

BRA Broken Rites Australia - researching the Catholic cover-up

Catholic clergy (including George Pell) looked the other way while Father Ridsdale continued committing more crimes against more children in more parishes

Background article by a Broken Rites researcher

This Broken Rites article is the most comprehensive account available about how the Catholic Church harboured this child-abuse criminal — Father Gerald Francis **Ridsdale** — for 30 years in western Victoria while his superiors and fellow-priests remained silent to protect the church's public image. In 1982, when Father Ridsdale had been abusing children for 20 years, a clergy committee (of which Father **George Pell** was a member) noted that Ridsdale was being transferred away from Victoria. Thus, he was inflicted on potential victims in New South Wales. Eventually, in 1993, Victoria Police detectives charged Ridsdale in court. He was accompanied to court by his support person, **George Pell**, who had become an assistant bishop in Melbourne. However, no bishop accompanied the victims. Encouraged by Broken Rites, more victims later spoke to the detectives. In his four court cases between 1993 and 2014, Ridsdale has been jailed for a minimum of 24 years for assaulting 54 of his victims. Broken Rites is proud of its role in exposing the church's cover-up of this criminal priest.

This 1993 photo helped to expose the cover-up

On every page of the Broken Rites website (in the right-hand column), there is a photo of Father Ridsdale (with his features obscured by dark glasses and a cap) walking to the Melbourne Magistrates Court on 27 May 1993 with his support person, auxiliary bishop **George Pell** (wearing clerical garb). This was the day when Ridsdale received his first conviction for child-sex crimes. [In 1993, Pell was an Auxiliary Bishop for Melbourne, and three years later he became the Archbishop of Melbourne.]

By 27 May 1993, unknown to Ridsdale and Pell, one of Ridsdale's victims had alerted the media that Ridsdale was due to appear in court that day for sentencing. Therefore, when Pell and Ridsdale approached the court building, a Channel Nine camera man obtained video footage of their arrival.

That evening, Channel Nine's news bulletin showed this footage of Father Ridsdale and Bishop Pell arriving at the court. This bulletin was viewed throughout the state of Victoria, including by many church-abuse victims. Viewers noticed that a bishop was accompanying the criminal priest, rather than accompanying the victims.

This publicity alerted other Ridsdale victims, many of whom later rang the newly-established **Broken Rites** telephone hotline. Broken Rites told these callers the phone number of the Victoria Police child-abuse unit, where they could report Ridsdale's crimes to the detectives.

As detectives interviewed more of his victims, Ridsdale was brought back to court in 1994 and in 2006 and in 2013 to be sentenced again. Each time, **Broken Rites** alerted all media outlets before the court date. After each court case, more Ridsdale victims contacted **Broken Rites** and, as a result, many (but not all) of these victims eventually spoke to the detectives.

Since 1993, the television footage of Ridsdale and Pell arriving together has been shown in current affairs programs (such as "Four Corners" and "Sixty Minutes") concerning sex-abuse cover-ups in the Catholic Church.

The church knew about Ridsdale

Gerald Ridsdale (born 1934) and George Pell (born 1941) both had a Catholic childhood in Ballarat, a "very Catholic" city, where the bishop for western Victoria is located. Various members of the Ridsdale clan were acquainted with various members of the Pell clan.

In 1960, Ridsdale was in the final stage of his studies as a trainee priest, while Pell was in the early stage. Both Ridsdale and Pell were sponsored in their seminary studies by the diocese of Ballarat (which covers the whole of western Victoria) and therefore both were committed to beginning their priestly careers in western Victoria after ordination.

Father Ridsdale began ministering in west Victorian parishes in 1961. George Pell continued studying at the Melbourne seminary for a while, then did further studies in Europe, returning to Australia in 1971 to work in west Victorian parishes.

In the 1970s, when Ridsdale and Pell crossed paths as priests in the city of Ballarat, western Victoria had about 55 parishes,

most of which had only one priest. This relatively small team of diocesan priests knew about each other's postings, transfers, promotions and career-disruptions.

In the 1960s, until 1971, Ridsdale's superior was **Bishop James O' Collins**. In May 1971, O'Collins was succeeded by **Bishop Ronald Austin Mulkearns**, who had been O'Collins's co-adjutor (assistant) bishop since 1968.

In 1971, Father George Pell was an assistant priest in a parish at Swan Hill in the Ballarat diocese's outskirts in north-western Victoria. Ridsdale, too, had been an assistant priest at this parish, shortly before Pell arrived.

In 1973, Father Ridsdale and Father Pell were both located in a parish within the city of Ballarat, living together in the parish house of St Alipius in Ballarat East.

According to church documents, Ridsdale offended against children during his seminary training in the late 1950s and again immediately after he was ordained in 1961. Bishop James O'Collins's office learned in 1961 that Ridsdale was abusing a boy in Ballarat. Nevertheless, the church (under Bishop Mulkearns) continued using Ridsdale as a priest, putting more children at risk. The diocese shifted the Ridsdale problem from parish to parish but it never warned parishioners that their children were in danger.

In some parishes, Ridsdale lasted only months or weeks. Early in his posting at the **Inglewood** parish (in north-central Victoria) in 1975, he fled from this town overnight after some victims reported his crimes to the police, and he had to ask the bishop for a new posting. Ridsdale's sudden disappearance from Inglewood was obvious to his fellow priests in western Victoria.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Ridsdale was evacuated from the Ballarat diocese — to spend "time-out" in Melbourne, Sydney and the United States, to get him away from his further troubles in western Victoria. This "time-off", especially his overseas trip, was common knowledge among his Victorian colleagues. Priests were always interested to learn that another priest was getting an interstate or overseas trip.

Ridsdale also committed crimes in New South Wales and the United States. He has not yet been brought to justice in those jurisdictions.

His interstate and overseas stints were interspersed with more postings in the Ballarat diocese, all of which ended in more crimes.

Ridsdale was still protected by the church's code of silence. One family says that when they complained to a senior cleric (Monsignor Leo Fiscali) about Ridsdale committing buggery on their son, the monsignor urged the family to remain silent "for the church's sake".

Meanwhile, Father George Pell's career boomed. He moved to Melbourne, where he was the rector of Victoria's Corpus Christi seminary (in 1985-87) before becoming one of Melbourne's four auxiliary bishops (in 1987). As a Melbourne auxiliary bishop, Pell was no longer associated with the Ballarat diocese but was responsible for overseeing Melbourne's southern suburbs.

Back in the Ballarat diocese, other priests knew about Ridsdale's removals and his times in the "sin bin". So why did George Pell accompany Ridsdale to court in 1993, instead of supporting the victims?

54 of Ridsdale's victims achieved justice

By Ridsdale's fourth sentencing, in April 2014, his convictions involved a total of 54 children (mostly boys, plus several girls), aged between six and 16, who were sexually assaulted between 1961 and 1987. These are not Ridsdale's only victims — they are merely those who eventually took advantage of the opportunity to talk with detectives from the Victoria Police and whose cases were included in Ridsdale's pleas of guilty.

Although the first of these convictions was for a crime committed in 1961, this does not mean that Ridsdale waited until 1961 before becoming a danger to children. The significance of "1961" is that this is about the time he was ordained as a Catholic priest, and this status gave him easy access to (and authority over) children. It remains to be seen what he was doing with children before he was ordained.

Only a few of Ridsdale's victims have contacted the police. Other Ridsdale victims (mostly boys, but also a few girls) have contacted **Broken Rites** or psychiatrists or solicitors or (unwisely) the Catholic Church without contacting the police.

Countless more victims still remain silent. The total number of Ridsdale victims may amount to hundreds.

Many Ridsdale victims still remain silent because they do not want to upset their "loyal Catholic" parents.

Others feel embarrassed about contacting the detectives. Some of the victims in Ridsdale's later court appearances said that

this embarrassment was why they had waited so long. However, the police detectives are very helpful to all victims, and the court procedures ensure that the victims' privacy is protected. In these kinds of criminal cases, victims' names cannot be published.

Four court cases from 1993 to 2014

Victoria Police laid the first charges against Ridsdale in 1993, about the time that **Broken Rites** was planning to establish its national telephone hotline. During the next 13 years, with help from Broken Rites, the police easily found additional Ridsdale victims.

Gerald Ridsdale's four court cases were as follows:-

* In May **1993**, Ridsdale was summonsed to the Melbourne Magistrates Court, charged with 30 incidents of indecent assault, involving **nine boys** aged between 12 and 16, occurring between 1974 and 1980. Ridsdale pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 12 months jail (with parole after three months).

* In **1994**, largely as a result of the **Broken Rites** telephone hotline, Ridsdale was charged with indecent assaults, occurring between 1961 and 1981, involving 20 boys, aged 9 to 15, plus the eleven-year-old sister of one of the boys, making a total of **21 victims** in this case. He was also charged with five incidents of buggery, involving four of these boys, and the attempted **buggery** of another one of the boys. Ridsdale pleaded guilty to all the charges. He was jailed for 18 years, with parole possible after 15 years. After this publicity, still more Ridsdale victims phoned **Broken Rites** and/or the police.

