

**Witness Name:** Rūpene Paul Amato

**Statement No.:** WITN0455001

**Exhibits:** N/A

**Dated:** 16.07.2021

**ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF RŪPENE PAUL AMATO**

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I, Rūpene Paul Amato, will say as follows: -

**INTRODUCTION**

1. My full name is Rūpene Paul Amato. I was born in 1972 in Wairoa, Hawkes Bay. I grew up in Wairoa but moved to Hamilton after I completed high school in 1992.
2. I was sexually abused by a Catholic priest at a Catholic primary school. I wish to share my experience of abuse because I want to help others overcome the impacts of abuse. I know that this is not easy, and I know that abuse impacts all areas of our lives. I also want to share about my experiences because I want to speak for those who haven't and for those who are no longer with us.

## FAMILY BACKGROUND

### *My parents and growing up in Wairoa*

3. My father is full Samoan. He migrated to New Zealand in the 1950s for a better life. My father and his siblings were raised by my grand-uncle (and his children) in Samoa after my grandfather passed away in his thirties. My grandfather was a *matai* (chief) in his village in Samoa, but when he passed away, his *matai* title had to be passed on to his brother, my grand-uncle.
4. My mother is Māori. She comes from Ngāti Kahungunu, Te Aitanga ā Māhaki, and Ngāti Mākoro (hapu).
5. My mum had 14 siblings – seven sisters and seven brothers. Mum's brothers were all *whāngai* to extended relatives, so my mum only grew up with her sisters and male cousins. They all had large families. For example, my uncle (mum's cousin) is one of 16 children, so mum grew up with a lot of cousins.
6. My parents met in Wellington in the 1950s. At the time, my mother was studying to become a nurse. I'm not sure what dad was doing at the time. My mum moved back to Wairoa around this time and shortly after, my father followed her. They then married and settled down together in Wairoa.
7. Before mum and dad got married, dad had to seek approval from mum's family for them to marry. My mum's family weren't supportive of their relationship because dad was an 'Islander'. In Wairoa at the time, it was out of the norm for a Māori person to marry an Islander, but it was normal for Māori to marry *Palagi* people.
8. Mum's family became more accepting of dad over time as he was working in the railway industry and therefore financially supporting our family. The railway company also provided my parents a 'railway house' to live in at Wairoa. I was raised in this railway house. Growing up, my family were considered 'flash' among our relatives because the railway house had a flushing toilet in it.
9. However, during my childhood, dad continued to be teased and bullied by mum's family about being an 'Islander'. Because of this, I think Dad chose to be more

'Māori'. For example, dad's Samoan name is actually [GRO-B-1] but he was called [GRO-B-1] by the locals in Wairoa. Dad just accepted this and to this day, he still goes by the name [GRO-B-1]

10. Given we were the only Pacific Islanders in Wairoa at the time, me and my siblings identified as Māori because we knew the other kids would hassle us if we said we were Samoan. We were also closer to our Māori whanau growing up because our mother raised us Māori, and dad chose to conform to the Māori way of life.

### ***My siblings***

11. I have three brothers (two older and one younger) and two older sisters. I am the second youngest in the family. My eldest brother passed away in the 1990s during a rugby game. His death really took a toll on all of us and I feel that many of my family are still struggling to get over his death to this day. He was the eldest mokopuna (grandchild) to pass away. He was a very talented sportsman and my father saw him as the 'All Black' in the family. He was named after a famous uncle and he was dad's 'golden child'.
12. My eldest sister was sent to live with our Samoan relatives in the U.S.A when she was 16 years old. She stayed with them until 2011. As a result, she got to meet a lot of our Samoan relatives. She was taken in by an uncle and learnt more about *Fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way of life) She is the glue between us and our Samoan side.

### ***Te reo Māori, Samoan language, and culture***

13. We were never taught te reo Māori by our parents. My maternal grandparents and my mother's generation were beaten for speaking te reo Māori. This meant that my mum didn't speak Māori during my childhood. It was interesting for me to see my grandmother change her demeanour every time she spoke te reo Māori. She was quite a loud woman but when she spoke Māori, her voice was more mild and meek. She wasn't normally that type of person.

14. I didn't know much about my Samoan grandparents because my paternal grandfather died so young. There were times when my grand-uncle would visit and stay with us in Wairoa. However, he only spoke limited English and I wasn't that close with him.
15. We were not taught the Samoan language. I believe dad just conformed to the Māori way of life and practices of the wider Wairoa community. On reflection, I could understand why *Fa'a Samoa* wasn't a priority for my dad.

### ***Alcohol and violence***

16. Growing up, there was a lot of alcohol use and domestic violence in our household. Dad was quite violent towards me and my siblings and our mum.
17. 

