

Witness Name: **GRO-A Mr G**

Statement No.: WITN0046001

Exhibits: WITN0046002 – WITN0046004

Dated: 04.11.2020

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF **GRO-A Mr G**

I, **GRO-A Mr G**, state:

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. My full name is **GRO-A Mr G**. I was born on **GRO-A** in Wellington and I am **GRO-A** years old. I have been retired for eight years and currently live in **GRO-A** **GRO-A**.

1.2. In **GRO-A**, when I was a 12-year-old student at Marist Brothers' School in Whanganui, I was sexually abused by the principal of the school, Brother John Michael "Fabian" O'Driscoll (Br Fabian).

Early life

1.3. I was born in Wellington but moved to Whanganui when I was six months old. I was brought up there in a strong Catholic family comprised of my father, my mother, an older brother, **GRO-B-1**, and two younger sisters.

- 1.4. My mother was a staunch Catholic and we attended Mass every Sunday at our local parish, Saint Joseph's, Aramoho. Although my father was not Catholic during my childhood, he attended Mass along with the rest of the family and was supportive of my mother's activities supporting the Marist Brothers. He later converted to Catholicism.
- 1.5. I began my schooling at the Holy Infancy Convent in Aramoho, a co-education school that was run by the Sisters of Joseph. My time at this school was quite good. Although the nuns were firm disciplinarians, I was never personally disciplined. Discipline consisted of a strap or ruler across the knuckles. This was administered for infringements like talking in class or answering back. I attended this school for about four years.
- 1.6. When I was eight or nine years old, I took Holy Communion at Saint Joseph's parish. My confirmation was held at Saint Mary's, the main Catholic church in Whanganui, when I was 12 or 13.
- 1.7. As a child, and throughout my school life, I would describe myself as mild, meek, timid, and compliant. I never got into trouble at school and was only ever caned once, despite corporal punishment being the norm at the time. I always attempted to be a good student and to please my teachers, parents and others. Some of my school colleagues probably regarded me as a "goody-two-shoes".

Marist Brothers' School, Whanganui

- 1.8. I attended Marist Brothers' School in Whanganui for four years from GRO-A, encompassing my Standard 3 to Form 2 school years. The school had a roll of about 120–130 students with one class for each grade—Standards 3 and 4, and Forms 1 and 2. The school was a day school with no boarding facilities.
- 1.9. There were four teachers at the school at any one time, one of whom was also the principal. When I started at the school, Br Benedict was the principal, but he was transferred away in GRO-A and Br Fabian took over as principal. Other teachers that I remember from my time at Marist Brothers' School were Br Claudius, Br Francis, Br Ephram and Br Marcelleno. At one point, Br Francis stayed with our family as he was quite sick and needed convalescence.
- 1.10. Marist Brothers', Whanganui was a fairly sports-oriented school. Students were required to participate in a sport, usually rugby in the winter and cricket in the summer.

- 1.11. Discipline was a daily event. Boys were caned if they were judged to be out of line. This consisted of being hit over the hand or backside with a bamboo cane between one and six times, depending on the severity of the infraction. I was only ever caned once in my time at the school and that was when my entire class was caned for talking.

2. THE ABUSE

Brother Fabian

- 2.1. Brother Fabian taught my Form 2 class and coached my cricket team. For many years, Marist Brothers taught boxing and organised an annual competition in the local opera house. In GRO-A, my last year at the school, with encouragement from my father I took up boxing and entered the competition. Brother Fabian was one of the boxing coaches, although he seemed to have no boxing knowledge or ability.
- 2.2. Nearing the competition date, which from memory was in the latter part of the year, I was at practice with other boys after school when Br Fabian called me aside and asked me to go to his office. I had no idea why he singled me out as I had done nothing wrong.
- 2.3. When I got to his office, he called me in, closed the door and said words to the effect, "I am going to give you a massage". I had a vague idea what a massage was but had no idea how it related to boxing. Br Fabian sat on an armless chair and told me to lay over his knees. I was wearing white sports shorts and a white singlet.
- 2.4. As soon as I lay down, he put one of his hands down the back of my shorts, under my underpants and started rubbing my buttocks with his hand and putting his fingers in and around my anus. This seemed to go on for an eternity although it probably only continued for a few minutes. He then pulled his hand out of my shorts and told me to go back to training. He said nothing further.
- 2.5. The next day I was back in Br Fabian's class. He continued to teach me daily, continued to teach me boxing, and continued to coach my cricket team. He never ever mentioned what he had done to me—it was like it never happened. I started to question whether the incident had taken place—although it definitely did—and hoping that my memory of what occurred would go away.