* In **2006**, while he was about to begin the 13th year of his jail sentence, Ridsdale was charged with 35 incidents involving **10 boys** (the youngest was aged only six) between 1970 and 1987. These included four incidents of buggery, 24 incidents of indecent assault and seven incidents of gross indecency. Ridsdale again pleaded guilty and the court added four years to his existing minimum jail term. This sentence thus delayed Ridsdale's earliest non-parole date to 2013, when he would be 79.

* On **8 April 2014**, Ridsdale (aged nearly 80 and still serving his previous prison sentences) was sentenced to eight more years in jail (with a minimum of five years before becoming eligible to apply for parole) on 30 additional charges against **14 victims**. Again, he pleaded guilty. These offences included three assaults on a female (Ridsdale committed one of the assaults on this female while he was performing the Catholic sacrament of "Confession" for her).

Where the crimes occurred

Gerald Ridsdale's victims were sexually abused inside the church, in the presbytery (the parish house), in the priest's car, in victims' homes, at the home of Ridsdale's parents in the city of Ballarat, during outings, and on holidays with the priest. He molested one boy and his sister a few hours after their father's funeral.

Some of the offences occurred during the sacrament of Confession — while Ridsdale would be asking questions about a child's "sins". After Confession (and after the molestation), Ridsdale would perform the rite of Absolution — an official declaration that the child was forgiven for **the child's** "sins".

Many offences occurred before and after the celebration of Mass, First Holy Communion, Confirmation ceremonies, weddings and funerals. Many of the victims were altar boys.

One altar boy was even sexually abused at the altar, when the church was empty and locked after Mass.

What Ridsdale did

Gerald Ridsdale committed indecent assault or gross indecency against all of his victims — and, whenever possible, he committed buggery (sodomy) against some of them.

"*Buggery*", like rape, is a serious felony.

"*Indecent assault*" (which carries a lesser penalty than buggery) is an invasive sexual touching of another person, falling short of buggery or rape.

"*Gross indecency*" (which might carry a lesser penalty than indecent assault) could be (for example) forcing someone to witness indecent behaviour.

In Victoria's criminal statutes, indecent assault and gross indecency are classed as a misdemeanour, not a felony.

In sex offences, if the victim is under 16 years old, the perpetrator cannot claim consent as a defence.

The impact on victims

When the court was deciding what sort of jail sentence to impose, many victims submitted written impact statements, telling how Ridsdale had affected their lives. The impact statements, plus comments by the judge, show that the church's role in the Ridsdale affair has disrupted families, marriages and communities.

Many victims found it difficult to tell their Catholic parents that a Catholic priest was a child-molester. Some parents defended Ridsdale and the church, thus alienating their own children. Some victims remained silent, knowing that their "devout" family would not believe them. All this disrupted the relationship between victims and their parents.

For many Ridsdale victims, this was their first "sexual" experience. And this first experience was with a Catholic priest! This had adverse effects on the sexual development of victims, some of whom ended up with sexual problems.

Many victims were struck by the hypocrisy involved. The church preached about "morality" but it harboured immoral clergy. The church's anti-abortion campaign championed the rights of "the unborn child" but the church was not so vigilant about the safety of its altar boys.

Many Ridsdale victims have carried scars into adulthood.

Many have drifted away from the church, often losing contact with the community with which they had grown up.

Some dropped out of school prematurely and left home, feeling bitter about their parents' gullibility and about the church's negligence. These victims would find it hard to achieve a satisfying career.

Some lost their trust in all authority, eventually getting into trouble with the law.

There have been frequent problems with alcohol and drugs. Some victims have had marriage problems. Some victims said their parents' marriages have suffered because of the tensions.

Several witnesses knew of former altar boys of Ridsdale who committed suicide.

Several victims became actively homosexual as adults, and one of these has died from AIDS. One Ridsdale victim went on to molest children himself and spent two years in jail.

The prosecutor told the 2006 court hearing that the effects on Ridsdale's victims and their families had been "catastrophic".

Ridsdale's criminal career in detail

Gerald Francis Ridsdale was born on 20 May 1934 at St Arnaud, in western Victoria, the eldest in a Catholic family of eight children, but he grew up in the city of Ballarat, where he attended St Patrick's College (run by the Christian Brothers). His extended family existed in a tribal Catholic environment. During Ridsdale's formative years, there was an entrenched culture of sexual abuse among clergy in western Victoria, including at St Patrick's College, as demonstrated in various court cases in the 1990s.

Gerry Ridsdale left school at 14 and worked for three years as a clerk in an accountant's office in Ballarat. In his teens he became aware of his sexual feelings towards boys.

Ridsdale's sister Shirley has said that Gerald was bossy, tending to over-control his younger siblings. He was power-hungry, she says.

With encouragement from a Ballarat priest, Ridsdale decided to go back to school, aiming to become a priest. He entered Melbourne's Corpus Christi seminary (then at Werribee), as a candidate for the Ballarat diocese.

After four years at this seminary, Ridsdale was chosen to go to Italy for church studies in Genoa, followed by two years in Dublin, Ireland.

Ridsdale was ordained in St Patrick's Cathedral, Ballarat, in July 1961, aged 27. The Ballarat diocese extends westwards from the city of Ballarat to the South Australian border and it includes Mildura and Swan Hill in the north and Portland and Warrnambool in the south.

From 1961 to 1993, Father Gerry Ridsdale's main on-going placements (that is, apart from numerous short relieving stints) were:

- **Ballarat Cathedral parish**, early 1960s;
- **Mildura**, mid-1960s;
- **Swan Hill**, late 1960s;
- **Warrnambool**, 1970-1;

- **Ballarat East**, early 1970s;
- **Apollo Bay**, 1974-5;
- **Inglewood**, 1975;
- **Edenhope**, late 1970s;
- In the "sin bin" in **Melbourne**, 1980;
- **Mortlake**, 1981;
- parishes in the dioceses of **Sydney** and **Broken Bay**, in New South Wales, 1982-6;
- **Horsham**, late 1980s;
- In the "sin bin" doing locum work in parishes in the **USA**, 1990; and
- In the "sin bin" as a chaplain and "counsellor" (!) in western **Sydney**, 1991-3.

The above list of Ridsdale's main locations does not include other places where he offended. Often he was removed prematurely from his main Victorian parish appointments (evidently because of misbehaviour) and he would then be sent to serve a few weeks as a relieving priest elsewhere — at **Port Fairy** (St Patrick's), **Camperdown** (St Patrick's), **Colac** (St Mary's), **Casterton** (Sacred Heart), **Coleraine** (St Joseph's), **Koroit** (Infant Jesus) and various other parishes.

For example, "Mervyn", who was one of the victims in Ridsdale's 1993 conviction, has told Broken Rites: "I lived in Coleraine, where Ridsdale made numerous visits as a relieving priest. He abused me each time. He conducted a Mass in our house for a member of my family who was dying of cancer."

And in the mid-1970s (between his appointments at Ballarat East and Edenhope), he made several trips to relieve at Swan Hill, where he had ministered a few years earlier. As a result, his victims were scattered throughout Victoria.

Ridsdale's style of operation

Early on, it became obvious that Gerry Ridsdale was obsessed with boys. He maintained an "open house", making his presbytery a drop-in centre for boys. He acquired a pool table and he was an early possessor of colour television, a microwave oven, an electric typewriter, a video-cassette player and computer games — all these became a magnet for boys.

He would often invite a boy to stay overnight. Many "staunch Catholic" parents permitted (and even encouraged) this, believing that a priest is a good role model. But the boy would find that he was forced to share a double bed with Ridsdale.

Sometimes Ridsdale took his victims far away from their families — on trips to other parts of Victoria, such as the presbytery at picturesque Apollo Bay. Even after leaving a parish, he would sometimes re-visit a family, perhaps a year later, to take their son on an outing, during which he would abuse the boy.

He also took boys to White Cliffs in far-western New South Wales, where he had a mining right in an opal region.

A significant proportion of Ridsdale's victims came from large families or families where the father was ill or dead or working away from home or doing shift work. A busy mother would gratefully accept Ridsdale's offer to "help" by taking one of her sons on a trip or to stay at his presbytery.

At his various parishes, Ridsdale acted as a visiting "chaplain" at local schools, thereby gaining access to more boys.

The 1960s

Ridsdale has admitted that, even while working in his very first parish, he was already abusing children. The earliest of his charged offences was for an incident in late 1961, a few months after his ordination. This victim ("Gilbert") was from Camperdown, in Victoria's south-west. The court was told that Gilbert's father was hospitalised and Ridsdale was "minding" the boy. These assaults of Gilbert occurred at Camperdown and at a seaside resort, Anglesea.

