

Witness Name: GRO-A Ms I

Statement No.: WITN0004001

Exhibits: WITN0004002 - WITN0004003

Dated: 17.09.2020

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF GRO-A Ms I

I, GRO-A Ms I, state:

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. My name is GRO-A Ms I and I am GRO-A years old.

1.2. I am a survivor of extensive verbal, physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse, which occurred from the age of seven years old. A recent ACC assessment has confirmed that my diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with dissociative features and depression is directly related to my history of abuse.

Early life and family

- 1.3. I was born at Waikato Hospital in **GRO-A**, the second of four children born to **GRO-B** and **GRO-B**. **GRO-B** was my maiden surname.
- 1.4. I have an older brother and two younger sisters, all of whom I now have nothing to do with. We all grew up in **GRO-A** Hamilton.
- 1.5. My parents were very authoritarian and used violence as discipline. My father was a scary man and I think my mother was genuinely also a very angry woman. They married young and were staunch Catholics. I would never think of complaining to them or ever put the Church down.
- 1.6. My family's staunch Catholic faith was the result of a long family connection with the Church overseas. Many of my extended family members were part of the clergy.
- 1.7. The most prominent was my father's uncle, **GRO-B**, who was a famous Franciscan priest in Croatia who studied theology and became a professor. As a priest in charge of a geographical area in Croatia, he was well known to Pope Pius and I remember having gifts from the Pope at our home in Hamilton. My uncle was held in high regard by my parents as was the entire Catholic Church.
- 1.8. Our family church was St Mary's Catholic Church in Hamilton East. Although we didn't attend every week, we went there for special occasions such as births and deaths.
- 1.9. When I was about nine years old, I took Holy Communion at St Mary's Church, although I always felt this was all about appearances. I never received Confirmation as this occurs at secondary school and I later attended a non-Catholic secondary school.

School

- 1.10. As I was raised a Catholic, I attended a Catholic school to begin with.
- 1.11. The first school I attended was St Mary's Catholic School (St Mary's School) in Hamilton East, until the age of 14. I was abused by the nuns that ran this school.

1.12. I later attended Hillcrest High School, which was not a Catholic School. I was not abused at this school.

1.13. I was extremely quiet and followed the rules at school, doing my best to stay under the radar. I never talked to my parents about how I was doing. We only ever spoke about when we would be going to school or coming home.

2. THE ABUSE

2.1. While I was at St Mary's School, I suffered verbal, physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse. This began during my first term (age seven) and continued until the end of Form 2 at St Mary's School (age 14). I cannot recall the names of the abusers, but I can remember some of their faces. They were all Catholic nuns, including my teachers and **GRO-B**.

2.2. The abuse started at Primary School. I was terrified of the nuns. They did not hesitate to use the cane on us young girls. I felt like they hated us because we were not boys. They were just so angry.

2.3. The abuse significantly worsened at Intermediate at St Mary's School. The abusers were a cohort of about five nuns, one being **GRO-B**, who was the primary abuser, and another being my form teacher in Forms 1 and 2.

2.4. Much of the abuse was in the guise of punishment but was not usually related to any actual rule breaking. Often punishment was meted out for no apparent reason, or for trivial matters. This was very confusing, kept me constantly on edge, and felt like psychological abuse. The punishment was unpredictable but occurred at least weekly in one form or another throughout the entire seven years.

Verbal and spiritual abuse

2.5. I was told not to mingle with the boys during lunchtime, or at any other time, especially in the school yard. The reason given was that I was evil, like the biblical Eve, that I would lead them astray sexually, and that I represented the Fall.

2.6. I was told that anything bad that happened to me was my fault, and that I deserved it because I was evil. I was told that no matter what I did could not change this because this was who I was.

- 2.7. When we walked to Mass each week, we passed through the boy's school and were told to behave and not to act like "little sluts".
- 2.8. This sort of verbal abuse was reiterated on a daily basis. I was under constant threat of punishment for being 'evil' and 'wilful' and was treated as if everything that I did was premeditated with evil intent.
- 2.9. At church I was made to confess my sins at the confessional, and the nuns would make a point of watching that I did so. I don't recall the other children being instructed in this way. I also had to ask for forgiveness. I would make things up in the confessional, like that I didn't eat my lunch, which I knew wasn't a sin and wasn't what the nuns intended me to say.

