make the statement if that was how I felt.

41. After the conversation in which Detective Condon said 'unfortunately there's not enough here for me to go by' I never heard from Detective Condon again.

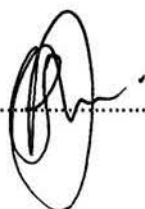
42. Prior to being read sections of my police statement, it was my recollection that I did not tell Detective Condon much about what had happened with Fr Searson. I now know I told him that Fr Searson sat me on his lap so I could feel his erect penis and pushed himself against me. I am gobsmacked to find now that I told Detective Condon that detail.

St John's College, Dandenong

43. In 1988, I started high school at St John's College, Dandenong. In 1991, when I was in Year 10, I started seeing Sister Colleen, a counsellor at the school. I told her a little bit about Fr Searson but I did not tell her the full story. I do not recall the detail of what I said. I think I would have told her about Fr Searson making me sit on his knee and making me kiss him on the lips and making me tell him that I loved him. I might also have told her about Fr Searson touching me on my private parts, but I cannot be sure.

44. At some point in around 1991, Sister Colleen took me to see the Principal, Mr Michael Quinn. I told him about Detective Condon coming to see me and that I was interviewed. I told him about Fr Searson, but I cannot recall what I told him.

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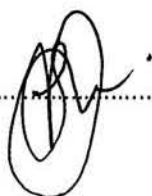
Statement of Julie Stewart continued

45. I gave Mr Quinn a manila folder containing Detective Condon's business card. I think it may also have contained a copy of the police statement that I made. Mr Quinn told me he was going to ring Detective Condon. About a week later Mr Quinn called me back to his office and said he had spoken to the police and there was not enough evidence to charge Fr Searson. Mr Quinn also told me he would get advice about the situation, but did not tell me who he was going to speak to. I did not hear anything more from Mr Quinn, and he never handed back the manila folder I had given him.
46. Not long after, still in 1991, the school had a special church service and Fr Searson was at the school to preside over it. As soon as I saw Fr Searson, my hands became clammy. I was in shock. As part of the service, Fr Searson was conducting communion. I was extremely nervous but I approached Fr Searson and took bread from him. When he looked at me I looked down at the ground. He did not seem to recognise me. I thought, 'Thank God!'
47. During that same week, I was having some personal issues with my then boyfriend. He had lost interest in me and I was having a huge issue with rejection. That, combined with seeing Fr Searson and bringing up the past memories of my sexual abuse, became too much for me. I decided to end my life. One morning I took 60 panadeine, 24 panadol and some zinc tablets in an attempt to overdose. I started to walk to school, but only made it three doors up before collapsing. I was rushed to hospital and had my stomach pumped.
48. After this, I also became angry with my parents and began a period of my life of rebelliousness and feeling worthless.

Melbourne Response

49. At the end of 1996 or early 1997 I bumped into Faye while shopping in Dandenong. She told me that a Queen's Counsel had been hired by Archbishop Pell to investigate Fr

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Searson. In early 1997 I met with Faye at her house and I agreed to meet Mr O'Callaghan, the QC appointed by Pell.

50. Mr O'Callaghan came to my house one night in 1997 to interview me. Faye was also there for support. I did not tell Mr O'Callaghan about all of the times Fr Searson had sexually abused me.

51. At the time of the interview, Mr O'Callaghan told me he was going to arrange an informal hearing in his boardroom. He told me it was not going to be like court.

52. In June 1997, I attended a meeting at Optus House, which I thought was Mr O'Callaghan's office. The meeting was with a lawyer who was assisting Mr O'Callaghan. I had to go over my story again, at least the part I had told them about. I was told I needed to be comfortable saying 'penis' and 'vagina', but I was not. I was being prepared for a face to face meeting with Fr Searson at the hearing. It was only during this meeting that I was told that Fr Searson's lawyer would be able to question me about my story. I had a lawyer, Bernie Moore, assisting me with the process. It is possible that Mr Moore had also received letters explaining the process to be followed at the hearing, but I don't remember discussing that with Mr Moore at the time.

53. On 4 June 1997 I attended the hearing at Optus House. I was waiting in a room with my then husband, [REDACTED] my friend from school, BTV and her husband, BTV Mrs Barrett, Mr Sleeman and his wife, Jenny. was there as my witness as she remembered the day I came running out of the confessional screaming and sobbing. Mr Moore was there to represent me.

54. I found the hearing very distressing. I was made to sit facing Fr Searson and I was questioned by his lawyer for a long time. I was not prepared for how hostile the cross examination was. I was taken into another room and asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. It is possible that this had been previously sent to my lawyer, but I don't

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recall. I don't remember what it said, but I signed it. I just wanted to leave. When I left the hearing I broke down and cried.

55. In 1998 I received a cheque from the Archdiocese for \$25,000. I also received a letter of apology from Archbishop Pell. That letter is marked as IND.0316.002.0001. I had never asked for a letter or for an apology.

56. I felt that the whole process re-traumatised me.

Life after Melbourne


57. In November 1998, my marriage ended. My daughter and I moved to Cairns with my parents. I have visited Melbourne since then, but I have never stepped foot in Doveton again.

58. In 2012 some of my family members in Melbourne saw Mr Sleeman on a documentary and told me about a newspaper article. I googled the article and read about my own story, this little nine year old girl who ran out of the confessional. I had never heard Mr Sleeman's side of the story before, and had not known what he had done for me and the other kids at Holy Family.

59. Following the newspaper article, I contacted Broken Rites. I was informed of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into child sexual abuse and asked if I would be interested in making contact. I was very concerned about being let down yet again so I didn't.

60. At the beginning of 2013 I suffered from a severe bout of depression. I have been on medication ever since.

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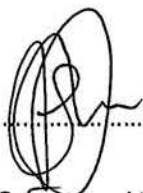


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61. In 2014 I made contact with Mr Sleeman and was overjoyed to talk to him. I then watched his interview on the Four Corners program. I became really angry about how I feel Mr Sleeman has been treated.
62. I have a wonderful, supportive family. I have remarried, have another two beautiful children and I have been getting on with my life.
63. I still cry for the little girl I once was. The little girl that never got to be a normal little girl doing all the things that little girls should do. The little girl who always just wanted to fit in, but always felt like a weirdo, like a problem. Nothing can ever give that back to me. It is a life sentence, and every day I make a choice to keep going.
64. It is important to me to tell my story now because I want peace for myself. I want peace for Mr Sleeman. I've got kids and I want to be a voice. I want people to know that this happened. I'm not ashamed anymore and I no longer blame myself. I will no longer be a victim. My name is Julie Stewart.

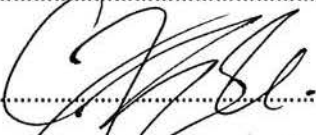
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