Ridsdale flourished within a climate of entrenched clergy sexual abuse in the Ballarat diocese. In the mid-1960, he spent a period at **Mildura** (Sacred Heart parish), in Victoria's far north-west, working under the supervision of Monsignor John Day. (**Broken Rites** has revealed that Monsignor Day was a major child-sex offender, and this revelation has forced the church to offer an apology to Monsignor Day's victims.)

Ridsdale ranged far and wide. The court was told that Ridsdale knew an altar boy from Horsham, in Victoria's far west. This boy's family moved to Wodonga, on the NSW border. Ridsdale visited the Wodonga home and took the boy camping at Mitta Mitta in Victoria's remote north-east, where he sexually assaulted the boy.

Another offence, in 1967-8, involved an altar boy, "Julian", who lived in **Swan Hill**. Some years later, Julian told his mother about the assaults but she did not believe that a Catholic priest would do a thing like this and she smacked him. This cover-up damaged Julian's relationship with his mother and later with his wife. When he made his police statement in September 1993,

Julian was aged 37.

The early 1970s

According to court evidence, the Ballarat diocesan authorities knew at least as early as 1970-1 that Gerry Ridsdale was a risk to boys. Ridsdale was then in **Warrnambool** (at St Joseph's parish).

One Warrnambool victim ("Ken"), according to a sworn statement tendered in court, told the late Father Thomas Martin Brophy (a priest of the Ballarat diocese) about Ridsdale's abuse — and Brophy duly reported it to the Ballarat diocesan authorities. Father Brophy then told a superior, Monsignor Leo Fiscalini. Ken said that a senior official at the Ballarat diocesan office confirmed to him in 1995 that Fiscalini knew about Ridsdale's abuse.

In 1974, Ken told the Ballarat diocesan office about Ridsdale, and the diocese referred Ken to Father Dan Torpy, who was acting as a counsellor.

Another of Ridsdale's Warrnambool victims was "Gus", an altar boy who was a student at Warrnambool Christian Brothers College (now Emanuel College). Ridsdale has pleaded guilty to indecently assaulting Gus in Warrnambool in 1970, when the boy was 13, and he has also pleaded guilty to committing multiple offences of buggery against Gus in 1972-3 at Apollo Bay, where Ridsdale had taken the boy for a "holiday".

Psychologist Ian Joblin (a defence witness for Ridsdale) told the 1994 court hearing that Ridsdale had some interviews with a counsellor for sexual matters in 1970-1 while at Warrnambool. The interviews were arranged by the church authorities but Joblin was not sure exactly who.

This all indicates that the church authorities knew, early on, about Ridsdale propensity.

Mr Joblin told the court that Ridsdale was also sent to a Franciscan monk, Father Peter Evans, in the mid-1970s for counselling for his sexual problems.

(Father Evans, who was also a psychiatrist, left the priesthood in 1976, got married and began practising psychiatry publicly in Melbourne. He told a journalist in November 1994 that he could not remember whether or not he had seen Ridsdale, but it was possible that Ridsdale was at a retreat for priests that Father Evans attended.)

In late 1971, Ridsdale was transferred from Warrnambool to be an assistant priest in **Ballarat East** at the parish of **St Alipius** (pronounced "al-LEEP-ee-us") where Ronald Mulkeans himself had been the parish priest before becoming the Bishop of Ballarat in 1971. Ridsdale was joined in this presbytery in 1973 by another assistant priest, Father **George Pell**. Ridsdale and Pell shared the house for a year or two until Ridsdale was shunted on to other towns. This means that Bishop Mulkearns, Father Ridsdale and Father Pell were equally well known among the parishioners of St Alipius — and among Ridsdale's young victims.

One victim (a former altar boy at St Alipius) said that, after being sexually assaulted by Ridsdale, he got himself removed from Ridsdale's altar-boy roster and changed to Father **George Pell's** roster.

Did this altar boy tell George Pell that Ridsdale was a child molester? Pell's usual answer to such questions is "I don't recall" (as he demonstrated when he was cross-examined in 2014 at Australia's national Royal Commission on child sex-abuse).

While working in Ballarat East, Ridsdale also acted as chaplain at the four-classroom St Alipius parish school, where he found like-minded company. Brother Robert Best who taught grade 6, Brother Edward Dowlan who taught grade 5, and Brother Gerald Leo Fitzgerald (now dead) who taught Grade 3, were all child-abusers. So was a later teacher there, Christian Brother Stephen Francis Farrell. All, except Fitzgerald, were later convicted of sex crimes. During Dowlan's County Court trial in 1996, the prosecution alleged that three St Alipius boys were each sexually abused by Dowlan, Best and Ridsdale.

One former St Alipius altar boy said in his police statement, that after he was indecently assaulted by Ridsdale, the priest gave him a piece of Holy Communion bread (as used in Mass) as a reward. Another former altar boy said that Ridsdale indecently assaulted the boy while the boy confessed his sins to the priest during the "sacrament of Confession".

In 1974-5, Ridsdale was re-assigned to the coastal parish of **Apollo Bay** (Our Lady Star of the Sea parish). One victim here was "Gary" of Colac, who met Ridsdale while the priest was president of the Colac gem club. Ridsdale took him to stay at the Apollo Bay presbytery, where the abuse occurred.

The church evades the police, 1975

In 1975, Gerald Ridsdale was appointed to be in charge of St Mary's parish at **Inglewood**, an old gold rush town, north-west

of Bendigo. Inglewood was then within the Ballarat diocese, although it has since been re-allocated to the Sandhurst (Bendigo) diocese. It was in Inglewood that his crimes first came to the notice of police. Inglewood policeman Bill Sampson received several complaints about Ridsdale and passed them on to Detective Sergeant Col Mooney in Bendigo. Mooney's inquiries were frustrated, however, when some parents would not allow their son to be interviewed, and Mooney was able to obtain only one written statement. Meanwhile, Ridsdale disappeared from the town. Sergeant Mooney visited Bishop Mulkearns to tell him what he had learnt from one victim about Ridsdale's behaviour. The bishop assured Mooney that the Ridsdale situation was under control and the church would handle it. [Forensic psychologist Ian Joblin told the court in the 1994 hearing that he believed that the church already knew about Ridsdale's problem before he went to Inglewood.]

Ridsdale has admitted that he was committing buggery at Inglewood and also before going to Inglewood. One buggery victim in 1975 was "Larry", aged 12, who was an altar boy at another central Victorian town. Ridsdale used to visit Larry's town and he took Larry to stay at the Inglewood presbytery. Larry finally contacted **Broken Rites** and the police in 1994 and was included in the 1994 prosecution. Another buggery victim in Inglewood in 1975 was "Andy" who also came forward in 1994. Ridsdale pleaded guilty to both of these.

After Ridsdale left Inglewood, the hierarchy gave the town a replacement priest, who (according to victims) soon heard from parishioners about the Ridsdale scandal, which had become the talk of the town since Ridsdale's disappearance.

It is unusual for a priest who is in charge of a parish, as was Ridsdale in 1975 at Inglewood, to suddenly vanish after a few months. Priests take a close interest in each other's appointments — and all of Ridsdale's fellow priests in the Ballarat diocese knew about his sudden disappearance from Inglewood.

After escaping from Inglewood, Ridsdale evidently spent some time based at the Ballarat Cathedral presbytery, doing relieving work in various parishes while awaiting a new appointment. A victim (**Stephen**) told police in 1994 that, when he went to the Ballarat Cathedral presbytery in 1975 to seek counselling about a sexual matter, Father Ridsdale came to the door. Stephen says that, later that day, Ridsdale sodomised him. (Ridsdale pleaded guilty to this in 1994.).

Stephen said in his police statements that, before being sexually assaulted by Ridsdale, he had also been indecently assaulted by Christian Brother Edward Dowlan and another Christian Brother at the St Alipius primary school, Ballarat East.

Late 1970s

In late 1975, despite the diocese's knowledge about the Inglewood crimes, Ridsdale was appointed to a more remote parish, St Malachy's at **Edenhope**, near the South Australian border. As usual, Ridsdale's new parishioners were not warned about Ridsdale being a risk to boys. There — unsupervised and out of sight — he committed more crimes (including buggery) until 1979.

In Edenhope, according to his victims, Ridsdale was active and apparently undaunted by his close shave with the police at Inglewood. Edenhope victims remember him coming into parish classrooms and choosing boys whom he would abuse in the nearby presbytery. Victims say the whole school knew that Ridsdale was up to no good.