Physical abuse

- 2.10. An example of physical abuse was being caned. The caning could be for not having the right answer, or if my nails were dirty. Sometimes I had done nothing wrong.
- 2.11. Another example of the physical punishment was being sent from the classroom during class time to a place where there was an external door, which, when open, caused a wind tunnel effect.
- 2.12. I had to remove my jacket and jumper, socks and shoes, and was made to stand in that cold wind tunnel until one of the nuns came to take me back to class. I would be standing there for the entire duration of a class. I was freezing cold but didn't have any other thoughts or feelings about it. I blocked out all my feelings and thought.

Psychological abuse

- 2.13. An example of the psychological abuse was when I defiantly cut up my sewing in sewing class. Instead of the normal punishment I was just totally ignored. I sat through the subsequent classes with no project and was ignored throughout. It was as if I didn't exist.

Sexual abuse

- 2.14. The sexual abuse was at the hands of GRO-B at St Mary's. I remember her as she appeared large and had her head covered. I would be sent to her office in the administration building next to the sick bay where she would remove my clothing, or I would be made to do so.
- 2.15. The sexual abuse involved her putting her fingers, and sometimes objects from her desk into my vagina. I remember in particular a wooden phallic shaped thing she had lying on her desk. It was the handle off something.
- 2.16. I was also made to put my hand on her private parts. The sexual abuse occurred approximately monthly.
- 2.17. Sometimes other nuns were in the room observing so they knew that it was happening. I was also often sent to GRO-B by other nuns. It was like they did this so they could watch.
- 2.18. From age seven onwards, I used to take my underwear off as soon as I got home from school due to a thick white discharge. I would hide them as I was dreadfully ashamed and fearful that my mother would notice.

Other impressions

- 2.19. There were others who were abused as well. You could tell who they were, they sat by themselves and were vulnerable, they looked sickly and different, and were always by themselves. They always appeared more scared than others.
- 2.20. Not all nuns were bad. I remember one nun was lovely and kind. She let us look after a stray cat who had kittens and we nurtured them in the classroom.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE ABUSE

- 3.1. At St Mary's, I stopped eating at school, resulting in frequent fainting. I now have scars on my chin from fainting. I increased my food intake when I began high school but was still underweight.

- 3.2. At about age eight, I was sent to the Catholic health farm in Raglan for being sickly, presumably due to malnutrition. This was run by Catholic nuns. It was horrible, the food was disgusting, and the place was run in a regimented way which made us all miserable. I think in hindsight my mother found the health camp as an option to get me better.
- 3.3. There was no sexual abuse at camp, but I remember the beds being all lined up in rows and were cold. The food was gluggy and hard to get down. The nuns were authoritarian and I was terrified the whole time. No one came to visit me the whole time I was there.
- 3.4. I underachieved at school, due to anxiety, inability to process information, and depression. This continued throughout school and into adulthood. I have had difficulty concentrating. At school my mind used to be blank.
- 3.5. I left home at 17, walking out with a bag of clothes and nothing else.

Substance addiction and self-harm

- 3.6. From an early age, I began to self-medicate and abuse prescription drugs. I had easy access to my father's Mogadon, Valium and alcohol. This led to intense cravings at an early age.
- 3.7. Once I entered my teenage years I started to engage in high-risk behaviour. By 16 years old, I had started using marijuana, LSD, and other class A drugs. I developed a poly-addiction very early on.
- 3.8. This lasted until I was 36 years old, when I sought help and attended a treatment centre. I am a recovering poly-addict, with 23 years of continuous recovery. I attend and follow the Alcoholics Anonymous programme and attend counselling through my sensitive claim with the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) at least three times a week.
- 3.9. Around this age I also began self-mutilation, cutting my arms and wrists, and getting involved in high-risk and dangerous situations.

Relationships, sexuality, and identity

- 3.10. I also engaged in promiscuous behaviour, which continued until I began my recovery from addiction at age 36. I mostly engaged in relationships with extremely abusive males.
- 3.11. In my late twenties I married a very abusive man. I was playing a role, a model wife. I did not love him. I divorced him at 31 years old.
- 3.12. At age 35 I fell pregnant. I had an abortion as I knew I couldn't raise a child. When I was pregnant it felt like the horror movie "Alien", that I had something hideous growing inside me.
- 3.13. I have never wanted to have children as I cannot imagine having the capacity to care for a child. I would not be able to afford one and don't trust my capacity to look after myself, let alone a child.