2.6. At the time, I did not tell my parents or anyone else what had happened. There were two reasons. Firstly, I thought that if I told my father he would physically harm Br Fabian (although he was not a violent man). Secondly, my mother was heavily involved in school activities, and I thought that perhaps my parents would not believe me. I was not prone to telling lies, but at the time it was probably unthinkable that a Marist Brother would be capable of such behaviour.

Other abuse that I am aware of

Brother Benedict (Evas Ivan Bulled)

2.7. Until recently, I did not hear of any other boys being abused during my time at Marist Brothers' School, Whanganui. However, two or three years ago, I spoke to my brother for the first time about what Br Fabian did to me and expressed my intention to register with the Royal Commission. During this discussion he mentioned for the first time that he had been abused by Br Benedict when he was the principal of the school.

2.8. GRO-B-1 told me that when he was called to give a presentation or talk in front of the class, Br Benedict would abuse him while he was standing behind the lectern and out of view of the other boys. Br Benedict would put his hand into boys' shorts and underwear and fiddle with their genitals. GRO-B-1 said that other boys had told him that the same thing had happened to them, but he did not tell me the names of any of these boys. I visited him in Whanganui and convinced him to register with the Royal Commission despite his attitude that it was better to let bygones be bygones.

Brother Claudius (Malcolm Thomas Pettit)

2.9. Br Claudius taught me in Form 1 (1959). I had no concerns about him while I while I was at school and nor did I hear of concerns from others. I was awarded a class prize for diligence the year that he taught me.

2.10. When I was a GRO-A in the 1980s, Br Claudius was interviewed by another police officer for indecent assault on a pupil at Saint Bernard's College, Lower Hutt. From memory, he was not charged with any offence at the time. However, in March 1992 GRO-A, Br Claudius pleaded guilty to an indecent assault on a boy at Saint Bernard's

College and was sentenced to six months imprisonment. I obtained a copy of his convictions from the Lower Hutt District Court.

Brother Patrick (Patrick Bignell)

- 2.11. In September 2015, Br Patrick Bignell was convicted on three charges of indecent assault on three separate boys and sentenced to eight months home detention. Sadly and unfortunately, he is my **GRO-A**. My mother **GRO-B-2** and his mother **GRO-B-3** were very close **GRO-A** but Br Patrick and I have never been close **GRO-A**. I am embarrassed and ashamed by Br Patrick's behaviour. Whilst I cannot apologise to his victims for his behaviour, I want it to be known that I have unwavering empathy for them and for what he has put them through. My thoughts are with each and every one of them. To know that one of my **GRO-A** is a convicted paedophile shook me to the core.
- 2.12. Having said that and following Br Patrick's sentencing, I made a spontaneous decision in the spirit of Christian love, to call upon him unannounced at his residence when I was in Auckland. He raised the subject of his being on home detention and his convictions. He went into limited detail about them. Brother Patrick has not contacted me since my visit.
- 2.13. To add insult to injury, Br Patrick wrote the official obituary for Br Fabian, which rubbed salt into my wound. To be fair to Br Patrick, he would not have known that I was a victim of Br Fabian.
- 2.14. I was astounded to learn that prior to and subsequent to his convictions, Br Patrick was working in the Marist archives in Auckland. I believe that it is / was totally inappropriate and irresponsible for the Marist Order to allow Br Patrick to work in their archives, based on his past predatorial behaviour which had strong similarities to the behaviours of some other Marist Brothers. In his role there, he is highly likely to have had unfettered access to all files relating to Marist Brothers including other convicted / suspected Marist paedophiles. He would have known many of these Brothers personally as he has been in the Marist Order for 50+ years.