One victim in the late 1970s was "Shane", an altar boy, who lived at in Ridsdale's earlier parish of Apollo Bay. Ridsdale had sexually abused him frequently while at Apollo Bay. Soon after Ridsdale was appointed to Edenhope, the priest heard that Shane's father died in an accident. Ridsdale returned to the Apollo Bay district to conduct the father's funeral and then offered to take Shane (aged 12) and his sister "Jill" (aged 11) to the Edenhope presbytery. The children's mother gratefully accepted the offer. Back at Edenhope, on the night of the funeral, Ridsdale indecently mauled the girl and later the boy — while they were still grieving their father's death. Jill told police in 1994 that, about 1990, she informed a female counsellor at the **Catholic Family Welfare Bureau** in Geelong about these assaults but the counsellor did not suggest reporting the priest to the police. Jill said she was surprised and angry about this omission.

Shane said in his police statement: "I couldn't speak to my mother about it [the sexual abuse] because she is really religious... What Ridsdale did to me affected my life in several ways. I have had to keep this secret all my life and I believe that has affected my self-confidence. I was never able to speak to my mother about it because of her religious beliefs and it would have caused her too much pain."

At Edenhope, Ridsdale even sodomised one boy ("**Jason**") at the altar when the church was empty and locked, after Mass.

More than a decade later — in November 1992 — it was this Jason who phoned the Victoria Police to spark off an investigation that resulted in the first jailing of Ridsdale in 1993. (*The sad story of Jason is told at the end of this article.*)

The 1980s

A year in Melbourne

By 1980, Gerald Ridsdale's behaviour was so rampant that the diocese sent him to have a rest at the church's "National Pastoral Institute" in Elsternwick, Melbourne. This removal was known to all his colleagues in western Victoria.

Ridsdale continued offending while in Melbourne. In 1980 he met "**Peter**", aged 12, who lived in Melbourne. Peter was distressed by his parents' impending separation. Ridsdale had a bungalow at the Institute, where he abused Peter. Ridsdale took Peter on a trip to opal fields at White Cliffs NSW and abused him there.

Another parish, more victims

In 1981, despite Ridsdale's record, the Ballarat diocese put him back into parish work at **Mortlake** (St Colman's parish), in south-western Victoria. Within days of his arrival, a Mortlake mother phoned a senior cleric at the bishop's office in Ballarat to report that Ridsdale had just indecently assaulted her son. According to the victim's family, the cleric remarked that the boy must have a vivid imagination. However, someone in the diocese evidently tipped off Ridsdale, who promptly visited the mother and claimed innocence [but he eventually pleaded guilty in court].

During that year, Mortlake families complained repeatedly to the diocesan office about Ridsdale, but the diocese resisted. The Mortlake story was finally exposed to the public in 1994. One victim told police in 1994 that Ridsdale sexually assaulted nearly all of this boy's mates in his class at St Colman's primary school, Mortlake.

When he went to Mortlake, Ridsdale was still in contact with "Peter", the boy he had abused while living at the National Pastoral Institute. In 1981, Peter went to live with Ridsdale at the Mortlake presbytery. Others victims say Peter was sleeping with Ridsdale. Ridsdale pleaded guilty to indecently assaulting Peter.

One of Ridsdale's Mortlake boys was bleeding from the anus, so his parents complained to a senior priest (Monsignor Leo Fiscalini) in another parish. The parents say Fiscalini urged the boy and his family to remain silent "for the church's sake".

After Ridsdale left Mortlake, parishioners told the next priest (and also the one after that) about Ridsdale's abuse.

Sydney, 1982-86

In 1982 Ridsdale was sent even further away, to **Sydney**, where the church gave him a desk job at the Catholic Inquiry Centre. In Sydney, where he stayed until 1985, he still found victims. He frequented various Sydney parishes and youth groups.

In the mid-1980s he was being used as a relief priest in the **Diocese of Broken Bay**, north of Sydney. E.g., about 1985, he was listed as living in the presbytery at Woy Woy (St John the Baptist parish). After Easter 1986, he administered the parish of Forestville (Our Lady of Good Counsel parish) for two months.

Ridsdale is wanted by the **NSW police** for sex offences in that State. Also, in 1994, the church was served with a civil writ, claiming damages for offences that occurred in Sydney.

During this Sydney period, he also served as a sea-going chaplain on Pacific cruises.

Ridsdale's removal from Victoria did not go unnoticed among his colleagues. At Ridsdale's 1994 pre-sentence hearing, one of his colleagues, **Father Frank Madden** (giving character evidence on behalf of Ridsdale), was asked about Ridsdale's transfer to Sydney in 1982. Madden told the court: "I knew [in 1982] that he went to [work in] the Sydney Inquiry Centre and to get treatment."

Final parish, late 1980s

Gerald Ridsdale's last parish appointment came in 1986 when the Ballarat diocese posted him to the town of Horsham (the parish of Saints Michael and John), in Victoria's west, where he committed more offences. Also, in August 1987, a 25-year-old Horsham man disclosed to his mother that he had been molested by Ridsdale while staying at the Edenhope presbytery when he was 16. The mother immediately complained to the diocesan office, objecting to Ridsdale's presence in Horsham and demanding that Ridsdale be removed from access to altar boys. The diocese, however, refused to do this and Ridsdale continued at Horsham.

In 1988 (according to evidence in court in 1994) Ridsdale told his colleague **Father Frank Madden**: "I will have to get out of here. My past is catching up with me."

Trip to the USA, 1990

Eventually, after the Horsham mother persisted, the Ballarat diocese gave Ridsdale a trip to the United States in 1990 to stay at a residence for paedophile priests in Jemez Springs in the state of New Mexico (conducted by a religious order called the Servants of the Paraclete).

Fellow-priests in Victoria knew the reason for the U.S. trip. At Ridsdale's 1994 pre-sentence hearing, one of his colleagues, **Father Frank Madden** (giving character evidence on behalf of Ridsdale), was asked if he had been aware that Ridsdale was sent to the USA for sexual problems. Madden replied, "Yes."

DEFENCE COUNSEL: "You knew he had a sexual attraction for boys and had been involved in sex activities with boys?"

FATHER MADDEN: "Yes."

DEFENCE COUNSEL: "Before he went to the USA [in 1990], you were aware he was getting counselling from a priest who is a counsellor?"

MADDEN: "Yes, I knew that."

While having his nine-month sojourn at Jemez Springs in New Mexico, Ridsdale also did "locums" for parishes in the local diocese — and the U.S. church has received complaints about him molesting children while in that country.

Another colleague of Ridsdale, **Father Brendan Davey** (giving evidence on behalf of Ridsdale in 1994), was asked in court about Ridsdale's 1990 trip to New Mexico, USA. Davey was asked: "When he [Ridsdale] came back from New Mexico, did he tell you that he had been a pederast?"

Davey told the court: "Yes."

Ridsdale a "counsellor", 1991-93

Returning to Australia, Gerald Ridsdale was re-appointed to the ministry in 1991 in a far-away location in New South Wales — as a chaplain at **St John of God** psychiatric hospital (operated by the Catholic religious order of St John of God Brothers) in Richmond, west of Sydney. According to church procedures, such an appointment would require the approval of Ridsdale's superior, the bishop of Ballarat.

Ridsdale's role as chaplain included counselling patients. One wonders how it was possible for the church to allow a sex-offender, like Ridsdale, to be inflicted on psychiatric patients in a "counselling" role.

And not just that. The patients at St John of God included patients who were suffering from the effects of sexual abuse. That is, the church was allowing a sex abuser (Ridsdale) to "counsel" the kind of victims that he himself had abused. *This was revealed in 2002 by former staff and patients at the hospital in the Sydney "Daily Telegraph" and the Melbourne "Herald Sun" on June 4 and 5, 2002.*

A former patient in 1992, Steven R, told a reporter: "I remember him [Ridsdale]. He used to come around and sit with us ... and console us. We had a day room with about 30 patients. Most had been sexually abused as children. He used to touch me on the leg. I used to hate that."

A victim tells the police

In late 1992, while Ridsdale was still working at the St John of God hospital, Victoria Police publicised a phone-in ("Operation Paradox") regarding child sex-abuse. One caller was "**Jason**", a Ridsdale victim from Edenhope. Jason signed his first police statement on 5 November 1992. Police then began making inquiries about Ridsdale. Jason was able to nominate other possible victims — and not just in Edenhope.

Early in 1993, Victoria Police summoned Ridsdale from New South Wales to Victoria for his first court appearance.

A former nurse at the St John of God hospital, Jeffrey Green, told the "Daily Telegraph" he recalled Ridsdale being at the hospital one Friday and then "he just disappeared in a puff of smoke". Mr Green said: "One of the St John of God Brothers told me that Ridsdale had to return to Melbourne because of family problems. It was later discovered that Ridsdale had been jailed."

Mr Green said he worked alongside Ridsdale and was "livid" when he discovered Ridsdale's background.

Mr Green said: "He [Ridsdale] was a perpetrator and they chose to bring him back to work with victims of child sexual-abuse. They chose to put him in this position without anybody's knowledge. That charade was maintained until the day he went to court.

"The hospital did everything they could to cover this up, they were evasive about it. I asked one of the St John of God Brothers, 'How could you allow a pedophile to work here in this hospital?' and his response was, 'We knew nothing'.