GRO-C

18. Because of the violence during our childhood, my siblings and I promised that we wouldn't use violence against our children when we were older. I am happy that our generation has been able to fulfil this promise and give our *moko* a new way of doing things. Although dad was violent towards us back then, he isn't violent towards his *moko*.

### ***Financial struggle***

19. Growing up, we were a poor family. This was mainly because my father was the only one working and he was also sending money back to Samoa to support his siblings and extended family. He also spent most of the money on alcohol. Inevitably, we were forced to live off the land.
20. Dad would disappear to Samoa for a few weeks at a time. When this happened, our family would be left without an income, so we would struggle to get food or money to pay the bills. I remember a lot of the time, we didn't have power. My

mum would send me and my siblings off to live with relatives whenever dad went to Samoa, and we would go back home when he returned to New Zealand.

## CATHOLIC CHURCH AND SCHOOLS

21. My maternal grandfather was a Bishop of the Rātana Church. The Rātana faith was a big part of our whānau, marae and culture. On the last Sunday of every month, my grandfather ran the church service. Every July was our family's turn to put on a *hākari* (feast).
22. My grandparents' home was a central gathering place. We always went over to their house to do gardening and to divide the corn, kumara and pumpkins we grew.
23. My father is Catholic and was raised in the Catholic Church in Samoa. He is still an active member of the GRO-C Catholic Church GRO-C. He still does a lot for the Catholic Church GRO-C.
24. As a child, I attended events and church services at both the Rātana and Catholic churches in Wairoa. I found church quite boring, but I liked some of the hymns, being with my cousins and friends, and gathering as a community.
25. My siblings and I started school at North Clyde School in Wairoa. After a few years, our parents moved us all to St Joseph's School which was a Catholic primary school in Wairoa. We changed schools because dad was a Catholic. Back then, you had to be a baptised Catholic to attend St Joseph's. Dealing with this change was difficult, but my siblings and I stuck together.
26. The majority of students at St Joseph's were Pākehā. Most Māori children, including our relatives in Wairoa, went to other public schools. There were maybe two or three public schools in Wairoa in those days.
27. There was nothing 'Māori' taught at St Joseph's. Everything we were taught revolved around the bible and the Catholic faith.
28. As a child, I always loved school and learning. I enjoyed it more than my siblings. In Wairoa, St Joseph's is known as a "good academic school". Because of this,

our parents saw it as a blessing that we were Catholic and were able to attend the school.

29. There were two Catholic churches in Wairoa. One was based at St Joseph's School, which is St Peters Church. Most Pākehā Catholic families attended this church. The second was St Theresa Church, which my family attended along with many other Māori families because there was a marae attached to it.
30. There was only one Catholic priest in town back then, so on Sundays there would be a service at St Peters Church then another service at St Therese's Church. The earlier service was at 9am and the later service was at 12pm.
31. Our former parish Priest, Father Snowden, was an amazing man. He was a part of our community and would help whānau in need whether they were Catholic or not. We were always happy to help him – he was kind and gave us treats. In my young mind, I thought all priests would be like Father Snowden. However, that wasn't the case.

### **SEXUAL ABUSE AT ST JOSEPH'S SCHOOL**

32. The abuse I suffered happened when I was in form one at St Joseph's School. I was around 11 or 12 years old at the time.
33. In the early 1980s, a new Priest was appointed to St Joseph's parish following the death of the former Priest. This change in priests coincided with sex education becoming a compulsory part of mainstream and Catholic education in New Zealand. Sex education then started to be taught at St Joseph's.
34. I can't remember the new Priest's exact name, but it was either Father [GRO-B] or Father [GRO-B]. I can remember this because me and my friends at school would call him "[GRO-B-2] the feeler". He was Pākehā, quite fat and I guess around 50 years old.
35. I'll refer to him as "Father [GRO-B-2]" from here on.

36. Because sex education was new, us kids were unsure how or what would be taught. Sex education ended up being one-on-one lessons with Father [GRO-B-2]. Our teachers were Nuns.
37. At that age, my knowledge of sex was what I had learnt from friends at school. Sex wasn't something I learnt about from my parents because that probably would've been too embarrassing for them.
38. When it was time for sex education, one of the Nuns would give each student a little yellow slip and tell them to go and see Father [GRO-B-2]. We were given no explanation about what sex education or puberty was, and we weren't prepared or warned about the content of the lesson with Father [GRO-B-2].
39. The grounds at the school were split into separate areas. There was a classroom block, a Nun's residence, a Church, and the Priest's house, which was beside the Church.
40. The first time I was sexually abused was by Father [GRO-B-2] in the Priest's house.
41. I remember the Nun giving me a yellow slip and telling me to go see Father [GRO-B-2]. I went by myself and gave him the piece of paper. He opened the note, read it and said, "Oh while you're here, let's have a conversation". He then took me to the lounge at the front of the house and started talking. I can't remember how the topic came up, but we suddenly started talking about sex.
42. Father [GRO-B-2] then asked me to remove my shorts, which I did. At this point, I was in my underwear standing in front of the couch I was sitting on. He grabbed my penis and said, "This is your penis, you might know it as your cock." He was stroking and masturbating me through my underwear.
43. I remember standing there with my pants down freaking out because I had no idea what was going on. Back then, I was also exploring my own sexual identity. This experience just made me even more confused. It was somewhat titillating, but I had a clear understanding what was happening, what was wrong and what was not good.

