

## GERALD RIDSDALE, PEDOPHILE PRIEST, IN HIS OWN WORDS

James Franklin\*

One major difficulty in understanding the clerical abuse scandal in the Catholic Church has been that the abusers themselves have not told their story. There has been virtually no account of their crimes by themselves, no apologies, no repentance.

That changed with the appearance of Gerald Ridsdale before the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse on 27-28 May 2015. Ridsdale is believed to be Australia's worst priest sexual abuser of children. He was convicted of offences against 53 children, including many rapes, but that is thought to be a small proportion of his victims. Sitting in Ballarat, the Commission heard two days of testimony from Ridsdale. He appeared by videolink from prison, where he has been since 1994. He gave the impression of being an honest and cooperative witness, though notably affectless. At age 81, his memory was very patchy, but the Commission was able to supplement it with some earlier material, especially a 1994 account he gave of his actions.<sup>1</sup> His oral evidence and the earlier document provide a unique opportunity to see into the mind of a pedophile priest.

Since the Commission's brief was to investigate the responses of institutions rather than the abuse itself, questioning by Gail Furness SC focussed on who knew about his offending and what they did or did not do about it. In this article however we select that part of the evidence where Ridsdale talks about himself.

The testimony was streamed live. Graham Richardson wrote after watching



*Gerald Ridsdale appearing before the Royal Commission, May 2015*

1 Part of the 1994 document is in the Commission's exhibits at <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/exhibits/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-february-2016,-melbourne> under the heading 'Extracts of transcript of interview between Catholic Church Insurance Limited and Gerald Ridsdale'.

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his evidence, “I want there to be a hell and I want Gerald Ridsdale and his ilk and all those who covered up for them to burn in that dreadful place for all eternity.”<sup>2</sup> Moral evaluation of that kind is certainly appropriate, but this article confines itself to the facts as they appear from his testimony and related documents.

### **Ridsdale’s account of his abusing**

Gerald Ridsdale was born in 1934, the eldest of eight children, and studied at St Patrick’s College, Ballarat. He experienced some relatively mild sexual abuse from an uncle and from a Christian Brother (according to his 1994 statement). He left school at 14 and worked in an accountant’s office but about three years later was inspired by a priest friend to consider becoming a priest. The little he recalls about it is significant:

Q. You say you talked to your priest friend, Dan Boylen, about becoming a priest?

A. Yes.

Q. Do you remember now anything he told you about the life of a priest?

A. No. The only thing I can remember about any conversation with Dan Boylen with regard to the priesthood was, he was talking about spiritual books that I was reading, and I remember him saying, “Always remember, when you’re reading books like that, that that’s not necessarily how people like that lived, but that’s how they would like to have lived”, and I don’t know why that stuck in my mind, but that’s something that I’ve always remembered.<sup>3</sup>

That was an unfortunate thing to take notice of, given that Ridsdale would go on to represent the extreme in the disjunction between priestly appearance and reality.

He is asked if he committed abuse while studying at Werribee Seminary:

Not in Werribee, I can’t remember anything. My biggest problem

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2 G. Richardson, If there is a hell, let abusers burn for all eternity, *The Australian* 29/5/2015.

3 This and later quotes from Royal Commission on Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Case Study 28, Transcript of Days C083 and C084 (27 and 28 May 2015), at <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-may-and-november-2015>

there was masturbation, and I remember going to my confessor and confessing it, and he said something like 'You will have to stop that or otherwise you have got to leave the seminary'. That was the kind of attitude there towards masturbation, et cetera.

His offences began very soon thereafter. After some study in Genoa and Ireland he was ordained in 1961 and served as assistant priest in parishes of the Ballarat Diocese. In the mid-1960s, he served in Mildura under the supervision of Monsignor John Day, another of Australia's worst pedophile priests, but there seems to be no evidence that they knew of each other's crimes. From 1974 he was parish priest in various locations.<sup>4</sup> Very little evidence comes to light of his priestly life apart from his offending. At one point he is asked about the only notable item on his CV other than parish work (and certain appointments made later to get him out of the way), his role as secretary of the Salary Review Board. He downplays the importance of the role:

- Q. And, to be appointed as a secretary of that committee showed, did it, that you were held in esteem by those who appointed you?
- A. Well, yes; I don't know how I was appointed or how I got onto the committee, but very often becoming secretary is a matter of, no one else is willing to do it.

