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Wednesday, April 17, 1996

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Commission probes Comensoli, Evans case

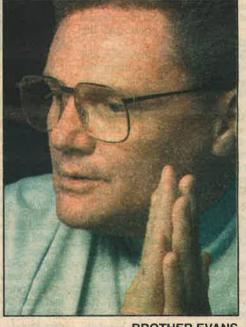
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BISHOP MURRAY

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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

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

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

Brother Michael Evans would not 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

> "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

"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.

• COMENSOLI FREED FROM JAIL - SEE PAGE 3

MURRAY PRAYED FOR GUIDANCE - PAGE 5

World P12,13 Letters P18 Business P26 Turf Guide P27 Lottery P31 EAC Multilist P36 TV P55

Priest freed trom prison

Sex offender Comensoli free

By LISA CARTY

Disgraced Catholic priest Peter Comensoli was freed from jail this morning after serving an 18-month sentence for sexually assaulting a boy and a teenager.

His release came just hours after he was named at the Police Royal Commission which yesterday started taking evidence about paedophile activity in Wollongong.

Father Comensoli was due to walk free from Berrima jail after midnight after a last minute-transfer from Cooma jail, a medium-security institution where 165 sex offenders are imprisoned.

The former Gwynneville parish priest was jailed by District Court Judge Angela Karpin in October 1994 after

he pleaded guilty to assaulting boys aged 11 and 17. His defence team argued for three hours that his unhappy childhood - particularly the death of his mother when he was five - meant he should be punished with a community service order or weekend detention.

But Judge Karpin said there was no doubt the priest knew he was doing wrong, and that the abuses constituted the "greatest breach of trust possible"

The court had been told Fr Comensoli used alcohol, pornography and gifts to ingratiate himself to his victims, one of whom was an 11-year-old altar boy.

The priest had sought help from within the church, the court heard, and a confessor advised him to "seek relief in

Fr Comensoli was charged after an Illawarra Mercury investigation after allegations made by several Illawarra

Apart from a short stint in Junee jail, Fr Comensoli did most of his time at Cooma jail, where offenders work in a woodcraft unit and sew hospital linen.

He was transferred to Berrima jail yesterday in anticipation of his release, and will now serve a six-month parole period under the weekly supervision of a parole officer.

Sentencing Judge Karpin acknowledged he would work in a church environment in the future, and in his only statement since his very public downfall Fr Comensoli said

he wanted to eventually return to the ministry.

A statement issued by his solicitors said: "(He) h that in time, and following further rehabilitation, he might one day again be in a position to contribute to the community in an appropriately limited form of ministry"



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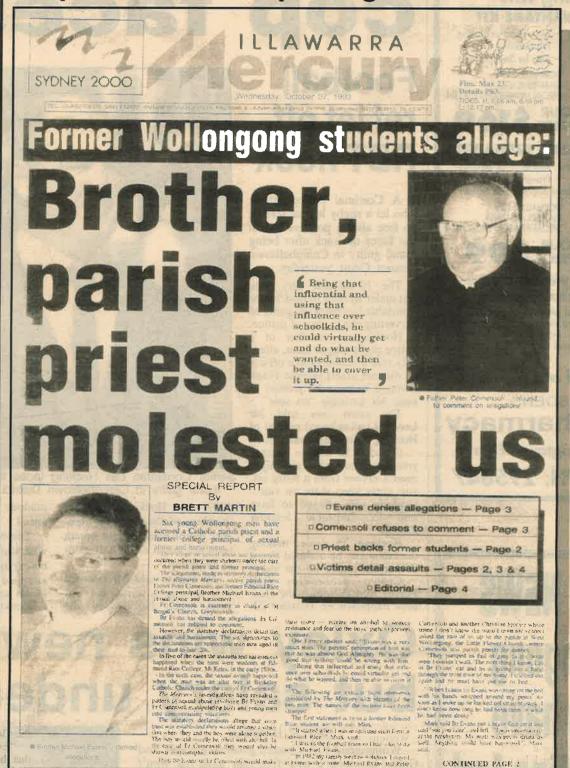
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Reports 'seen as plot against church'



Illawarra cleric tells: 'They all closed ranks'

By PAUL McINERNEY

The publishing of details of sexual attacks on young boys by two prominent members of the Catholic Church in Wollongong were initially considered a "plot and an attempt by the media to attack the church", the Wood Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service was told yesterday.

The Commission's sole witness vesterday, a serving parish priest in the Illawarra whose name has been suppressed said: "The feeling I got from the general clergy was it was a vicious media attack.

"They all closed ranks.

"It was considered an attack to blow the church out of the water.

"People were asking how a newspaper (The Illawarra Mercury) could get away with printing their faces (Brother Michael Evans and Father Peter Comensoli) without them being charged.

"However, the plea of guilty by Fr Comensoli made them realise the church was in real trouble.

"A lot of them were older men, very good men, but it was almost too much for them to take.

"They still pretend it didn't happen,"

the priest said. The Illawarra Mercury broke the story on October 27, 1993, with the publishing of five statements by young victims of sexual abuse at the hands of Edmund Rice College principal and former Illawarra Mercury columnist Br Evans and West Wollongong parish priest Fr Comensoli.

The stories written by Walkley Award winning journalist Brett Martin sparked a renewed police investigation which led to the charging and jailing of Fr Comensoli and the suicide of Br Evans in Rockhampton, Queensland, when police went to question him after he had fled a new job in Coffs Harbour.

From the witness box the Wollongong parish priest said he felt younger members of the clergy would be better prepared in future.

"I feel action will be taken, provided they are given direction about the right action to take," he said.

"The history of the Catholic Church in this particular matter is one of getting bogged down." Justice Wood: "A commitment from

the top? Priest: "Possibly, yes." The Illawarra Mercury sexual abuse expose of October 27, 1993, which published statements by young victims of abuse.

abuse cases listed

More than a third of the 254 callers to a NSW Government hotline on the abuse of state wards have had their cases referred to the Wood Royal Commission.

Community Services Minister Ron Dyer said another 18 calls came from interstate: Queensland six, Victoria and Western Australia three each, South Australia and ACT two each, Northern Territory and Tasmania one each.

The hotline was set up for two weeks after the Wood Commission into paedophile activities heard last month that a Department of Community Services clerk known as T7 handed state wards files on to a paedophile

T7 was dismissed and the hotline set up after several former NSW state wards were interviewed on radio talkback and current affairs shows.

"The response was so great that at the height of demand, seven people were taking calls from people who had suffered abuse while in care," Mr Dyer said.

The hotline was staffed by counsellors from the Child Protection Council, Community Services Commission, DOCS and Health Department.

Yesterday, Mr Dyer said 89 of the 254 calls taken in 14 days had the information referred to the Wood Commission so it could deal with the evidence as part of its hearing into police involvement or ineptness in dealing with paedophile networks.

Three calls also were received from children, those aged under 15.

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Profile on i98fm's Andrew Gordon in our new Thursday column, Life's Like That



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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

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

"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

"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

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



Retiring Wollongong Catholic bishop W 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

"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 occa-

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

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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