Mr Green said: "But somebody must have known. His bishop must have known..."

Ridsdale's nephew, David

Ridsdale sexually abused several of his nephews. One of these, **David Ridsdale**, was a victim in the 1993 prosecution. [David Ridsdale later spoke in the media about his experiences, using his real name, so that is why Broken Rites is using David's real name in this article.]

David Ridsdale came from a family of nine children. He said it was "very Catholic" home, and the family's friends included a Ballarat priest, Father **George Pell**, who eventually became the archbishop of Melbourne and later Sydney. David said that originally his uncle Gerald was his hero. At one stage, David even aspired to be a priest. But when he was aged 11 in the late 1970s, his uncle started molesting him.

David said: "He offered to teach me to drive his car. I had no idea what was going on.

"He had a great deal of trust within the family. He told me straight that no-one would believe me if I said anything [about the abuse]."

The abuse continued until David was 15, in 1982, leaving scars on David's adolescence and adulthood. He became a rebel at home and travelled the country aimlessly.

David remained silent about the abuse for many years. He did not want his grandmother (Gerry Ridsdale's mother) to know about it.

David Ridsdale and George Pell

Early in February 1993, when he was 25, David was considering reporting Gerry Ridsdale to the police. David says he consulted family friend **George Pell**, who by then had become an auxiliary bishop in Melbourne. There is some dispute about who said what during this alleged conversation. David later claimed (in an interview published in "Outrage" magazine in April 1997) that Pell encouraged David to remain silent about the abuse but Pell denies doing this.

After this conversation with Pell, David decided that he would not be able to obtain justice through the church. Instead, David immediately phoned the police, who made an appointment for David to talk to detectives, so that he could make (and sign) a written statement about the crimes that Ridsdale had committed on David. In fact, unknown to David, detectives had already opened a file on Gerald Ridsdale because another victim ("Jason" from the Edenhope parish in far-western Victoria) had made a police statement about having been abused by Ridsdale. The detectives soon found some more of Ridsdale's victims.

So, in February 1993, police formally charged Father Gerald Francis Ridsdale with indecently assaulting five boys, including David and "Jason". Later, four more victims were added to the case, making a total of nine.

- In 2002, David Ridsdale was interviewed by the Nine TV network's "Sixty Minutes" program, regarding Gerald Ridsdale and George Pell. You can watch a re-play of the interview by clicking a link at the end of this Broken Rites article.

The first court case, 1993

Gerald Ridsdale was scheduled to appear in the Melbourne Magistrates Court on 27 May 1993. One of his victims alerted the media. This is how a Channel Nine camera man happened to be waiting for the arrival of Ridsdale and his support person, Bishop George Pell. A reporter from *The Age* daily newspaper, also, was in court; and a story appeared in the next edition of this paper. Broken Rites still possesses a cutting of this *Age* news story.

Gerald Francis Ridsdale pleaded guilty regarding nine boys (when he was in parishes at Apollo Bay, Ballarat East, Inglewood and Edenhope) and was jailed for a minimum of three months.

After being released from jail in August 1993, Ridsdale spent some time staying at his family's home in Ballarat and also at a presbytery in western Victoria, where the parish priest was a friend of his.

Broken Rites hotline

In September 1993, **Broken Rites** was establishing an Australia-wide telephone hotline. The phone number was publicised in newspaper articles and radio programs throughout Australia. Several victims from Ridsdale's May 1993 court case phoned us. They said that there are countless more Ridsdale victims out there somewhere.

Gradually, Broken Rites, began hearing from additional Ridsdale victims who had not been included in the May 1993 prosecution. We advised these newcomers to contact the Victoria Police sexual offences and child abuse unit (the SOCA unit). This unit began taking written statements from the victims.

Damage control

In late 1993, the church authorities realised that the police were preparing to take Ridsdale to court again to face more charges. The church needed to protect its image. Ballarat's Bishop Ronald Mulkearns announced that he had asked the Pope to "dispense" Ridsdale from his "priestly ordination". Mulkearns said the Pope had agreed to this, and the Pope therefore returned Ridsdale "to the lay state". (This ensured that, next time Ridsdale appeared in court, the media would describe him as a FORMER priest.)

However, a colleague of Ridsdale — Father John McKinnon, parish priest at Warracknabeal in the Ballarat diocese — wrote in his parish newsletter that this did not mean that the church had "dismissed" or disowned Ridsdale. McKinnon claimed that Ridsdale himself had requested the change of status. [Did Father McKinnon mean that, if Ridsdale had not requested the change, the church would not — or should not — have dismissed or disowned him?]

The second court case, 1994

Late in 1993, Detective Constable John Norris, of Warrnambool, was gathering written statements from Ridsdale victims with a view to prosecuting him again. On 31 December 1993, during this investigation, the Ballarat diocese wrote to the families of some Ridsdale complainants, seeking to interview these families. The letter was signed by Father Glynn Murphy, who was Bishop Mulkearns's secretary and also convenor of the Ballarat Diocese "special issues committee" on clergy sexual abuse. [One result of this initiative would be that the church could ascertain what evidence a particular victim would be giving to police.]

On 19 January 1994, Gerald Francis Ridsdale appeared in the Melbourne Magistrates Court for a bail hearing, at which he was formally charged with some of the additional offences. Representatives from **Broken Rites** were present in the courtroom's public gallery during this hearing. That evening's television news had footage of Ridsdale being escorted to the court by a police officer.

This time, no bishop accompanied Ridsdale to the court. Why not?

The new charges caused a sensation throughout Victoria, especially in the Ballarat diocese. **Bishop Mulkearns** issued an open letter to all west Victorian parishes, defending his administration. He said: "I can say that **this past 18 months or so** [since the police began investigating Ridsdale for the first court case] has been a nightmare for me and that matters which have come to light in that time have cast an enormous shadow over the diocese."

Mulkearns said the allegation had been made that the church knew of the abuse that was taking place in the diocese but did nothing about it. He said: "I hope it is unnecessary ... for me to say that this is simply untrue." (Warrnambool Standard, 1 February 1994.)

That is, in early 1994, Mulkearns seemed (to some people) to be denying that the diocese knew about Ridsdale's criminality before the police investigation of 1992-3. In May 1994, Gerald Ridsdale's sister Shirley (mother of one of Ridsdale's victims) wrote to Mulkearns, accusing the bishop of being untruthful in his denial. Bishop Mulkearns replied to Shirley on 2 June 1994, explaining that he had been unaware of the "extent" of the crimes. Mulkearns admitted that he knew in 1975 about Ridsdale's actions at Inglewood but said he "immediately removed" Ridsdale from that parish.

[From 1975 onwards, however, Mulkearns re-assigned the abusive priest to further parishes.]

On 13 May 1994, a preliminary ("committal") hearing was held at the Warrnambool Magistrates Court. A **Broken Rites** researcher travelled from Melbourne to study the proceedings, and every Melbourne television channel had a film crew there. Two fellow-priests (who had been fellow students with Ridsdale at the seminary in the 1950s) accompanied Ridsdale to court, but there was still nobody present from the church to support the victims. Ridsdale was again featured on that evening's television news.

This hearing was told that Ridsdale was facing 180 charges, including 21 of buggery, two of attempted buggery, 102 of indecent assault and 55 of gross indecency.

On 3 August 1994, the Ridsdale case moved to the County Court (in Warrnambool), with a judge. The number of charged incidents was reduced — to merely one or two "representative" incidents per victim. Ridsdale pleaded guilty to the lot.

Two fellow-priests

One purpose of the August 1994 hearing was for defence witnesses to give evidence about Ridsdale's character and background, so as to help the judge to decide what penalty to impose on Ridsdale. Two priests, who accompanied Ridsdale to the Warrnambool court proceedings, gave evidence on behalf of Ridsdale about his background.

1. **Father Frank Madden**, parish priest at Horsham in 1994. Madden, who said he was aged 67 in 1994, had been a mature-age entrant to the Melbourne seminary, where he met Ridsdale as a fellow student. Madden was Ridsdale's successor in the

Horsham parish after Ridsdale was removed from there in 1988. (Therefore, Madden knew some of the Horsham families who had been affected by Ridsdale.)

2. **Father Brendan Davey** of Ararat (who said he was 58 in 1994) had been at school with Ridsdale in Ballarat and the pair had been room-mates in the seminary.

Sentencing

In Melbourne on 14 October 1994, Ridsdale was sentenced to his second jail term. Judge John Dee told Ridsdale: "The victims were not given, in my view, any priority by your superiors in the Catholic Church [who were] aware of your conduct. The image and reputation of the church was given first priority. You were given some perfunctory in-house counselling before being shifted off to continue your criminal conduct in other areas."