He is asked if he agrees with a psychiatrist's description of his *modus operandi* in abusing:

- Q. Professor Ball says, and I quote: It is very clear that his subsequent career in parish work indicated that in each of the parishes to which he was appointed there was a group of five or more children with whom he had close and ongoing relationship, plus a number of other casual contacts. His usual pattern was to become involved in one or two families, often with an absent father, develop close relationships with the children, which then merged into the sexual in the context of a variety of opportunities within the presbytery, on various outings and camps, et cetera. The targets were predominantly prepubertal or

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4 Personnel documents for Fr Gerald Ridsdale, exhibits in hearing day C077 of the Royal Commission, [http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/exhibits/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-may-2015,-ballarat;](http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/exhibits/860eabc6-e0fc-453a-b9d4-51a89852fede/case-study-28,-may-2015,-ballarat; Broken Rites summary at http://brokenrites.org.au/drupal/node/55) Broken Rites summary at <http://brokenrites.org.au/drupal/node/55> (which includes some victims' stories).

early prepubertal boys. Do you accept that is an accurate description of your pattern?<sup>5</sup>

A. Yes, I think so.

In his own description, he admits his manipulative behaviour. He is asked to read from the transcript of his earlier interview, concerning his offending at Inglewood in 1975:

*Yes, I was out of control, really out of control in those years.*

*These other ones, would they be from the school or altar boys or what?*

*Well, I had a pool table and it was just known that anyone who wanted to come was welcome to come and play pool. There is no sense in pretending, I suppose, because if there was any kind of good motive about it being a drop-in centre but it was the trap.*

*You can see that now?*

*Yes, I can see that now.*

(Presumably in the interests of retaining his cooperation as a witness, the questioning does not go into some of the more grotesque aspects of his actions that had come out in earlier court cases, such as telling a nine-year-old boy that the abuse was “the Lord’s work”; describing a four-year-old girl he was abusing as “God’s little angel”, and giving another victim a piece of communion bread as a reward for being abused.<sup>6</sup>)

Ridsdale is happy to admit that his actions were all wrong and criminal (at the same time, without appearing notably remorseful or overcome with any sort of emotion):

Q. Now, you knew what you were doing were committing crimes against children, didn’t you?

A. Yes, I did.

Q. You’d known from the very beginning in 1961 when Bishop O’Collins spoke to you that what you were doing was committing criminal acts?

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5 Professor Ball’s 1993 report is included in the exhibits under the heading ‘Psychological reports prepared by Professor Ball’.

6 M. Russell, Notorious pedophile priest jailed for eight years, *The Age*, 8/4/2014.

A. Yes.

Q. Did you see them, in addition to criminal acts, as moral failures on your part?

A. Yes, they were serious sins.

Q. You thought they were serious sins because of the teaching you had received in the seminary and beyond about what a sin was?

A. Yes.

Q. You would have known it was a crime; is that what you said?

A. Yes.

Q. Thank you.

A. Well, should have anyway.

Q. Well, you did know it was a crime, because otherwise you wouldn't have been concerned about the police, would you, Mr Ridsdale?

A. Exactly that, yes, exactly. I would have known it was a crime.

As to the effects of his offending on his victims, Ridsdale answers:

Q: Did you know, Mr Ridsdale, that the effect you had on children you offended against was that they wouldn't let anyone touch them and they wouldn't let their fathers touch them. Did you know that?