Father Phil Roberts

- 2.15. I was recently informed by an old school friend that Father Phil Roberts, the former principal of Saint Augustine's College, had indecently assaulted at least one pupil. He picked on a particular pupil, made them come back to school after

hours for disciplinary reasons, and indecently assaulted them on more than one occasion. The victim is dead now and I don't think any complaint was ever made.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE ABUSE

Later life

- 3.1. I left Marist Brothers' School after Form 2 and attended St Augustine's College (now Cullinane College) for four years from [GRO-A] (third form to sixth form).
- 3.2. Before I left school, I applied for the [GRO-A] and was accepted but I felt I was too young and needed to mature so I declined the invitation and went to work for New Zealand Rail for twelve months. I then reapplied and was accepted into the [GRO-A].
- 3.3. I spent [GRO-A] [GRO-A]. The last ten years of my service were as a [GRO-A], responding to all manner of [GRO-A]. Almost all of my service was in [GRO-A].
- 3.4. In [GRO-A], I resigned from the [GRO-A] due to an issue with my voice (addressed in further detail below). I joined the then Department of Social Welfare (now the Ministry of Social Development) where I initially worked as an [GRO-A]

GRO-A

- 3.5. For my last twelve years with the Ministry, I was [GRO-A]

GRO-A

- 3.6. In [GRO-A], I was one of [GRO-A] individuals in the public service to receive a certificate from the State Services Commissioner recognising our outstanding contribution to the [GRO-A] and standards of the New Zealand Public Service.

Refer exhibit WITN0046002 – Copy of certificate from the State Services Commissioner.

- 3.7. I retired in 2012 and have been retired for eight years.

The impact of the abuse

- 3.8. In hindsight, I think that Br Fabian's actions had a bigger impact on me than I realised at the time and in later years. At primary school, I was one of the top three or four students in my class. However, following the assault, I found it significantly more difficult to learn and study. I just scraped through my School Certificate exams and did not achieve University Entrance, even though I should have achieved high marks in both. **GRO-A**, I continued to struggle studying for exams and had to work much harder than my colleagues.
- 3.9. In the 1980s, my voice began to deteriorate and change to the extent that I decided to leave **GRO-A**, a career that I really enjoyed. I left because I feared that my voice might fail me at a vital time, and place my life, or the life of a colleague, in danger. I cannot say categorically that the actions of Br Fabian caused the issues with my voice, but I now believe that his assault contributed at the very least. I have seen numerous specialists, attended voice therapy and had operations, but nothing has been able to fix the issue. A recent operation was only thirty percent successful. I have now struggled with these voice issues for more than 33 years and spent a lot of money attempting to restore my voice.
- 3.10. I dealt with several paedophiles over my **GRO-A**. Each time I dealt with such a case, the memory of my encounter with Br Fabian reared its ugly head. I certainly did not back down; I got on with my job in a professional way and performed to the best of my ability, but the abuse of Br Fabian was in the back of my mind.
- 3.11. The abuse may also have affected my first marriage, particularly my ability to express myself.
- 3.12. Finally, I was a staunch Catholic for all my life until about five years ago. In the last few years, I have backed away from the Catholic Church, partly because of what happened to me, and others, and the lack of response from the Church. I had been thinking about Br Fabian and all the Marist Brothers that I know abused people. Since the Royal Commission started, I began to wonder which of the priests could be trusted. There are certainly some fine men among them, but I have done a lot of research and this is a global problem. I lost faith and confidence in the Catholic Church. It was difficult to step away, but I still retain my own personal faith, just not in a formal way with the Church.

