

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

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF ROBERT MARTIN FERREIRA  
RECTOR / TUMUAKI,  
ST PATRICK'S COLLEGE, SILVERSTREAM, WELLINGTON**

**FILED ON BEHALF OF  
THE BISHOPS AND CONGREGATIONAL LEADERS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND**

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*Notice to Produce No. 527: Paragraphs [2] to [15]*

## Introduction

1. My full name is Robert Martin Ferreira. I am the current Rector/Tumuaki of St Patrick's College Silverstream (**Silverstream**) in Upper Hutt, Wellington. I have been in this role since 2 May 2022, five months before the date of this evidence.
2. Before that, I was the Principal at St John's College in the Hawke's Bay. I was in that role since January of 2020, after being the deputy principal since May of 2017. St John's College is also a state integrated school with a Catholic special character. Like Silverstream, St John's was staffed for significant periods of its history by the Society of Mary. My roles at Silverstream and St John's have been my only roles to date at state-integrated Catholic schools.
3. I have been a teacher for 33 years. I was born in South Africa and trained as a teacher there. I came to New Zealand in 1993 and my first teaching role was at Palmerston North Boys' High School.
4. My role at Silverstream is called 'Rector/Tumuaki', rather than 'Principal' as a reference to the college having a boarding hostel. I am aware that historically, when the Society of Mary were directly involved in the school, the head of the community (and the college) was called the Rector. However, my current role is not as a member of a religious congregation. I am a lay member of the Catholic faith and have never held any position in the Church outside of schools.

## Acknowledgement of harm

5. I have only recently learnt of the horrific abuse suffered by former students at Silverstream, particularly in the period from 1950 to 1984. I became aware of this as a result of media reporting. I am shocked and saddened to hear of this abuse.
6. On behalf of Silverstream's management, I apologise to those who have suffered harm at our College.

### Limitations on my evidence

7. I would like to help the Royal Commission as much as possible, but I need to explain the limitations I have in responding:
- (a) **My limited involvement with the College** – I have only been involved with the school since 2nd May 2022. I have no personal knowledge of any events before that time. Given this, I have quite limited knowledge of the matters the Royal Commission has asked about, except for contemporary child protection measures.
  - (b) **Time available** – I was served with this notice by the Royal Commission on 8 September 2022. I have had a limited amount of time to review a significant amount of information and prepare this evidence.
  - (c) **Absence of historical documents** – I have been able to review documents from the Royal Commission and in media. Silverstream does not have an extensive archive. While we have an ‘Archives’ room in our main building, it contains mostly old school magazines, historical photos, and school trophies. Separately, the College holds current and recent student and staff files. Included in these records are some records of recent allegations of harm, but there is an absence of documentation prior to 2005. I understand that that is due to standard document retention procedures (many documents have been disposed of at regular intervals, following various practices in place at the time).

### Response to the Royal Commission’s questions

8. The Royal Commission has asked a number of specific questions in the Notice I received. I have set these out below, along with my answers.

9. Many of the questions ask about a time period from 1950. I am not able to answer questions relating to events prior to my arrival at the College in May this year.

### **Role in safeguarding and prevention of abuse**

*For the period 1950 to present day, please*

*2 a. Your understanding of your role in relation to the safeguarding and prevention of abuse at St Patrick's College, including:*

- i. Legal obligations (statutory requirements);*
- ii. Obligations under any policies or procedures (including reporting to any church authority or State agency); and*
- iii. Obligations under any relevant Catholic Church protocols.*

### **Current formal policies, procedures and obligations**

10. I cannot speak to any historical obligations, as I am not familiar with them.
11. I understand that Sean Mahony and Clare Couch (the Chair of the School Board and the Chair of the Board of Proprietors) have set out the procedures that the College follows in relation to safeguarding and the prevention of abuse in their evidence. These policies implement our legal obligations as a school.
12. My role as Rector/Tumuaki is to implement these policies and procedures in terms of the management of the College. I have a limited role in creating policies, but in general terms, my responsibility is to ensure the safe management of the College for its students and staff through managing procedures.
13. My primary focus is on the current operation of the College. I am responsible for monitoring the employment of staff to ensure that they are complying with all of the relevant policies.