44. Father [GRO-B-2] then touched my testicles and said something like, "These are your testicles, you might know them as your balls". As Father [GRO-B-2] was talking, he cupped my testicles and fondled them.
45. While we talked about sex, Father [GRO-B-2] groped and fondled me. All of the touching was through clothing. He talked about things like masturbation and ejaculation. These "sex education lessons" would last about 20 minutes. Then I would be sent back to class.
46. The second time I was abused by Father [GRO-B-2] was much like the first time. I took the note given by the Nun and went to see Father [GRO-B-2] in his house as instructed. I didn't have to take my shorts off this time, but he still fondled my testicles and penis.
47. The third time Father [GRO-B-2] abused me was when I was an altar boy. One job altar boys do is prepare the Church for Mass. While I was doing this, Father [GRO-B-2] came up behind me, rubbed my shoulders and started massaging me. At the same time, he rubbed the front of his body against my back and bottom.

### SEXUAL ABUSE DURING CONFESSIONS

48. The Priest's role at the school was largely ceremonial. They were involved in important Catholic events like first holy communions, Christmas, Easter and Lent. During Easter and Christmas, we had school Mass followed by confession for children, which was run by Father [GRO-B-2]
49. By the time Father [GRO-B-2] started at St Joseph's, the way confessions were done had changed. There was no longer a partition between the Priest and the parishioner. The confessions at the school were face-to-face with Father [GRO-B-2] in an open room with a few chairs. During confession, Father [GRO-B-2] would grope and fondle us. The door was always closed. Afterwards, he always insisted that we hug him before we could leave.
50. Confessions became more frequent than the "sex education lessons". Father [GRO-B-2] had easy access to children at the school, and he also had the ability to abuse

us without being disturbed. I think Father [GRO-B-2] abuse carried on longer than it should have.

### **ABUSE OF OTHERS BY FATHER [GRO-B-2]**

51. One lunchtime, I remember sitting in a circle with a group of friends. Me and my friends were talking about something unrelated when we saw a student walking towards the Priest's house with a yellow note in his hand. We all said things like, "Oh I know where you're going" and started laughing. Because we were talking about what was happening, it made other students aware of what might happen to them when they were alone with Father [GRO-B-2]
52. There was a girl in our group [GRO-C]. She told us that when she had taken the yellow note, Father [GRO-B-2] tried to touch her breasts. She said she smacked his hand away and told him not to touch her. Everyone then started sharing stories about abuse from Father [GRO-B-2] during the one-on-one confession and the sex education lessons.
53. After sharing our experiences, we realised that the abuse was happening to all of us. We all agreed to go home and tell our parents. I didn't tell my parents that night, mostly because I wasn't sure how they'd take it. I was scared I would get a hiding mainly because I know that it was dad's church. At the time, I knew that it would be my word against the Church. I knew dad would take the Church's word over mine.

### **COMPLAINT TO THE SCHOOL**

54. I later found out that when one of my friends told her mother after school that day about Father [GRO-B-2] her mother called some of the other parents and told them what Father [GRO-B-2] had been doing. A group of parents went to the school the same day and complained about Father [GRO-B-2]
55. Within a week of this complaint, Father [GRO-B-2] was no longer at St Joseph's. We didn't even see him the next day. There was no explanation given as to why he left. Nobody from school or the Church talked to us about it. Father [GRO-B-2] was just there one day and gone the next.