Refer Exhibit WITN0004002 – Art completed in 1994

- 3.14. I have never shaken the belief that I had to serve and be useful to a man. This originated in what the nuns told me and was demonstrated by their behaviour toward me. They treated the boys very differently. It was implied that the boys had to be protected from me, that they would be attracted to me, and that I would pollute them or tempt them.
- 3.15. I was taught that the only worth I had was my sexuality. The rest of me was faulty. Yet this was also what made me be perceived as worth nothing. I felt like a prostitute. I was just something to fuck.
- 3.16. My sexuality seemed like something decided by others, not something inherent in me. This meant that I wasn't able to claim any part of my sexuality, and it was out of my control or authority—I had no rights over it.
- 3.17. My identity was all to do with my body, not my Self. This was later reinforced by being head-hunted by reputable modelling agencies. I did some modelling work for 2–3 years. I was also approached for nude modelling and I did some photo shoots. I was dissociated and didn't know why I was doing it. I was afraid of being found out for this for years.

3.18. I have never had sexual intimacy—I have only ever “fucked” and only under the influence of drugs or alcohol. I now avoid sexual intimacy as I cannot connect with nice men.

3.19. I have severe distrust issues with both males and females and find it difficult connecting with people in general.

Mental health

3.20. The effects of the abuse are ongoing and include complex PTSD, with dissociation and anxiety. I limit what I do each day to reduce PTSD symptoms and avoid suicidal thoughts.

3.21. I withdraw from friends and family and isolate myself to hide my sense of worthlessness and to manage my emotions in private. I do this to minimise fear.

3.22. I now cannot drive through Hamilton because it triggers a panic attack. I will drive completely around it because of my association with the place. My friends know I will not visit them there.

3.33 I am frightened of authority and try to avoid interactions with those in authority. An example was the recent arrival of a traffic ticket in the mail, which caused a massive anxiety attack.

3.34 I avoid clearing my mail, resorting to only doing this twice a week as I am frightened of what I might receive from those in authority, and that I might be in trouble for something.

Treatment

3.35 In the absence of any help from the Church, I have had to spend more than \$100,000 over 25 years on a vast range of treatments for the effects of the abuse that occurred. This has included engaging counsellors, psychologists, and psychotherapists, and attending courses and classes in personal development and recovery, all from reputable organisations.

3.36 I have sought help from hypnotism, homeopaths, remedial massage, child regression work, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) practitioners and psychodrama therapy groups.

3.37 I attend regular osteopath and other physical therapy for the somatic discomfort and pain and I also meditate regularly. I have had hundreds of sessions with physical therapists for the chronic physical effects associated with the abuse. I have also engaged in rehabilitation with a personal trainer, acupuncturists, a physiotherapist and a chiropractor.

Other impacts on my life

3.38 Over the years, I have continuously changed employment and accommodation. I keep my work hours to a minimum to avoid stress, but this causes financial difficulty. I have also spent long periods unemployed, and spent time on the sickness benefit, which has also contributed to financial hardship and failed relationships.

3.23. I was living in Auckland until 1999 when I moved to Sydney. I now know leaving New Zealand was about escaping the memories of the abuse. I only returned to New Zealand in 2017 and am now living in Nelson.

Family

3.24. I am estranged from my family of origin. They did nothing to protect me. I have a hatred of my mother for her failure to protect me.

3.25. My older sister who went through the same schools, reportedly also hid her underwear, and behaved in ways that worried an aunt.

Faith and religion

3.26. I lost my faith completely and now have a hatred and avoidance of anything religious, particularly Catholic. I am still struggling with the concept of a higher power. I feel God made me faulty and he wants to punish me. He is uncaring and similar in this respect to the nuns.

4. REDRESS

4.1. I did not tell anyone at the time of being abused because I believed that I was evil, and I would be punished for telling anyone. My parents were not interested in my welfare and I had no one safe to confide in. I just had a feeling of shame.