4. REDRESS

- 4.1. The first time that I mentioned what Br Fabian did to me was during an individual counselling session in the 1990s for unrelated issues. I only mentioned it briefly and we did not go into any depth. The counsellor asked me if I had ever indecently assaulted anyone myself and I was taken aback and affronted by this response. I understand why he asked but it has always stuck in my throat. I later briefly mentioned the abuse to my first wife, GRO-B-4.
- 4.2. In 2002, Br Fabian's actions had been playing on my mind for some time and I began to wonder if what occurred had contributed to the issues with my voice. I wanted to talk to someone off the record, so I mentioned Br Fabian's actions to a trusted former colleague—GRO-A. He made some initial inquiries and found that Br Fabian was still alive but was in care in a rest home. I decided at that point not to pursue the issue. I wondered whether I had been the only one that this happened to, or whether I had imagined what occurred. I was also very concerned that I would not be believed. In 2006, Br Fabian passed away.
- 4.3. When the Royal Commission was announced I took an interest in its terms of reference. When abuse in faith-based care was added to the scope of the Inquiry, I decided that now was the time to put up my hand. I registered with the Commission and encouraged my brother to do the same.
- 4.4. On 22 November 2019, I attended a private session with Commissioner Andrew Erueti in GRO-A and told my story. I provided a written statement and gave it to the Commissioner, who also had some questions for me. I thought that it was a good process, and the Commissioner was very laidback, understanding, and gentle. I came away feeling that a big load had been lifted off my shoulders for the first time. It felt a bit surreal.
- 4.5. After the private session, I felt like I had got my story out in the open and that I should also report it to the Catholic Church. I wanted to ensure that the Marist Brothers fully understood what had been going on. Not just with Br Fabian but the others who had not been good Marist Brothers. I thought that someone needed to connect the dots.
- 4.6. I had vaguely heard of the *A Path to Healing* process but did not know much about the procedures.

- 4.7. On 25 November 2019, I sent an email to the National Office for Professional Standards (NOPS) stating that I had been abused by a Marist Brother in 1960 and asking to be advised of the correct procedure to report the matter. It was around this time that I saw an Otago Daily Times article by Chris Morris and became aware for the first time that Br Fabian was a serial offender who had been the subject of multiple complaints to the Marist Brothers.
- 4.8. The following day, 26 November 2019, I received a response from a Professional Standards Officer at NOPS, outlining the complaint process and asking me to complete a notification form providing further details of my complaint.
- 4.9. I completed the notification form and returned it to NOPS and on 2 December 2019, I received an email from an Administration Coordinator at NOPS informing me that an investigator would be appointed to investigate my complaint.
- 4.10. On 13 February 2020, I received a letter from the Professional Standards Officer informing me that Pat Coady, a licenced private investigator with the Corporate Risks firm, had been appointed to investigate my complaint. A document summarising the investigation process was enclosed.

Refer exhibit WITN0046003 – Copy of letter from National Office of Professional Standards informing of appointment of investigator.

- 4.11. After a couple of phone conversations with Pat, he realised that Br Fabian had taught him at school and that our careers had also crossed paths at **GRO-A**. He therefore decided that there was a conflict of interest so stood down from the investigation.
- 4.12. On 12 March 2020, I received a letter from the Professional Standards Officer informing me that a new investigator from the same firm, Al Lester, had been appointed to investigate my complaint.

Refer exhibit WITN0046004 – Copy of letter from National Office of Professional Standards informing of appointment of new investigator.

- 4.13. I was scheduled to meet Al in March, but due to the Covid-19 lockdown this meeting was rescheduled. On 8 July this year, Al visited me at my home in **GRO-A** to discuss my complaint. He asked a series of questions about

what occurred, and I provided him with a copy of the written statement that I provided to the Royal Commission.

- 4.14. Al asked me what outcomes I wanted from the redress process. I outlined three: (1) a written apology from the Marist Brothers acknowledging the conduct of Br Fabian, even though he is now dead; (2) an acknowledgment of the wider issue of abuse within the Church—I personally know of four Marist Brothers who abused children; (3) an ex-gratia payment. In regard to the ex gratia payment, my intention is not to make money out of Br Fabian's conduct but if what occurred contributed to the issues with my voice, and I think it has, then it has cost me a lot of money over the years to seek treatment.
- 4.15. Following the interview, Al provided me with a written transcript documenting our discussion. He is finishing his inquiries, including speaking to two individuals that I asked him to speak to. He will then write up his report.

5. LOOKING FORWARD

- 5.1. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church has not been outspoken about the abuse that has occurred within the Church. They need to be more vocal about what happened and supportive of people who have suffered. NOPS seems to be working pretty well—they should continue to refer matters to an independent body for investigation and there should be no interference from clergy protecting other religious. In the old days, they would shunt them sideways and allow them to continue with their behaviour unfettered.
- 5.2. As far as the Royal Commission, I would like to see its recommendations actioned rather than just talked about or sat on. There should be more opportunities for organisations to have their volunteers and staff vetted to prevent this sort of thing from occurring. There should also be strong protocols put in place for how organisations deal with complaints.

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**

Dated 9 September 2020