Several victims attended the sentencing as observers. Afterwards, a priest (a friend of Ridsdale) stood outside the court, taking photos of these victims as they left. This was a breach of privacy and an act of harassment. The victims said they felt they were being victimised again.

After the 1994 jailing, more Ridsdale victims contacted the Victorian police or **Broken Rites**.

Police investigate the bishop

In the 1994 conviction, about two-thirds of the offences (including buggery) occurred before Ridsdale went to Inglewood. About one third of the offences (including three buggery offences) occurred after 1975 — that is, after the police told Bishop Mulkeams about Ridsdale at Inglewood. Therefore, some victims complained to police in 1995 that Bishop Mulkeams had knowingly transferred a child-abuser to further parishes to commit more offences.

Melbourne detectives conducted an investigation, "Operation Arcadia", in July 1995 to determine whether Bishop Ronald Mulkeams could be charged with 'misprision (concealing) of a felony'.

In late 1995, **Broken Rites** obtained a copy of the Operation Arcadia report under Freedom of Information legislation. The report reveals that police received complaints in 1975 that Ridsdale had indecently assaulted boys in Inglewood. Detective Col Mooney, of Bendigo, investigated the matter and tried to locate Ridsdale but was told by the church that he was not available. Mooney was then advised by his direct superior, Superintendent O'Sullivan, to approach Mulkeams and notify him about the complaint. This was done the following day, and Mulkeams was handed a written statement from one boy, detailing the offences. The Bendigo police headquarters then left it up to Mulkeams to "deal with" Ridsdale.

The Operation Arcadia report, in September 1995, concluded that, as the offence in the Inglewood boy's statement (given to Mulkeams) was a misdemeanour offence (indecent assault), not a felony (buggery), the police were unable to charge Bishop Mulkeams with concealing a felony. In Victoria's criminal statutes, there is no offence of concealing a misdemeanour. The Operation Arcadia report indicates that Bishop Ronald Mulkeams knew in 1975 that Ridsdale was committing crimes of indecent assault but the bishop claims he did not know about the **penetration** offences (i.e., felonies).

Another interesting feature of the Operation Arcadia report is that the police found no evidence of Ridsdale ever undergoing proper professional therapy in the 1970s. Apart from having discussions with his superiors, Ridsdale merely visited a priests' retreat, which was a kind of drop-in centre. So Ridsdale went on to offend at Edenhope, Mortlake and Horsham.

The bishop resigns

In 1996, **Broken Rites** circulated copies of the Operation Arcadia report to all Australian bishops. The contents alarmed Mulkeams's fellow bishops, who now realised that Mulkeams was a liability.

Mulkeams finally had to write a letter to the Australian Catholic bishops (published in the Ballarat "Courier" on 21 December 1996). In this, he denied that he knew "**in 1971**" about Ridsdale's crimes but his letter dodged the years after 1971. What about 1972 ... or 1973 ... or 1974? He said he did not know about the **felonies**, but the letter did not mention that police told him in 1975 about the **indecent assaults**.

In May 1997, Bishop Ron Mulkeams took early retirement. Announcing his resignation, Mulkeams said ("Herald Sun", Melbourne, 31 May 1997) that his emotional energy had been sapped "by the draining effect" of the sexual abuse scandals.

And Mulkeams was not referring just to Ridsdale. **Broken Rites** knows of other abusive priests in the Ballarat diocese during the Ridsdale years.

The third court case, 2006

After the 1994 jailing, more Ridsdale victims contacted **Broken Rites** or the police. The Ballarat Criminal Investigation Unit

(under Detective Sergeant Kevin Carson) compiled written statements. At first, Victoria's Office of Public Prosecutions was reluctant to spend time and money on a further Ridsdale prosecution. But the victims persisted and eventually, on 6 August 2006, Ridsdale (aged 72 that year) was charged again — in the Ballarat County Court.

The offences were committed on boys when he was a parish priest in Warrnambool, Ballarat East, Apollo Bay, Inglewood, Edenhope, Mortlake and Horsham.

The prosecutor said Ridsdale offered one 11-year-old victim special training so he could become an altar boy. He told the boy he was going to make him "special enough" to become an altar boy and that, because the priest was close to God, he knew what to do. Ridsdale then went on to abuse the boy.

Sentencing Ridsdale to an effective four additional years in jail, Judge Bill White criticised the Catholic Church for its failure to act after receiving complaints about Ridsdale's conduct, and its failure to show adequate compassion to some victims. He said the constant moving of Ridsdale from parish to parish only provided more opportunities for his predatory conduct.

As security guards led Ridsdale out of the court, a woman called out: "Mr Ridsdale, I'm one of the social workers who had to clean up the mess you made. It was horrific."

Fourth court case, in 2013 and 2014

Ridsdale was due to become eligible for parole in June 2013 after serving his long prison sentence. But by early 2013, additional Ridsdale victims had contacted the detectives in the Victoria Police sex-crimes squad.

So, instead of going before the Parole Board, Ridsdale was charged in the Melbourne Magistrates Court on 18 November 2013 with multiple new offences against 14 victims (eleven males and three females).

Ridsdale pleaded guilty to 29 charges including one count of buggery, 27 counts of indecent assault, and one count of carnal knowledge of a girl. The offences were committed between 1961 and 1980 at various Victorian towns. The victims included three children from one family.

The court decided not to proceed with more than 50 other charges.

According to documents tabled in court, Ridsdale indecently assaulted one ten-year-old girl numerous times including: once at the presbytery house; once while medically assisting her injured knee; and once during Confession when he made her perform sexual acts after telling her that she was wicked and naughty and had to be punished.

His victims included children who regularly attended church or participated in after-school programs he ran. The children were abused in various locations - in cars while driving them around, in a bed he shared with them and at his parish and in surrounding bushland.

As result of this Magistrates Court hearing, the Ridsdale case was passed on to a higher court, the Melbourne County Court, for sentencing.

Sentencing, April 2014

The sentencing was conducted in the Melbourne County Court on 8 April 2014 by Chief Judge Michael Rozenes. In his sentencing remarks, Judge Rozenes said that Ridsdale's "unfettered sexual deviance" had been a blatant breach of the trust existing between priests and parishioners. He said that Ridsdale had preyed on his vulnerable victims under the guise of being the 'friendly priest'. Ridsdale's position in the church involved a high degree of trust and some degree of power and his offending had had a devastating impact on his young victims, he said.

Judge Rozenes said the contents of the victim impact statements detailing the effect of Ridsdale's offending could only be described as powerful.

"Collectively they shared some common themes: a feeling of being exploited; feeling trapped, powerless, worthless and humiliated; anger at, and distrust of, the Catholic church; loss of faith and innocence; loss of the enjoyment of childhood; a sense of bewilderment and disbelief; and the fracturing of family relationships.

"Tragically, many thought that they were to blame for your actions. To me, one of the most tragic comments I heard was that 'if I had 'taken my turn' maybe my little brothers would have had happier lives'."

The judge said that the mothers of some of the victims "conveyed an understandable, but unjustified, guilt at having failed to protect their children".

The judge said: "Mr Ridsdale, I sincerely hope that you now understand how your offending has not only affected your victims,

but created a ripple effect that has touched upon all aspects of their lives."

Another priest knew about Ridsdale's criminal behaviour, the court is told

During these proceedings in 2014, the court heard an edited summary of what each of the 14 victims had told the police investigators. For example, one female victim (born in 1962) said in her police statement that when she was aged 10 to 11, she used to visit the presbytery (where Ridsdale was living) at the Saint Alipius parish in Ballarat East. The victim, who turned 11 during 1973, said in her police statement that on one occasion, she was cutting up vegetables in the presbytery kitchen when Ridsdale grabbed her, dragged her into a room and sexually assaulted her.

Another priest, who walked past before going outside, saw what was happening but did not intervene, the victim said.

(The name of this silent priest, who allegedly knew about Ridsdale's behaviour, is known to the prosecutor and defence lawyers and the judge, but the name was **not** stated in the edited summary as heard in court.)

Addressing Ridsdale during sentencing, Judge Rozenes said:

"Although it does not directly involve you, Mr Ridsdale, there is a further disturbing aspect to this incident, namely that this complainant believes another priest was present for a short time while you were sexually assaulting her and must have been aware of the assault but did not intervene.

"I raise this merely to make an observation: namely that this behaviour appears to be demonstrative of the church's approach to sexual abuse at the time which ultimately — and unfortunately, for your victims — allowed your criminal behaviour to go unchecked for so long."

A suicide

While he was summarising the 14 cases (and mentioning their family backgrounds), Judge Rozenes noted that three of the victims were from one family. This family was a large one (with male and female children) who had been "befriended" by Ridsdale.

The judge said that a fourth child (a male) in this family eventually took his own life. The judge said that the court does not know whether this deceased brother, too, was a victim of Ridsdale.

Because he is dead, this brother was not available to be interviewed by detectives. Therefore Ridsdale was not charged regarding this deceased brother.