14. As the Rector/Tumuaki, I am the employer of the teaching and boarding hostel staff. If matters are raised about current staff, I am responsible to the relevant Board for responding to these.
15. Every member of staff, with the exception of the chaplain, are the College's employees, volunteers or contractors and are lay, i.e., not members of religious congregations and/or clergy. The chaplain is a member of the Society of Mary.
16. Anything that may be untoward, or anything that may need to be investigated in terms of abuse will have to go through a process – this would be with reference to our policies and procedures. These would ordinarily be dealt with as employment/ contractual matters. We may have to work with the Teachers Council or the New Zealand Schools Trustee Association for them to give us advice as to how to proceed with an issue, depending on its nature. We may also need to work with the Police or Oranga Tamariki depending on the nature of any allegations.
17. In my time as a Rector/Tumuaki, I have not had a complaint or allegation against a current staff member of such serious wrong doing that could have been a criminal offence. I certainly have not had such an allegation in my short time at Silverstream. I have received a letter about alleged historic abuse by former staff members, but that did not disclose any allegations and related to the issue of portraits (discussed in Clare's evidence) – I referred that matter to the Silverstream Board, and the Board of Proprietors.
18. I am also ultimately responsible for disciplinary matters with the students. This is usually managed by the year level deans, the Dean of boarding and the Assistant Rector of Pastoral Care under my supervision. Sometimes this involves verbal or physical altercations between boys. I would expect serious matters of student discipline to be escalated to me by my staff.
19. Sometimes, this role could include receiving information relating to older complaints that do not relate to current staff. In these cases, I would refer the

information to the appropriate agency – such as the Police, Society of Mary or whoever else is required to receive the information.

### ***Informal processes***

20. As I begin my role as Rector/Tumuaki, I am trying to actively foster and encourage positive relationships and trust between students, staff and I.
21. I firmly believe that you cannot be a principal who sits in his/ her office all day and completes administration. Sometimes, I feel like that would be a good thing, as I could get it done more quickly, but you just cannot operate like that.
22. For example, I do not have lunch in my office. I take my lunch and I walk around the school and talk to the boys. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when the bell goes, I am always at the front gate saying goodbye to them. The boys know I have an open door policy and they can come and see me at any time that they wish. There are also guidance counsellors and deans.
23. We must all create a professional and trusting relationship with the students. The students need to know they can come to you, if there's an issue. The Dean of Boarding, who is in charge of our boarding facilities at Redwood House, is really good with this. So are the hostel staff. You must earn the trust of the boys and they need to know that there are proportionate consequences for failure to meet required standards of behaviour but also that you are consistent and fair, and that you will listen to them. I always say to the boys in assemblies that "I'll always listen to you, I might not agree with you but I will listen to you so come and talk to me". So I think all of those sorts of aspects put together, help to ensure that the policies and procedures work in practice, so that if there is something untoward happening, the students will tell you.

### **Responding to reports of abuse**

*2 b. Your role in responding to reports of abuse at St Patrick's College both before you were Principal and while you have been Principal.*

*7. Explain how the Principal has responded to reports of abuse at St Patrick's College, and to the extent responses have changed over time, describe the changes and the reasons for such changes. Please include in your answer:*

- a. Whether the Principal (past and present) recorded disclosures (and if so where);*
- b. Whether the Principal (past and present) reported disclosures and to whom; and*
- c. How the Principal (past and present) responded to students who were reporting abuse.*

24. I had no role with the College prior to becoming the Rector/Tumuaki earlier this year.

25. As I say above, my role is to manage the College. I have very limited experience of dealing with reports of harm in my short time at the College. I do not think the approach I take would significantly differ from any other competent principal in a state-integrated college.

26. The only incidents that come to mind, in my time at Silverstream, as examples were an occasion where a student harmed another student, and a verbal altercation between a student and staff member. These matters have been addressed according to established procedures.

27. In addressing these incidents, they are indicative of my approach in preventing and responding to any harm that takes place in the College. I often receive information in my role that I need to consider. If appropriate, I carry out an impartial and fair investigation to determine what, if any, action is necessary. Then, I carry out that action or refer the matter to the appropriate body, which may be the Board of Proprietors (if the incident occurs at Redwood House) the Board of Trustees (if it is an incident at the College) or other relevant external authorities (for example, the Police or Oranga Tamariki).

28. If a very serious incident took place in the school, I would contact the Ministry of Education and NZSTA initially to get advice. Both Chairs of the Board of Proprietors and Silverstream Board would be informed. Depending on the nature of the incident, other agencies such as the NZ Police would be contacted.

### **Role with other governance entities**

*3. Describe your understanding of the roles and obligations of the Archbishop, the Society of Mary, the Silverstream College Trust Board later renamed the Silverstream College Board of Proprietors, the Board of Governors, and the Board of Trustees in relation to the prevention of abuse and responding to reports of abuse at St Patrick's College. Please include in your response how this has changed over time, and any distinctions between the school and the boarding facilities.*

29. I cannot speak to the history of these relationships at Silverstream before I was at the College.
30. However, I can briefly provide an overview in terms of responding to any issues that arise in the College. Generally, issues relating to the boarding facilities are referred to the Board of Proprietors (who own the College's land and buildings and are responsible for the hostel). If the issues were about teachers or staff in the College, I would advise the Board of Trustees if the issue were serious enough. Again, depending on the issue, other entities such as the Teachers' Council may need to be involved.
31. In terms of the Society of Mary, unless an allegation involved a member of the clergy, we would not contact the Society in the first instance. We may well eventually contact the Society through the Board of Proprietors if we have an issue with a staff member. But that is simply because they are the owners of the school and we have a close relationship with the Society of Mary. So, we may well inform them that there has been an issue and how it has been dealt with.

