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Commission probes Comensoli, Evans case

PRIEST DAMNS BISHOP, SENIOR POLICE OFFICER



BISHOP MURRAY



INSPECTOR AINSWORTH



BROTHER EVANS



FATHER COMENSOLI

By PAUL McINERNEY

Wollongong's retiring Catholic Bishop William Murray and a high ranking police officer came under fire at the Police Royal Commission yesterday when a priest rebuked them over their handling of sexual misconduct allegations against a parish priest and a brother.

The priest from the Illawarra area told the Royal Commission he became very angry when told by a senior police officer that allegations of sexual abuse against former Edmund Rice College principal

Brother Michael Evans would not lead to his arrest and charging.

The priest, whose name has been suppressed by the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service, said three pupils at Edmund Rice College who had made formal written complaints against Br Evans on his advice were also extremely disappointed and bitter that no prosecution was to be launched.

The priest also recalled a conversation with Bishop Murray in which he told the Bishop about serious allegations of sexual abuse of the three students.

Asked about Bishop Murray's reaction, the priest said: "I must

comment that he did not seem to be upset or unsettled."

"It made little impact on him," he said.

The priest told the Royal Commission that then Detective Senior Sergeant David Ainsworth, head of Wollongong detectives, had contacted him to tell him that the charges against Br Evans would not proceed.

"He said the reasons were that he considered that the boys' evidence was not strong enough and he thought too much time had gone past since the alleged offences had occurred," the priest said.

The priest said that he told now

Dapto Inspector David Ainsworth that the written evidence of the two boys code-named by the Commission X5 and X6 represented ample corroborative evidence against Br Evans.

"He said they would keep a good eye out for Br Evans and if there were more recent allegations they would go after him," the priest said.

"The detective said he didn't want to go to court unless they could win the case.

"I felt very disappointed.

"I was very angry because I believed that the statements that the boys had made was what really happened.

"They had gone to the church and

they had gone to the police and they all felt there was little else they could do.

"At least they felt that they had been able to air the matter."

The priest said that the case against Br Evans was "lying fallow" from 1990 through to 1992.

He told the Commission that after *The Illawarra Mercury* had published a number of statements by victims alleging sexual abuse by Br Evans and Fr Peter Comensoli, police interest in the allegations was rekindled and he was interviewed a number of times.

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Saddened Bishop farewells diocese

... but happy memories greatest

By GEOFF FAILES

Retiring Wollongong Catholic Bishop William Murray said yesterday the highly-publicised downfall of a priest and a brother had caused him "great sadness and mental anxiety".

He said he had prayed for the people concerned and "for guidance for myself especially in dealing with the problems."

"It's something that causes grave concern and to me personal bewilderment that such things happen."

Although he did not refer to individuals, Bishop Murray agreed that the downfall of former Edmund Rice College principal Brother Michael Evans and former Gwynneville parish priest, Father Peter Comensoli had taken a personal toll and caused him "great sadness".

Fr Comensoli was jailed in October 1994 for 18 months on two charges of sexual assault on an 11-year-boy and a 12-year-boy.

Br Evans committed suicide in Queensland on the same day a detective flew from NSW to interview him about a number of sexual assault allegations.

Bishop Murray has resigned as Bishop of Wollongong at the age of 75 after almost 21 years in the office.

His successor will be Monsignor Philip Wilson, 45, who is a priest with the Maitland-Newcastle diocese.

At present, Monsignor Wilson is completing a doctorate in Canon law in the United States. He is expected to be consecrated as Bishop of Wollongong within three months.

In an interview with *The Illawarra Mercury* yesterday, Bishop Murray said he had more happy than unhappy memories of the past 20 years as Bishop of Wollongong.

Referring to the downside, including the charges against the two priests, he said:

"I suppose I have to admit that the sacrament of holy orders, the ordination of a man to the priesthood doesn't destroy human nature.

"If there are weaknesses there in human nature, they will emerge."

Bishop Murray said he was saddened by media reports of the incidents and "attacks" on the church which he felt were "rather personal".