Broken Rites has been told that the victims from this family were abused by Ridsdale when they were staying (as his guests) at Ridsdale's presbytery in Edenhope, western Victoria. The siblings were living in another part of Victoria. Broken Rites understands that the brother who took his own life did so by hanging himself some years later, when he was aged about 20.

Additional time in jail

On 8 April 2014, Judge Rozenes sentenced Ridsdale to an additional eight years in jail (with a minimum of five before becoming eligible to apply for parole).

This means that he could be in jail until 2022 (when he is turning 88), but will be eligible for apply for parole in April 2019 (when he is turning 85).

More complaints about Ridsdale

Since late 1993, Broken Rites has been interviewing numerous victims of Gerald Ridsdale. Some, but not of all of these victims, have spoken to the police.

Here is one example of the Broken Rites research in the 1990s:

While ministering in the city of Ballarat in the early 1960s, Ridsdale acted as a visiting "chaplain" at a local orphanage — Nazareth House, in Mill Street, Ballarat (operated by the Sisters of Nazareth). In the 1960s, Nazareth House contained homeless girls, but today it is purely an aged-care home.

At Nazareth House, the nuns allowed Ridsdale to take any child to a private room for "Confession", "counselling", or "sex education". Several women have told Broken Rites that, while they were at Nazareth House, they were mauled indecently by Ridsdale.

One victim ("Dorothy") said she was in Nazareth House, aged from 9 to 12, after her parents separated. At age 10, Nazareth House sent her to another town to have respite care with a temporary foster family, and the nuns allowed Ridsdale to drive

the girl there in his car. Out in the countryside, he stopped the car and mauled her genitals.

Dorothy told Broken Rites: "I didn't know about sex — the nuns told us nothing. When the Beatles came to Australia, we weren't allowed to watch them on TV. We weren't allowed to be with a male. Yet they put me in the hands of Ridsdale.

"When I returned to Nazareth House, I didn't tell the nuns what Ridsdale did to me. They would have hit me."

Broken Rites is doing further research regarding Nazareth House, Ballarat.

In the early 1960s, Ridsdale was also a visiting chaplain at an institution for homeless boys in the parish of St James at Sebastapol, a Ballarat suburb

Summing up

The Catholic Church provided a framework for Ridsdale's crimes. The church selected Ridsdale for the priesthood (while prohibiting married priests and women priests), placed him on a high pedestal, advertised him as being "celibate" and then turned him loose among the children.

By enforcing "high" and strict moral standards on its congregations (regarding sexuality), the church convinced parents that their children were safe with Ridsdale. Until about 1993, such priestly crimes were "unheard of" — for the simple reason that the church skilfully covered them up.

Broken Rites helped to put an end to the Ridsdale cover-up. Thus, we helped to obtain justice for his victims — and, later, justice for the victims of other perpetrators.

Victims' stories

Here are some stories from Ridsdale victims, as told to Broken Rites in late 1993:-

1. Daniel at Swan Hill, 1966-9

"Daniel" (born 1956) lived with his family in a rural community outside Swan Hill, northern Victoria. He told Broken Rites on 5 October 1993:

"My family lived in a farming area, a few kilometres from Swan Hill. My mother used to take us to Mass at St Mary's parish in Swan Hill .

"I remember that Father Gerry Ridsdale used to hold what he called 'twilight retreats' at the church in Swan Hill, which would be attended by about 20 boys including me, with no adults present apart from Ridsdale. His talks were all about sex and how you should not entertain impure thoughts. He seemed to thrive on all this dirty talk. The over-all message was 'Don't Do It'. It's a pity he didn't follow his own advice.

"When I was in about Grade 6, Father Ridsdale started coming out to our district on Sundays to say Mass in a rural hall for the local farming community. I was made an altar boy. He also used to visit my family's farm on Sundays, and he often took me in his car for what he described as bird-watching trips. He had a pair of binoculars and, when he was getting me to look through the binoculars, he would interfere with me. He would also molest me in his car on these trips. He would strip me to my underpants and also strip himself to his underpants and then lie on top of me on the front seat of his car with the doors open. This happened on quite a few occasions, not just once.

"He made it clear that I was not to tell anybody — and I obeyed.

"After primary school, I dropped out of being an altar boy. Later, I also dropped out of going to Mass. Mum was still going but Dad used to go somewhere else on Sundays and I started going wherever Dad went.

"It was many years before I ever told anybody about Ridsdale. When I saw on the TV news this year [1993] that Ridsdale had been jailed for child molestation, I discussed it with members of my family. And then my family heard on regional radio about the Broken Rites telephone hotline. So here I am.

"I am very aware that Ridsdale seriously disrupted my teenage sexual development. It had drastic effects on me."

2. Andy at Inglewood 1975

In December 1993, "Andy" (born 1960) told Broken Rites about his experiences as an altar boy for Father Gerald Ridsdale in Inglewood in 1975:

"At Inglewood, Jerry Ridsdale made his presbytery into a drop-in centre for youth. Nearly every boy in Inglewood aged

between 10 and 15, including non-Catholics, would have visited him at some time.

"He had a pool table. Parents assumed that it was a safe environment. When Ridsdale started inviting me to visit him, my mother encouraged me to go.

"Boys were welcome to stay overnight. Ridsdale also had boys from other parishes staying with him, including some from Bendigo and Ballarat.

"I remember when I first found out what Ridsdale was really like. We had just driven another boy home, and then suddenly I was left alone with Ridsdale in his car. I will never forget it.

"I later had many similar experiences at Ridsdale's presbytery. Meanwhile, my family kept on encouraging me to visit him.

"Ridsdale would have had many victims in Inglewood.

"Because of the kind of upbringing and schooling that we had, it was difficult, even impossible, for us to tell our parents. The clergy is on such a high pedestal that nobody wants to hear anything negative about a priest. Many victims do not even talk about church-abuse to other victims.

"If a child molester wants to get access to children, the best place for him is in the priesthood. It is a perfect cover. The molester is even aided and abetted by the victims and their parents.

"Eventually, one Inglewood boy did tell his parents, and this father kicked up a fuss and wanted Ridsdale to get out of town. Evidently this father did not take it any further. He just wanted the problem shifted out of Inglewood.

"But the result was that the Ridsdale problem got shifted to Edenhope.

"After Ridsdale left Inglewood, the whole town soon found out why. The diocesan authorities, who had to find him a new parish, also knew why. They had been shifting Ridsdale around for years.

"I never told anybody that I was a Ridsdale victim, but the experience had a disastrous affect on me. I stopped trying at school and I messed up my final year of studies.

"In July, 1993, when I was living in Melbourne, I saw a 'Compass' program on ABC TV about church sexual abuse. I rang the church authorities in Melbourne and interviewed a senior person in the archdiocese, but he didn't seem interested and nobody got back to me.

"I have therefore instructed a firm of solicitors to begin a civil legal claim against the Catholic Church for damages for negligence in having inflicted Ridsdale upon me.

"My experience with Ridsdale has messed up my life and I am undergoing therapy."

3. Larry at Inglewood 1975

"Larry" (born 1963) told Broken Rites on 22 November 1993:

"I am from a Catholic family of 15 children in central Victoria. In 1975 our parish priest was away, and Jerry Ridsdale came from Inglewood to say Mass at my local church. I was then eleven and a half years old. I was an altar boy. Ridsdale offered to take me and two younger brothers (aged 10 and 9) to his presbytery at Inglewood for a weekend, during which we would serve as his altar boys.

"He drove us to Inglewood late one Friday night and we went straight to bed. The sleeping arrangements were that my two younger brothers would sleep in one room and I would sleep in Ridsdale's room. On the first night, Ridsdale was in a big bed (which seemed to be a double bed), while I slept on a smaller bed along the foot of his bed. Nothing happened that night because it was very late.

"On the Saturday night, Ridsdale went and bought us fish and chips. During the evening about 14 or 15 local boys dropped in and stayed for varying lengths of time. There was a pool table in the house. The local boys went home, some on bikes. At bed time on the Saturday, he told me to get into the big bed. After going and locking up the house and putting off lights, he came and got into the big bed with me. He started interfering with me and then tried to penetrate me. I squealed like mad, and this made him give up.

"On the Sunday morning we said Mass at the Inglewood church. Then he drove us home to have lunch with our mum. I had been expecting to receive a watch from Mum for my 12th birthday and Ridsdale warned me that, if I told anybody about what he had done to me, he would tell Mum that I was a bold naughty boy — and therefore she would not give me a watch. I did

not tell my mother about it. But she could not be told anyway because she was a staunch Catholic (and still is) and priests can do no wrong. I still haven't told her.

"A month or so later, Ridsdale invited me and my two brothers for another weekend visit. I said I didn't want to go but Mum insisted, so I gave in to avoid a fuss. The same assault happened in Ridsdale's bedroom.

"A third invitation came and again I tried to refuse to go but I gave in to please Mum. I suffered another assault at the presbytery.