A. No, I didn't know then. I didn't know that then. I do now.

Q. You didn't think about the effects on the children, did you?

A. No, I didn't.

Q. You were only concerned about your own gratification?

A. That's right.

It is arguable that there is some contradiction between his claiming not to know the effects of abuse and claiming to have been abused himself. However, the abuse he suffered appears to have been much less severe than that he inflicted.

The offending continued and Ridsdale was moved from place to place,

including to New South Wales. In the late 1970s, he was able to take children to White Cliffs, the remote opal mining town in western New South Wales, where he had an underground house. From this period there is a near-contemporary description of the abuse as seen from both sides, thanks to correspondence received by the Bishop of Ballarat and made available to the Royal Commission. The solicitor for victim “BAF” writes:

BAF alleges that at the age of 16 at Whitecliffs he was under the care of Father Ridsdale and because of an accommodation shortage, he was forced to sleep with Father Ridsdale in the same double bed. We quote his instructions: “That night he began touching me firstly on the arms and legs and then my genitals. I asked him to stop but he would not. He made me masturbate him and forced me to give him oral sex. I was crying and emotionally upset and wanted him to stop. He apologised and he said he would not do it again. The following night, similar events occurred.”<sup>7</sup>

The solicitors were able to quote from letters and a card which Ridsdale sent to BAF soon after. It is the most astonishing evidence in the whole case, revealing an extraordinary level of self-deception on Ridsdale’s part:

We quote from a letter from Father Ridsdale dated May 2nd, 1979 addressed to BAF:

“I depend on you more than anything or any-one else for support - that weekly phone call and a card in the mail gives me the energy to keep going ‘straight’. I hope I don’t lean too heavily on you - sing out if I do. I don’t know how much you know about me or how much you’ve guessed, but you’re the first person I’ve ever wanted to open up to (although I seem to do it in a round about way - You’re the first kid I have been honest with and warned off (a bit late unfortunately, but I suppose all experiences bring some good out in us).”

In a card sent, the following statement by Father Ridsdale appears:

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7 Paul Cronin, solicitor for BAF of Shepparton, to Bishop Ronald Mulkearns, 19/2/1988, [http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/downloadfile.ashx?guid=edf85c42-6f3a-4351-8715-7c5d8ddea608&type=exhibit&filename=CCI.0001.00632.0179\\_R&fileextension=pdf](http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/downloadfile.ashx?guid=edf85c42-6f3a-4351-8715-7c5d8ddea608&type=exhibit&filename=CCI.0001.00632.0179_R&fileextension=pdf), downloaded 30/5/2015; the severe effects on the victim are detailed in a letter from the victim’s mother to Fr Brian Lucas of 24/10/1989 [http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/downloadfile.ashx?guid=6ba5db98-1aad-4ee4-9a68-594d1e66f0a8&type=exhibit&filename=VPOL.0014.001.0088\\_E\\_R&fileextension=pdf](http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/downloadfile.ashx?guid=6ba5db98-1aad-4ee4-9a68-594d1e66f0a8&type=exhibit&filename=VPOL.0014.001.0088_E_R&fileextension=pdf)

“I am far from strong and hope you’re strong enough - I don’t want to run any risk of losing you as a friend.”

In a letter posted 3rd May, 1979 from Edenhope Father Ridsdale stated:

“The words on the front seemed to say a fair bit about Sunday night. Thanks. Even though it was December 1978 at W-Cliffs, I still sometimes wish! No harm in hoping. Good to have a weak mate, isn’t it? Not much help - and, when I come to think of it, I’m pretty weak with you. I think your mum hasn’t much trust in me. I suppose I really don’t want to be a priest with you - a friend, or what? When I pray for you, God comes first - when I’m with you, you are first.”

### **Who knew of Ridsdale’s offending?**

The evidence before the Royal Commission on knowledge of the fact and extent of Ridsdale’s offending was complex. Certainly the successive bishops of Ballarat, James O’Collins and Ronald Mulkearns, received plenty of information about it. Various people in parishes came to learn about it, but it did not exactly become common knowledge and it was possible for other priests to remain unaware of it. Here we consider what Ridsdale himself says. He certainly feared exposure and made efforts to conceal his crimes, including from his confessors.

