

Senior priest defends dealings with paedophiles: inquiry

By IAN KIRKWOOD July 25, 2013, 12:25 p.m.



FATHER BRIAN LUCAS. Picture: Darren Pateman

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FATHER Brian Lucas has finished giving his evidence in chief to the special commission of inquiry with a determined defence of the practices he used to deal with Denis McAlinden and

other paedophile priests.

Father Lucas, the Canberra-based general secretary of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference since 2002, was previously with the Catholic Church's Archdiocese of Sydney and a key player in the Australian church's formulation of early policies dealing with child sexual abuse by clergy.

As he did on Wednesday, Father Lucas defended his decision not to tell the police about McAlinden on the grounds that the victims who had come to him for help were adamant that they did not want the police involved.

In the commission's pre-lunch session on Thursday, Father Lucas said this created a significant dilemma that was only solved in 1996 when the church began working more closely with police and developed a protocol to tell the civil authorities about allegations made against clergy without necessarily naming the victims.

As he did on Wednesday, Father Lucas said repeatedly he had no recall of ever meeting or talking with McAlinden despite a body of evidence – which he said he accepted – showing his direct involvement in the case.

Father Lucas's counsel, Peter Skinner, objected a number of times to questions put by counsel assisting the inquiry, Julia Lonergan.

Noting at one stage that there were twitters around the court room when Father Lucas said he could not recall meeting McAlinden, Mr Skinner succeeded in having Ms Lonergan reframe one question about what he expected then Bishop Leo Clarke to have done about McAlinden as a "hypothetical" situation.

This was in relation to McAlinden's time in the Philippines, and Father Lucas again said the blame for McAlinden having potential access to thousands of Filipino children as a school chaplain lay with the Filipino bishop who should have checked with Maitland-Newcastle authorities that McAlinden was "in good standing".

The commission has heard that McAlinden was moved from parish to parish across the Hunter and also lived in Papua New Guinea and the United Kingdom as well as the Philippines.

Ms Lonergan said Father Lucas had been told by Monsignor Allan Hart that McAlinden had been wearing his priestly clothes and crosses a month after Bishop Clarke had removed his faculties to practise as a priest.

"I may have been, but I don't recall," Father Lucas said.

Ms Lonergan described McAlinden's admission of paedophilia and his subsequent time in the Philippines as evidence that Father Lucas's "procedures had failed".

But Father Lucas said that if McAlinden "never offended after talking to me" then it was a success, although he agreed it was "a failure of risk".

EARLIER:

Priest never went to police about paedophiles: inquiry

FATHER Brian Lucas has told the special commission of inquiry that he has never taken information about paedophile priests to the police.

Resuming his evidence on Thursday morning, Father Lucas was taken through the dilemma he said existed if a victim did not want to go to the police.

At one point, counsel assisting the commission, Julia Lonergan, said it was the situation that he "could go to the police but he didn't".

With due respect, Father Lucas said, that was an unfair description of the situation.

Earlier Ms Lonergan said it was a "chicken and egg situation" because the police could not know about the offending priest unless they were told.

As he had on Wednesday, Father Lucas said he had no recall of any meeting or confession from disgraced paedophile priest Denis McAlinden, who was practising as a priest in the Philippines in the mid-1990s despite being stripped of his priestly faculties by the then Bishop of Maitland, Leo Clarke.

Father Lucas agreed it was inadequate to simply tell the Philippines authorities that McAlinden knew the reasons he was not to practice as a priest.

He said he would not have written to the Filipino Bishop as Bishop Clarke had done in 1994.

"I wouldn't have written a letter, I would have picked up the telephone," Father Lucas said.

Even so, he said it was not up to the Bishop here to tell the 5500 bishops around the world that McAlinden was no longer "incardinated".

"The obligation is not on the bishop to tell the 5500 bishops around the world," Father Lucas said.

"It is on the 5500 bishops to check his incardination."

He agreed that it “may be helpful” for other bishops to know that a “kindly old Irish man” – as Ms Lonergan described McAlinden – was a paedophile.

But all they really needed to know was that he was “not in good standing” in the diocese to which he was incardinated.

The hearing continues.