

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Additional Witness Statement of

Desmond Vincent Austin

Support person present: No

My name is Desmond Vincent Austin. I am usually referred to as Des. My date of birth is [REDACTED] 1945. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Having now read the transcript of Richard Yeo's evidence given to the Inquiry on 23rd June 2017, I wish to make an additional statement.

I was disgusted with what he had to say. It was a well-rehearsed performance, his main purpose being to continue to deny any responsibility by the English Benedictine Congregation for abuse that took place at Carlekemp and Fort Augustus. He showed scant consideration for the victims of abuse and seems to have made no attempt to investigate the abuse that had taken place. His mealy-mouthed apology on behalf of himself as an individual did not ring true. He takes great pride in letting us know that he insisted, as a condition of his appearing on the "Sins of our Fathers" BBC programme in 2013 that he be allowed to apologise for any abuse that "may" have taken place. He continues to use "may" or "might". I am sure that any victims would find the use of that additional word extremely insulting in view of the considerable body of evidence that has come to light.

He states that the English Benedictine Congregation was formed to "provide coordination, some sort of inspection, and some sort of remedy if things go wrong". The purpose was to reduce the dangers arising from the excessive "isolation", as he called it, of individual monasteries. He can't have it both ways. The English Benedictine Congregation either didn't know what was going on, in which case they failed in their overseeing role, or they knew but took no action, and were complicit in covering up abuse.

It defies belief that they were not aware of the activities of the [REDACTED] sexual abuser [REDACTED] MEV [REDACTED] MEV who returned to Australia in 1977 with no warning given to the Church or authorities there; Aidan Duggan, who was despatched to be chaplain to nuns at Stanbrook Abbey in 1965 after 10 years of abusing pupils at both schools, again returning to Australia (in 1974), with no warnings given; and [REDACTED] MFF [REDACTED] MFF who was relieved of his duties [REDACTED] SNR [REDACTED] SNR in 1972 after beating three boys so viciously that one had to have his wounds attended to by the local doctor.

The lack of records from the two monasteries is simply astonishing. And destroying personal files of monks when they died or left the monastery. This is very strange. For someone who is Abbot President of the English Benedictine Congregation, Richard Yeo didn't seem to have much idea of what was going on. When asked if that was normal practice in the Congregation his reply was "I don't think so, but I don't really know"!

Richard Yeo says he had received letters from former pupils, referring to Carlekemp and Fort Augustus, in his words "implying that it was a fairly robust regime". He is indeed the master of understatement. I doubt that any of the former pupils used that moderate language.

What pertained at the two schools, from the 1920s right through to at least the 1970s, can only be described as "institutionalised violence". He confirms several times during his hearing that teaching qualifications were not required, even though he acknowledges the serious obligations of the schools. He accepts they had "a legal duty of care to each child in its care" and a "legal duty not to cause harm to children in its care". They failed lamentably on both counts.

Richard Yeo makes a vague reference to one of the first headmasters: "I think that in the 1930s there was a layman who acted as headmaster". The person he is referring to is Commander Gilbert Farie, who began as a teacher at Fort Augustus, became Prefect of Discipline in 1924, and was headmaster from 1930 to 1938. His ideas of discipline had been formed on the TS Mercury, the naval training ship for 12-15-year-old boys, run by the sadistic [redacted] – a brutal regime of lashings and floggings.

The culture of violence was firmly established. The qualifications from now on for the three senior positions at Fort Augustus - two housemasters and one headmaster – appear to be that the candidates had to have gone through the same regime, been a [redacted] of the schools. What chance was there for this cycle of violence to stop, unless it was recognised and action taken by someone, some organisation from outside the school? The opportunity was there for the English Benedictine Congregation to do something. They did nothing. Housemasters who were former pupils included [redacted] MFG, [redacted] MFE and [redacted] MFC, [redacted] SNR were [redacted] MFD, [redacted] MEX, [redacted] MMF and [redacted] MFF, [redacted] MFE retired as Housemaster in 1967. He was described by the [redacted] SNR, [redacted] MKT as "an unchanging pillar of the school". I am sure that those former pupils, who, like me, were victims of his brutality, wish the pillar had been removed a long time ago.

I have learnt that funds raised from the assets of Fort Augustus Abbey have been put into a trust to provide compensation to victims. I would imagine that this fund is fairly limited, and I am concerned that this is another attempt to limit the liability for abuse to just the schools, and not the English Benedictine Congregation and, ultimately, the Holy See. The Catholic Church is one of the wealthiest institutions in the world and can well afford to properly compensate victims financially, though this will never make up for the lasting damage suffered by victims of serious abuse.

Other Information

I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed.. [redacted]

Dated..... 23/7/2019