Q. When you left the seminary, did you continue to go to confession?

A. I did for a while, but not regularly.

Q. When you say “for a while”, for how long did you continue to go to confession?

A. Maybe three, four, five years. But I can’t really remember, but that’s just the impression that I sort of have now.

Q. And were you honest in what you confessed to your confessor?

A. No.

Q. What did you not confess to your confessor which you should have?

A. I didn’t confess the sexual offending against children.

Q. What did you do, as an assistant priest and as a parish priest when you are offending, to keep it a secret?

- A. Well, I would have made sure that I was in a situation where there was no one else around, and I would have told the children to keep quiet about it.
- Q. Did you threaten the children as to what might happen if they didn't keep quiet?
- A. I don't know whether I did or not; I may have.
- Q. You hurt those children, didn't you, Mr Ridsdale?
- A. Yes, I did. I know that.

What he feared from exposure was the loss of priesthood:

- A. It's the sort of thing I wouldn't tell anyone.
- Q. Why is that?
- A. Looking back on it, I think that the overriding fear would have been losing priesthood.
- Q. And you thought that, if you told anyone, you'd lose the priesthood?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Because what you were doing was a crime, wasn't it?
- A. That's right.

He was caught, and caught again, but did not lose the priesthood until the time of his court cases in the 1990s. His 1994 document says, speaking of 1963:

While I was there [Ballarat East] I remember going into his room and fondling him while he was showing me something in the cupboard, toys or whatever, and putting my hand down his trousers and touching his penis. It would have been a fairly brief kind of thing. Then later the Bishop called me in, Bishop O'Collins, and said there had been a complaint and he said, 'If this thing happens again, then you are off to the missions' and he sent me to Mildura.

In Ballarat East Ridsdale lived in the same presbytery as Fr George Pell. Ridsdale says he does not remember that. He says there were no general rumours about his offending at that time. This has been the subject of intense

interest because in a much-reproduced video, Pell is seen accompanying Ridsdale to his first court appearance in 1993. Pell has expressed regret for doing so. There has been controversy as to whether Pell knew earlier of Ridsdale's offending. Ridsdale's own evidence gives no reason to think so.

But at Inglewood in 1975 things became more difficult:

What happened there was a lady came to me one morning after a morning mass and she said that 'there is talk around the town that you've been interfering with the boys', and she said 'the police have been around making enquiries'. So I panicked, packed up a few things and then probably about midnight I called in to stay with a priest friend at Maryborough and slept the rest of the night there and went straight down to the Bishop.

Police involvement seems to have been off the agenda. The bishop and his advisers seem not to have considered reporting the matter to the police. Even the police did not report it to the police:

- Q. Bishop Mulkearns is recorded as saying that the first complaint he ever had was when you were at Inglewood in 1975, and he describes the complaint as being that a policeman came to see him to say that he was worried about an incident with his son, that is, the policeman's son, and that in addition you came to see Bishop Mulkearns too, and that Bishop Mulkearns said to the policeman that he would "pull you straight out of the parish and have him seek counselling" ...
- Q. But that police officer from Bendigo was a police officer who happened to be a father of a boy that you had offended against?
- A. I didn't know that, or I don't remember that now.
- Q. You see a bit further down on that page, it was put to you that, knowing the size of Inglewood, that the interviewer thought it would be imprudent to molest the policeman's son, and you then say: [in 1994] ...
- A. Well, one of them was with the policeman's son, and when you say imprudent, it's like taking an alcoholic and saying, 'Call into that hotel and get a bottle of lemonade', there's no logic to it.