56. To this day, I'm not sure whether my parents know about what happened with Father [GRO B-2] or if my friend's mother had called my mum that night. If they did know, we never talked about it. Most Pacific families, especially Catholic, don't talk openly about sex or sexuality. I think my parents thought that the problem was solved because Father [GRO B-2] had moved on.
57. Our group of friends continued to sit together at lunch time after Father [GRO B-2] left. Sometimes we shared our experiences and talked about how we felt, basically counselling each other. I remember after Father [GRO B-2] left, we all had a sense of, "what now?". We were all glad that Father [GRO B-2] was gone but didn't feel as though things were resolved.
58. On reflection, I now know that Father [GRO B-2] was grooming us all. We lived in a poor town and were more vulnerable to this kind of abuse. Later in life, I felt glad that the truth came out when it did and that no further abuse occurred at the school.
59. Father [GRO B-2] taught sex education at the school during all of form one and some of form two. His sex education lessons only focused on talking about sex, showing us our physical anatomy through fondling and telling us the different names for parts of the body.
60. Luckily, my friend had the strength to share what Father [GRO B-2] had done to her. This allowed the rest of us to feel comfortable enough to share what he had done to us. Once my friend shared about it, it had a domino-effect on the rest of us. Before my friend shared her story, I had no idea that Father [GRO B-2] was also abusing other children. I thought I was the only one, but once she shared about her abuse, it was such a relief to hear that I wasn't alone.
61. None of us ever complained to the Church or anyone at the school because we knew that we wouldn't be believed. My friend and her mother were instrumental in stopping the abuse. I believe this was largely due to my friend's mother telling other parents, so a collective complaint was made rather than her approaching the school on her own.
62. We also never discussed contacting Police or anything like that once Father [GRO B-2] left.

## LATER LIFE AND OVERCOMING THE IMPACTS OF ABUSE

63. Since my abuse, I was really grateful that we as children were sharing our experiences during playtime and lunch time at the time. In hindsight, it was like a group therapy session. I learnt that the other kids had more extreme sessions than I did with Father GRO-B-2. But it helped that I talked about it with others at the time.
64. Moving on to College, I recall times where I continued to talk about it with other students who experienced the same sexual abuse by Father GRO-B-2. I was in class with a couple of girls who were abused themselves and we often talked about it. I found this helpful because we were talking about it, and we could relate to each other without being judged.
65. I also found myself needing to be around groups of people at College. It made me feel safe and being around people made me feel protected. So, I gravitated towards team sports. I played a lot of basketball, athletics, soccer and netball. Sport was a good outlet for me and helped me to develop self-confidence and to become a leader.
66. I later went on to represent New Zealand in netball because there were so many *Fa'afafine* and *Takatāpui* playing the sport. This helped me to be more comfortable exploring my own sexual orientation and identity.
67. In recent years, I've been more open with my family about being sexually abused by Father GRO-B-2 GRO-B  
GRO-B GRO-B-2 GRO-B  
GRO-B Before this, it was really difficult for me to talk to my own family about what happened to me because I genuinely felt they wouldn't believe me. I also felt that they would reject me and judge me.
68. I then attended Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato where I studied Social Sciences. During this time, I continued to be active in sports where I represented New Zealand in both indoor and outdoor netball. I also chaired the Waikato Men's Netball Association in 2007 for three years.

69. I then went on to volunteer on the Board for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse in Waikato for a couple years because I support the kaupapa. As a survivor, I felt that it was integral that information, education and support be available to other survivors who may not be able to access information on this topic. Serving others was also a good way for me to work through any remaining trauma that I had from my own experiences.
70. I currently sit as a committee representative at both local and national level for Out at Work, a support network for LGBTQI+ workers and advocate for inclusivity at work sites.
71. I currently work as a Union Organiser for the E tū Union. I continue to be active within my community and I am a strong advocate for social justice.
72. One of the major impacts on my life was that I became distant from the Church as a result of what happened to me. Especially St Peters, because that is where the priest's residence currently remains and it's where it all happened. However, more recently, I have decided to visit the Church to close the chapter on my abuse. I believe that my resilience towards over coming my abuse stems from the principles of Catholicism, in particular the principle of forgiveness.

### **REDRESS AND COMPLAINTS PROCESS**

73. There should have been further consequences for Father GRO  
B-2 I believe that he should have been prosecuted for what he did. If not, something else to hold him accountable and to prevent him from moving on somewhere else and continuing the cycle of abuse.
74. Following on from the abuse, the school should have had someone speak to us about what had happened, what was done about it and how to get support if we needed anything. However, the school didn't do any of this.
75. In order for children within the Catholic Church to feel comfortable about disclosing any type of abuse, there needs to be a neutral person that children can talk to. This neutral person would not be part of the Catholic Church or Catholic School. The children and parents should be made aware that there is

an independent person they could talk to. The trust which children have in this person is the key, as children won't speak unless they can trust that the person will help them and is able to do something about the situation.

76. Being on the Board for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse in Waikato, I have come to learn that there is a lot of power in sharing a story. Particularly for those who are survivors of sexual abuse who feel that they are alone. It would be great if it were normalised to have someone like myself or other survivors who work in these fields to go into schools to share their experience and inform children and young people of the supports that are available.
77. The systems and supports that are set up to help young survivors of sexual abuse need to be well thought out and in touch with the reality of children at schools.

### **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: \_\_\_\_\_

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_