### **Relationship between St Patrick's College and the Catholic Church**

*4. Briefly describe the relationship between St Patrick's College and the Catholic Church, as you understood it at the time.*

32. I can only speak about the relationship between Silverstream and the Catholic Church currently.



33. We still have a close relationship with the Society of Mary because the school's charism is Marist. We identify as a Marist school. So, what we try to teach the students is framed in terms of what we expect of a Marist man. Most of the day-to-day interaction is through the Young Marists group. For example, the Marist youth leaders come in and they speak to boys about leadership and social justice.
34. Prior to integration and maybe even shortly after integration when clergy were teaching then, obviously there was a closer relationship between the Society of Mary and the school because members of the Society were teaching at the school and running the boarding house. Again today, with the exception of one staff member, who is a member of the clergy and the Chaplain, everyone else is lay.

**Steps by the Rector taken to prevent abuse**

*5. Outline what steps, if any, have been taken by the Principal over time to prevent abuse at St Patrick's College.*

35. I can only speak for the current steps that I take, which I have largely outlined above in terms of following policies and procedures, and creating an environment of trust and listening at the College.
36. When I moved to the College earlier this year, there was nothing that struck me as requiring attention to keep students safe. It appears to me that the College operates as any good state-integrated school would.
37. The only things I can add is that we always background check staff properly and staff are required to follow the Catholic School Code of Ethics (in addition to other requirements for teachers set by the Teacher's Council).

### **Nature and extent of abuse**

*6. Outline your understanding of the nature and extent of abuse at St Patrick's College and its boarding houses, and your position on the reasons for that.*

38. As a result of this inquiry, I have become aware of historical reports of abuse in the period between 1950 and 1984. These all related to members of the Society of Mary.
39. Since getting the Royal Commission notice, our lawyers have reviewed the staff files we hold at the College and other documents. All disciplinary matters that they found are listed in the appendix to Sean Mahony's statement.
40. As I have said above, I am not aware of any recent allegations of abuse or harm during my time at the College.

### **Barriers for disclosing abuse**

*8. Describe your understanding of the barriers to disclosing abuse at St Patrick's College.*

41. I cannot think of anything that is particular to Silverstream that would prevent students from disclosing abuse.
42. As I mentioned above, there are a number of formal and informal processes to ensure that the College is a safe environment for students.
43. It may have already been identified during the Commission, but I do think that teenage boys (and probably teenagers in general) are concerned that disclosing abuse may affect their friendships or may differentiate them from the group.
44. I was reminded of this recently when I was at a rugby game with the reunion of a group of old boys. There were about 30 of them and they were having a fantastic time - they were telling stories about the old teachers and it was all incredibly positive. I did think to myself that it was largely only going to be

students who had a good experience at the College who returned for the reunion, or any bad experiences were much less likely to be discussed.

### **Culture or practice of normalising abuse**

*9. Comment on whether you consider that there was a culture or practice within the Society of Mary, lay members of staff or clergy in the Diocese of Wellington and within St Patrick's College of ignoring, tolerating or normalising abuse at St Patrick's College. Please include in your answer the reasons for your view.*

45. I have no knowledge of this, given my short involvement with the College.

### **Preventing abuse/ changes required**

*12. What do you consider are the biggest challenges for a Principal in preventing and responding to reports of abuse of students?*

46. I think one of the challenges principals have is balancing the demands of the job, with the need to find out what is happening in their school.

47. As I have previously said, my view is that it is not OK to me to be a principal who just sits in their office doing admin all day. To know what is happening and to encourage people to speak to them, I think principals need to be active and visible in their school. It is not always easy to find time to do this, but I think being a strong part of the school's daily life is essential to preventing and responding to reports of abuse.

### *Changes required (questions 13-15)*

48. As I have said above, I think the main focus needs to be on creating an environment where people can speak out and know they are going to be listened to. I think it is often easy to assume that good policies prevent abuse, but while they may help to prevent abuse if they are followed, policies can be thwarted if an organisation's culture does not encourage people to speak out or creates an impression that people will be ignored.

49. Similarly, I cannot think of any further initiatives that state agencies could offer at this stage. I think that for a problem as complex as abuse in schools, there needs to be a very considered approach and there are no quick fixes.

#### **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-C

Robert Martin Ferreira

**Dated:**

5 October 2022