

## Cleared priest's witch-hunt fears

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Tasmanian Anglican priest Father Alan Farrell yesterday warned that sex abuse allegations were the witch-hunts of the 1990s and were very hard to disprove once claimed.

Speaking from his Hobart home, Fr Farrell spoke candidly about his five-year fight against male rape charges, which ended this week after the Crown decided not to proceed with another trial alleging he raped a 34-year-old invalid pensioner in February 1994.

“It’s the nature of these sexual offences \_\_ I mean everyone is hysterical about them \_\_ they’re the new witch-hunts, especially if you happen to be a priest. But even if you’re not, you just have to be a man. Someone says ‘aha, he did this to me’ \_\_ and it’s very hard to disprove it because the damage is done,” he said.

Fr Farrell, who turns 50 next month, said that he knew of at least two prisoners who were convicted of sex crimes but were innocent.

“There are all sorts of innocent people in prison, but I was lucky enough to have friends, I was lucky enough to have money, I was able to have lawyers who believed in me and we fought it all the way to the High Court. That’s great \_\_ but not everyone can do that,” he said.

Fr Farrell, who came to Tasmania in 1992, was convicted of four counts of rape, one count of aggravated sexual assault and one count of assault in July 1995, and was sentenced to eight years’ jail.

He appealed to the Court of Criminal Appeal and later to the High Court, which quashed his rape conviction and ordered a retrial. The Crown this week announced it would not go ahead with the retrial.

Fr Farrell, who served three years in jail, feels that he is vindicated by the move to drop the trial, and says his name has been cleared.

“What has happened is that the Director of Public Prosecutions office, whatever spin they choose to put on things, has dropped all charges against me \_\_ charges that should never have been brought in the first place,” he said.

“If a trial had gone ahead, we would have insisted that an independent psychiatric assessment be made of the complainant.

“My name is clear, I am innocent and I have no criminal record. My conscience has always been clear, so what’s important in the end is what I think about myself, not what other people think about me.”

Fr Farrell admits that his ordeal has changed him forever, in both good and bad ways.

“I’m not angry \_ I feel complex things of course, but not mad, soap-box, aggrandising anger,” he said.

“I’ve learned that when you’re a winner, everyone wants to know you, but when you appear to be a loser, most people don’t want to know you, but the people who stick by you through the darkness, they’re the ones who come up trumps.”

Fr Farrell said his three years in Risdon Prison was an experience he would rather forget.

“In the first few months, I was treated very, very badly, although I was never physically or sexually assaulted,” he said.

“There are no friendships in prison; there are only alliances. The prisoners banded together and it was convenient for them to displace in a psychological sense their anger and frustrations on to someone like me, the sort of posh-sounding priest who apparently had raped this poor invalid man. I was a sitting duck for having people scream at me day in, day out.”

Fr Farrell, who is writing a book on his experience, will leave Tasmania within three months and will serve as a priest at a Melbourne university.

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