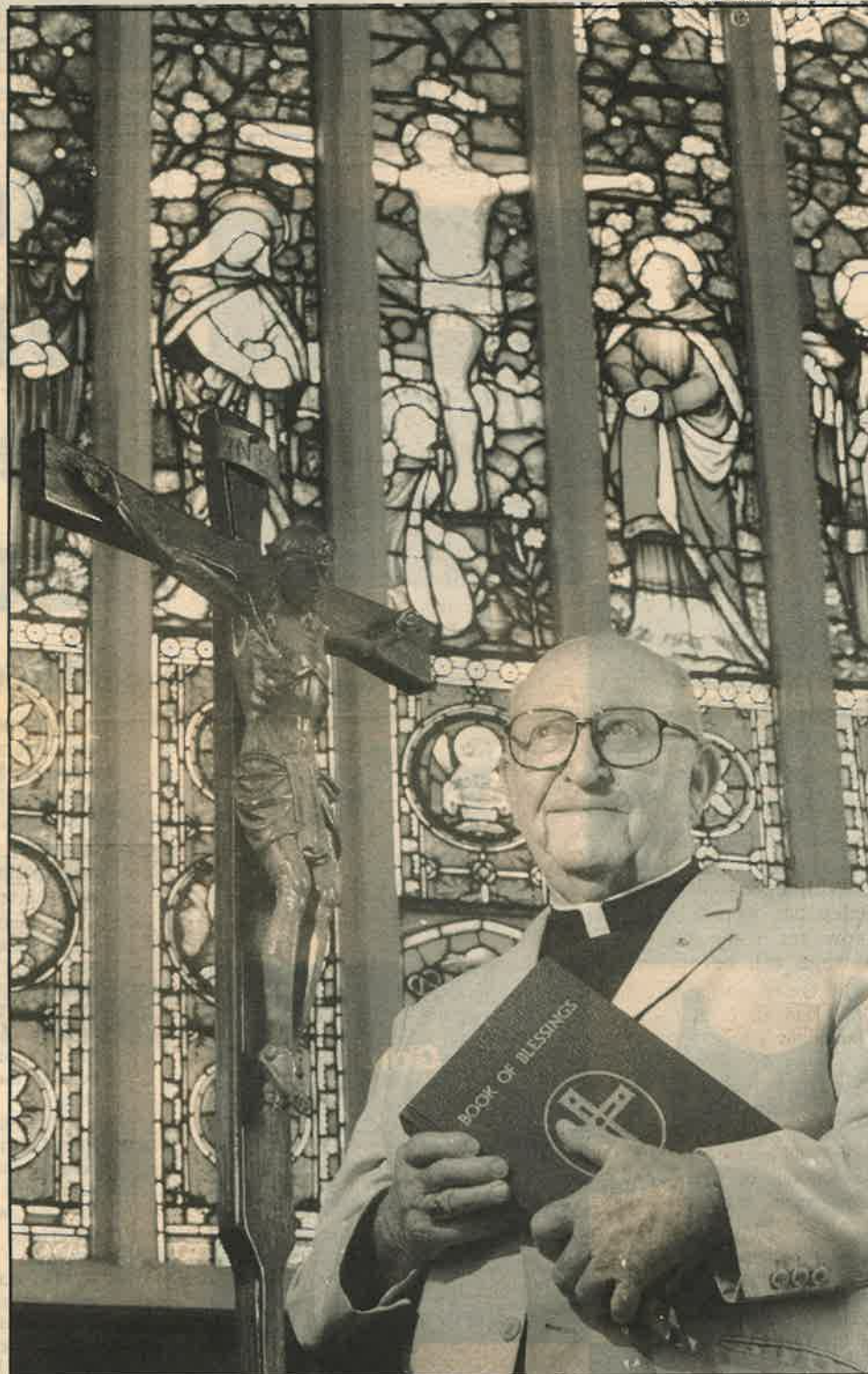
"But I did not intend to retaliate or counteract them ... I just had to weather them," he said.

"The publicity didn't help at all. We certainly must not try to cover up when cases like these occur but uncovering the mat and dealing with them correctly, according to Canon and civil law, is a painful process."

On his retirement, Bishop Murray said: "I would say to Wollongong I don't like to be leaving you but I think the time has come to move on and make room for a new boy on the block."

The Bishop has only met Monsignor Wilson once but believes he is eminently qualified for the job.

"I've always regarded it as a great honour and privilege to be the spiritual leader of the Catholic community in Wollongong for over 20 years."



Picture: KEN ROBERTSON

Retiring Wollongong Catholic Bishop William Murray reflects on almost 21 years in office ... I don't like leaving you but the time has come to move on.

Bishop Murray said he was concerned about the diminishing number of clergy in the diocese.

"The Catholic population is about 170,000 and while I have been Bishop I have ordained 30 priests for the diocese but I think we have lost the same number from death, retirement and one or two unfortunate departures from the priesthood.

"So the ratio of priests to the Catholic population is fairly low."

In the 20 years he had seen extensive growth and development in the four areas of the diocese - Illawarra, the Southern Highlands, Shoalhaven and Macarthur.

Bishop Murray said he had attempted to encourage more young people to enter the priesthood, particularly on confirmation occasions.

The difficulty in attracting more clergy, he believes, is a "very involved sociological problem."

"One of the principal reasons is that we live in an age not so much of the spoken word but of

image - I don't think the correct image is being projected to young people.

"The image they get is of the Hollywood type of priest and that doesn't convey the true picture of what the priest really is."

Being Bishop had helped him in the growth of his own spiritual life, in his relationship with God.

Born in Leichhardt in Sydney, Bishop Murray studied for the priesthood in Springwood in the Blue Mountains seminary and was ordained in the arch-diocese of Sydney.

For 17 years, he was the arch-diocese media spokesman and later was appointed director of the Springwood seminary before his appointment to Wollongong.

He intends to continue living in this area - he has a house at Kiama - and is expected to be called on to conduct ceremonies, especially during the Bishop-elect's early years.

□ This article was written without prior knowledge that activities of Father Comensoli and Brother Evans would be mentioned in the Police Royal Commission yesterday.

MLC urges rethink of defender rights

A decision not to charge a shopkeeper who shot dead a robber last month would encourage the public to rethink their rights to defend themselves, Shooters Party MLC John Tingle said yesterday.

The Director of Public Prosecutions said yesterday it did not have sufficient evidence to charge Anton Lees after the death of Glenn Whitely outside his antique shop on March 10. Whitely, of Roselands, in Sydney's south-west, was armed with a sawn-off .22 rifle when he entered Dural Antiques and demanded money from Mr Lees' wife.

Mr Tingle said he was pleased for Mr Lees that no charges would be laid but that he had not been surprised by the decision.

Man killed jumping in front of train

An unidentified man died after jumping in front of a train at Wollongong last night.

Ambulance officers were called to the Victoria Rd overpass shortly after 6pm after reports a man had been hit by a train.

A witness told the officers the man jumped the fence behind a property in Denison St and was walking along the railway tracks.

The victim, believed to be in his mid-20s, then threw himself in front of the train as it approached.

Initial investigations by Wollongong police failed to reveal the man's identity. A number of missing people have already been eliminated and police will continue their inquiries into the death.

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