(In fact the police produced a report and notified Bishop Mulkearns of Ridsdale's offending. A police investigation of 1995 into whether Mulkearns

had concealed a felony found that he may have known only of lower-scale offences.<sup>8</sup>)

### **Psychological treatment**

During the long course of his offending, Fr Ridsdale had considerable interaction with psychologists and psychiatrists. What he tells the Commission casts light on the role of those professions in the sexual abuse crisis. He had some awareness of needing professional help. He says (in the 1994 document) of his time in Warrnambool in 1970-2:

Well sometimes it would go on for a while, maybe with one lad over a period of some months just on and off and then you had a time when I was free of the problem. Warrnambool was probably the first place that I tried to get some help or realise that I needed help and I was out at the mental institution near Brierley and part of my job was to go out to Brierley and take communion out and probably had mass out there and I remember one day there was a psychiatrist or psychologist that I had met a couple of times, and I remember saying to him once 'Could I ask you a question, I want to talk about a problem?' and I said something to the effect that 'I think I might be homosexual' and I can clearly remember his question, 'Do you dream about having sex with men?' and I said 'No' and he said 'Well you have got no problems, you are okay' and rather than follow it up then with, 'Well, what about kids?', I just let it go. But the first time I can remember having the guts to say anything.

When his offending became known to the Church authorities, a series of therapies were tried:

- Q. You describe that, and I quote: [1994 document] One of his strongest things [his, being Father (Augustine) Watson] was to stay close to the Lord and respect your priesthood and more spiritual kind of stuff. Do you see that?
- A. Yes, I can see that now, yes.
- Q. Can you recall now what benefit you received from the therapy with Father Watson?
- A. No, I can't, but I did follow up that logotherapy with Viktor Frankl,

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<sup>8</sup> Broken Rites site, <http://brokenrites.org.au/drupal/node/55>

and I studied that, and I think the basic reasoning behind that was, in whatever difficult circumstances a person is in, if they have some reason for living, a good reason for living and going on with life, then that was helpful.

The 1994 document, speaking of 1980, contains some self-diagnosis:

I took a year off and one of the reasons I took a year off was I knew my life was all screwed up and I appreciated or I thought that I had worked out for myself that part of my problem was that I couldn't mix comfortably and relate comfortably with adults. So I thought if I could go to some kind of a program or course and spend a year, a live-in year with adults, I might be able to sort of help myself that way, but it was only partially successful.

I know, looking back from where I am now, that there was probably a lot of fear in mixing with adults because of the secret that I held, the secret of offending, and perhaps frightened of being questioned by them or - I don't know really, and it was also concerned with control I think, control and power, and I was a control freak and I couldn't control adults.

Well, I think the whole purpose of the year was to just try to turn my life around, away from offending with children, to becoming more comfortable with adults and, if I could do that, then I thought it might eliminate the offending. But I had no idea then, as I do now, that logic and threats, they're no help to a paedophile. The only way out of it is proper treatment.

Ridsdale was eventually sent to the centre for "hard-core" problem priests run by the Congregation of the Servants of the Paraclete at Jemez Springs, New Mexico. The facility was closed down in the 1990s because of its failures in treating abusive priests, but Ridsdale takes a more positive view:

Q. It's plain that, although you went through this treatment, it didn't work, isn't it?

A. In New Mexico?

Q. Yes.

A. I didn't offend at all after I came back from America.

Q. You didn't?

A. No.

Q. So you say the treatment worked?

A. Yes, I think it did.

A final exchange between the Royal Commissioner and Ridsdale is hard to disagree with:

THE CHAIR (Peter McClellan QC):

Q. Mr Ridsdale, do you accept that someone with your issues should never have been a priest?

A. Yes, I accept that now. I'm sorry that there was nothing –

Q. What should have been in place with the church to stop you becoming a priest?

A. There should have been a better screening process that was much more thorough, a psychological process that was much more thorough than anything that was conducted then.

Q. If, when you first discussed your offending behaviour with the Bishop, he'd gone to the police, that would have brought it to an end, wouldn't it, as far as your role in the church was concerned?

A. It would have, and I am now sorry that it didn't; that it didn't happen.

Q. You might be sorry, but the offending –

A. It would have saved so many others.