- 4.2. In the late 1980s I was drinking a lot. When I got drunk I kept letting stuff out to my friends, alluding to my abuse. My friends would tell me that I would talk about sexual abuse when I got drunk but when sober I would minimise it.
- 4.3. I knew I needed help and knew the Catholic Church had a counselling service. I was broke and needed help. I looked up Catholic Counselling Services in Auckland in the Yellow Pages and phoned.

Refer exhibit WITN0004003 – Listing for Catholic Counselling service

- 4.4. The first call I made was answered by a woman. I told her I had been sexually abused at a Catholic school. She hung up on me immediately. I redialled, and she again hung up.
- 4.5. Later that year, I called twice more. In all instances the women who answered were dismissive, or sounded angry, and told me, “we cannot help you with that”. I remember one saying, “No, no, no, goodbye” and hung up in my ear.
- 4.6. In around 1995, I got hold of an Irish Catholic priest based in Auckland. I can’t remember his name. I told him I did not have a car, so he came to my house twice. He had a strong Irish accent and was from a nearby parish close to me in Greenlane. I thought if I told a priest I would feel better.
- 4.7. The priest told me that all he could do was listen. I told the priest what happened, and of my hatred of the Catholic Church. He expressed no opinion, made no comment, had no particular expression on his face.
- 4.8. He gave me no spiritual help or any further offer of help and after he left I felt worse.
- 4.9. When I was in recovery doing step 4 of my programme (which was “making amends”, including listing my character defects and putting effort into resolving these), I tried to overcome my bad attitude toward the Catholic Church.
- 4.10. I went to confession and spoke about being angry with the Church. The priest told me to do penance. I didn’t feel any better. Nobody from the Church ever gave me any help. All I got was denial, anger and a refusal to help. I was told to do penance and remain silent.

4.11. The Catholic Church representatives I contacted were obstructive, sounded angry, and were totally unhelpful. They showed no support and did not take my experience seriously.

4.12. The lack of an adequate response only deepened the damage done. My hatred increased, and I was left feeling frustrated. It prolonged my suffering by years.

4.13. What I needed was to be listened to, an apology, and some empathy. I wanted support to attend counselling to help me let it go, to feel better and to overcome my hatred of the Church. There has been a total lack of financial support.

4.14. I have never heard of or been told of any redress program the Catholic Church has. I am unaware of their A Path to Healing process.

Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC)

4.15. I have also been involved with the ACC process. However, the complexity of the effects of the abuse has not been fully accepted by ACC, especially in relation to the physical and somatic effects. Although ACC substantially accepted the outcome of a recent review of my claim, it was very protracted and extremely stressful.

5. LOOKING FORWARD

5.1. Although it was the nuns who abused me, and I feel anger towards them, they were representing the Catholic Church as Brides of Christ.

5.2. I feel greater anger toward the Catholic Church. The nuns' behaviour is a symptom of a sick, misogynistic Church hierarchy. It is the Church itself I have the biggest problem with.

5.3. Every time an offending priest or nun gets little or no prison sentence for abuse, or they are treated as being above the law, it reinforces my powerlessness and hatred. I also have a distrust of government agencies and of systems in general. I cannot trust 'authority'.

5.4. I have felt alone and isolated, and unsupported financially. It continues to be a real struggle financially despite my determination and resolve to survive.

- 5.5. The catalyst for complaining to the Royal Commission was my attendance at a course for women where memories of my abuse started coming out, even though those memories are still limited.
- 5.6. I have come forward to the Royal Commission for three reasons:
- 5.6.1. To ensure that the public get to understand and become educated about the corruption within the Catholic Church, the extent of the damage done to innocent children, and what needs to happen to stop the abuse from happening.
 - 5.6.2. To ensure survivors such as myself are properly and sufficiently supported and compensated by the Catholic Church who clearly have the means to do so.
 - 5.6.3. For accountability, the offending priests and nuns should be charged and imprisoned like regular members of the public. The Catholic Church should pay for their incarceration. I also believe preventative education should be promoted and paid for by the Catholic Church.
- 5.7. It is important that my story and the stories of others become public. I want the New Zealand public to know our stories in an unfiltered way.

Statement of Truth

This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and was made by me knowing that it may be used as evidence by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.

Signed

GRO-A Ms I

Dated

17/9/2020