"When a fourth invitation came, I managed to evade it, much to Mum's disappointment.

"I never told anybody about what Ridsdale did — not my brothers, not any of my school friends. My mother's Catholic world would collapse if she found out.

"In recent times, I have told my fiancée with whom I have been living.

"About March 1993, after hearing sexual assault by clergy being talked about on TV, I went to a solicitor and told my story to a stranger for the first time. This week [November 1993], my solicitor saw an article about Broken Rites in a local newspaper, so I immediately phoned Broken Rites."

4. A concerned citizen at Mortlake, 1981-2

A woman who was closely associated with St Colman's parish primary school in Mortlake, south-western Victoria, told Broken Rites on 15 November 1993:

"A couple of days after Ridsdale arrived in Mortlake, one mother phoned Bishop Mulkearns's office to complain that Jerry Ridsdale had molested one of her sons. As the bishop was overseas, she spoke to [a senior official at the diocesan office] but he treated her like a criminal and said the boy must be imagining it. Ridsdale must have been tipped off about this complaint because a day or so later he visited the Mortlake family and denied that he had molested the boy.

"Eighteen months later, the same mother went to see Bishop Mulkearns, accompanied by her husband and another set of parents. They threatened to go to the police. We later learned that Sister Kate McGrath, then principal of the school, had also complained. The result was that Ridsdale left Mortlake within a few days.

"The next priest at Mortlake did not know why he had been sent to replace Ridsdale. The families told him and he was shattered. We also told the next two priests.

"In 1989, seven years after Ridsdale left Mortlake, one mother said in a discussion that her son had been abused by Ridsdale in 1981. She had stopped going to church. In 1990, Bishop Mulkearns came to Mortlake for a confirmation service and I told him about this mother— without success.

"I later wrote letters to Bishop Mulkearns about Ridsdale.

"In 1993, after the court case, I wrote again to the bishop about Ridsdale and sexual abuse in the church generally, and I also sent a copy to all the priests in the diocese.

"The Mortlake parents are intimidated. They don't want to hurt the church. Also, because they had Ridsdale visiting their homes as a member of the family, their own gullibility would be shown up."

The sad story of "Jason", the victim who first alerted the police

Beginning in September 1993, Broken Rites received many phone calls from "Jason" (then aged 30) who was a Ridsdale victim at Edenhope. He had heard about Broken Rites in the media.

It was Jason who phoned the Victoria Police anti-pedophile campaign ("Operation Paradox") in late 1992, resulting in the first police prosecution of Ridsdale in 1993.

When Jason made his first police statement in November 1992, he was too embarrassed to reveal that Ridsdale's offences against him included buggery. But in late 1993, after Ridsdale finished his first jail sentence, Jason told the police about the buggery offences, so these were included in the second prosecution in 1994.

"Jason" told Broken Rites on 20 September 1993:

"In 1976, when I was turning 13, I was attending the Mercy Nuns convent (St Malachy's) at Edenhope. Father Gerry Ridsdale lived right near the school and he was the school manager. I was an altar boy and he was always asking me to come to his

house, saying that he had some jobs for me to do there. My mother used to insist that I should go.

"He used to assault me at his house, in his car and at the church (including at the altar when the church was empty and locked). This went on for two years. He did everything to me that you can imagine. He penetrated me countless times.

"After each molestation, he would grant me Absolution, meaning that I did not have to tell anybody else about the sin that I had just committed with him.

"At first, I assumed that I was the only one but eventually another boy told me a similar story. I tried to tell my mother but she did not welcome hearing anything negative about a priest.

"When Ridsdale finally left the parish, he didn't get the usual send-off. We learned later that he went on 'renewal study leave', and this indicates that the diocesan office knew about what he had been doing.

"St Malachy's school left a lot to be desired. The Mercy nuns were hopeless. One girl who had been going out with a boy for a long time became pregnant. The nuns gave her hell and made her an outcast. Yet the nuns were quite happy to let Ridsdale remove boys from the classroom, one by one, and take each one to the presbytery, where he talked to them about sex before targeting them.

"In 1988 I told another priest what Ridsdale had done but this priest told me: *'The best thing is to put it behind you and get on with your life.'* [In 2006, this priest was still in charge of a parish in the diocese.]

"It is difficult now to get on with my life. Ridsdale has ruined my life."

The death of Jason

In 1993, Jason engaged lawyers to seek an out-of-court payment from the Ballarat Catholic Diocese to help him to pay the costs of repairing his life. The church's lawyers fought Jason's claim fiercely. The diocese eventually gave Jason a relatively small payment and it agreed to pay his legal expenses as well as the church's own legal expenses, but no amount of money could undo the damage that had been done to his life. The diocese probably spent as much on the fees for the two sets of lawyers as it gave to Jason.

Former Senior Detective John Norris, who prepared the 1994 prosecution, believes that, of all Ridsdale's victims, Jason was probably the most damaged. He was left a tormented mental and physical wreck. Melbourne journalist Ian Munro, who interviewed Jason, wrote: "Where some victims found jobs, fought their addictions and formed families, he [Jason] lived alone, drug addicted, isolated and haunted by his demons."

Jason died in May 2002, aged 39, after his fourth heart attack in a couple of months, but those close to him believe the real cause lay in the Ridsdale years.

Jason's sister "Rachel" told reporter Ian Munro: "His whole life he could not cope with it. He was on prescription medicine as long as I can remember. He was on a huge amount of medication. Anti-depressants, Serapax, Valium, and methadone."

Rachel lives with her husband and children on the farm where she and Jason grew up near Edenhope.

Jason was a typical, fun-loving farm boy — until the diocese sent Ridsale to Edenhope in February 1976.

Ridsdale drove an iridescent blue Datsun 240K. He installed a pool table at the presbytery and kept animals to amuse the children. He was big and loud. He had presence.

Rachel says of Ridsdale: "We'd had all these old-fashioned priests. When he came, he was this modern, high-energy fellow and he spent a lot of time at the school. He was like a breath of fresh air. There were no more fuddy-duddies. He was a super cool priest.

"I found him repulsive, though, because he would often kiss me in the church yard. He would find out it was your birthday and he would plant this big kiss on you."

Despite her own misgivings about Ridsdale — she hated it, for example, when he arrived one night and set about taking the family's confessions in Rachel's bedroom — her family was happy that the priest took a keen interest in Jason.

"I don't know how many times the car came here, and he picked up ["Jason"] and off they would go," Rachel says. The family thought how lucky Jason was.

Often Ridsdale dropped in to ask if he could have the boy to do some odd jobs around the presbytery. "There were never any jobs to do", Jason would eventually tell the police. Ridsdale would lock the door and molest and, eventually, rape him. Jason

told police he was raped weekly. His mother always insisted he go with the priest.

Jason told The Age newspaper in 1994: "He'd ask me somewhere and I'd say: 'No, I'm going to a friend's place.' Then he'd go over my head and go to my mother, and of course she'd always say yes. She'd say: 'You must help the priest, they need helping.' So he'd screw me out there.

"He once had sex with me and soon afterwards insisted on hearing my confession. Someone analysed that for me recently. They said he was trying to turn the blame back on to me for turning him on."

Rachel said her mother — a devout Irish Catholic — was the perfect dupe for Ridsdale. She said the family suspected nothing. She noticed a change in Jason over time but the truth was simply unthinkable.

In his early 20s, Jason tried to tell the family what had happened, apparently confiding in a local identity who called them to a meeting. By then his behaviour was somewhat erratic anyway, and when he told them a priest had raped him, Jason 's father and brother walked out in disbelief.

"We just had no idea that it was all true," Rachel says. "Even now it's very hard to comprehend that happened to my brother."

Perhaps, however, their mother suspected the truth before her death in 1991. She became less emphatic in her defence of the church, Rachel says.

Despite his long ordeal, Jason was not entirely the impotent victim. It was his call to the Victoria Police "Operation Paradox" that initiated inquiries into Ridsdale in late 1992 and early 1993.

Former acting Detective Sergeant Ray Steyger, who headed Operation Paradox, told The Age: "You could safely say that it was his call and the information that was received from him that initiated the investigation. As a result of that, we were able to put the other two pieces of information (relating to Ridsdale) together, and it went from there."

So, by phoning the police and Broken Rites, Jason helped to obtain justice for church sex-abuse victims in general.

Gerald Ridsdale and George Pell

In 2002, Ridsdale's nephew David Ridsdale was interviewed by the Nine TV network's "Sixty Minutes" program, concerning what David told Bishop George Pell about Ridsdale's abuse. This interview was re-played by "Sixty Minutes" in 2013. *To watch the video, click [HERE](#).*

Broken Rites is continuing its research about how the Catholic Church authorities covered up the crimes of Father Gerald Francis Ridsdale.

- ***This background article, by a Broken Rites researcher, was updated on 19 February 2016.***

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