

THE SINS OF THE BROTHERS

This week the Police Royal Commission heard evidence of homosexual assaults by a prominent Christian Brothers teacher on some of Wollongong's youth. Did Catholic Church leaders try to cover up the scandal or were they just slow to act?

RICHARD GUILLIATT reports.



Founder . . . Edmund Rice.

IN EARLY 1984, a somewhat nervous 18-year-old turned up at the presbytery building of St Francis Xavier Cathedral in Wollongong, the impressive residence of Bishop William Murray, head of the Catholic Church in the Illawarra region. The teenager had contacted the 64-year-old bishop on a matter of some gravity: he was about to accuse the city's most prominent Catholic teacher — Brother Michael Evans, the recently appointed principal of Edmund Rice College — of sexual abuse.

According to his evidence before the Police Royal Commission this week, the young man — a former student at Edmund Rice College, now a 30-year-old adult code-named X4 — told Bishop Murray that, several months previously, Brother Evans had violently abused him in the West Wollongong presbytery office. The incident had occurred on a night in late 1983 when X4, drunk after a session at the pub with his mates from

youth refuge in Wollongong four years later? And why wasn't he prosecuted in 1990 when three of his victims, frustrated with the Church's lack of response, first tried to have charges laid?

Justice Wood reportedly has more than one such case under investigation. Another matter that has been brought to his attention involves Brother John Aloysius Littler, a former Marist Brother from St Vincent's Boys' Home in Westmead, who pleaded guilty in 1993 to three charges of sexually assaulting a boy at the home in 1962.

During his court hearing, Littler claimed his actions occurred during an isolated episode in his life and there was no evidence that he had ever offended again. He was given a good behaviour bond and requested permission to travel overseas for counselling.

But after the case concluded, five other former St Vincent's boys told police they had been abused by

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send the errant former brother his severance pay. During civil damages proceedings brought by one of Littler's former victims last year, the Catholic Church acknowledged sending money to Littler in the United States.

The Catholic Church has consistently depicted itself as a concerned organisation anxious to help both young victims of abuse and the troubled priests and brothers who have strayed from the path of propriety. While admitting that its response was inadequate in the past, the Church claims it has reformed its ways and instituted new procedures for dealing with abuse allegations.

FATHER Brian Lucas, secretary of the archdiocese of Sydney, told Justice Wood on Thursday that the Church now realised that the “the very, very worst thing that could possibly be done would be to try to dissuade people from the proper processes of the law”.

Yet that is exactly what one witness claimed Father Lucas himself had suggested during a meeting about Brother Michael Evans less than three years ago.

The allegations against Evans were first aired publicly in the

headmaster of Edmund Rice, the college named after the 19th-century Irishman who founded the Christian Brothers.

X4's visit to Bishop Murray was the first direct allegation made against Evans to a senior Catholic official. During that meeting, X4 recalled, he also told Bishop Murray about Father Peter Comensoli, a Wollongong priest who was in the habit of inviting young boys to his presbytery, plying them with drink and alcohol and fondling them.

Bishop Murray has not given evidence and his response to the visit remains unknown. What is known is that Brother Evans's career, far from being stymied, flourished in the years that followed. He had a popular Sunday night radio program on 2WR Wollongong, wrote a column for the *Illawarra Mercury*, opened the youth refuge Eddy's Place in 1988 and basked in the image of a man dedicated to caring for Wollongong's youth.

X4, who had started training to become a Catholic priest in 1986, became so disturbed that he confronted Evans in 1989-90 in his office at Edmund Rice. The headmaster, he recalled, initially played dumb, then “really patronised me and said: ‘Look, no kid here is in danger’”.

Unhappy with the meeting, X4 arranged to meet Evans's superior in Wollongong, Brother Bill Hocking, and the deputy provincial of the Christian Brothers, Brother Laurie Needham, in March 1990. “I discussed everything with them and told them what the problem was,” recalled X4, “and to my shock they were aware of it, that he had this problem, and said that, you know, he'd been receiving some treatment, some counselling.”

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According to his evidence before the Police Royal Commission this week, the young man — a former student at Edmund Rice College, now a 30-year-old adult code-named X4 — told Bishop Murray that, several months previously, Brother Evans had violently abused him in the West Wollongong presbytery office. The incident had occurred on a night in late 1983 when X4, drunk after a session at the pub with his mates from Edmund Rice, had dropped in on the presbytery and been offered a bed upstairs by Brother Michael.

Bishop Murray, X4 recalled, asked for a detailed description of the incident. So the teenager told him how Brother Evans had walked into the room in which he was sleeping, sat on the bed, struck up a conversation and then "suddenly started tickling me and poking me in the ribs and things like that... and then he just put his weight, his full weight, on me and put his forearm across my neck and pinned me to the bed and reached under the covers under my underpants and started probing at my genitals." Brother Evans had said, "Relax. All the boys like it," until X4 nearly screamed and grabbed the Christian Brother by the throat.

Bishop Murray, X4 recalled, agreed that the information was serious and should be looked into. "I didn't discuss any specific proposals with him about what he was going to do," said X4. "I just felt reassured that he said he was going to take care of it."

With this evidence, the royal commission has opened an avenue in its pedophile hearings which leads straight to the heart of the most vexed issue in the Catholic Church's sex scandals of recent years. Priests and brothers of many denominations have been jailed for sexual misconduct in that time, but the conduct of senior Church administrators has largely escaped judicial scrutiny. Now senior officials of the Church are being called before Justice James Wood to justify their action, or inaction.

The questions raised about the Brother Michael Evans affair this week were pregnant with implications. What did Bishop Murray do after his visit from X4? Why was Brother Evans allowed to set up a



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youth refuge in Wollongong four years later? And why wasn't he prosecuted in 1990 when three of his victims, frustrated with the Church's lack of response, first tried to have charges laid?

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During his court hearing, Littler claimed his actions occurred during an isolated episode in his life and there was no evidence that he had ever offended again. He was given a good behaviour bond and requested permission to travel overseas for counselling.

But after the case concluded, five other former St Vincent's boys told police they had been abused by Littler. These included a Queensland man who said he was raped at the age of 15. Littler never returned from overseas and the NSW Director of Public Prosecutions is trying to locate him in order to have extradition warrants issued.

While the DPP has been having difficulty locating Littler, however, the Catholic Church was able to

my genitals. 7

send the errant former brother his severance pay. During civil damages proceedings brought by one of Littler's former victims last year, the Catholic Church acknowledged sending money to Littler in the United States.

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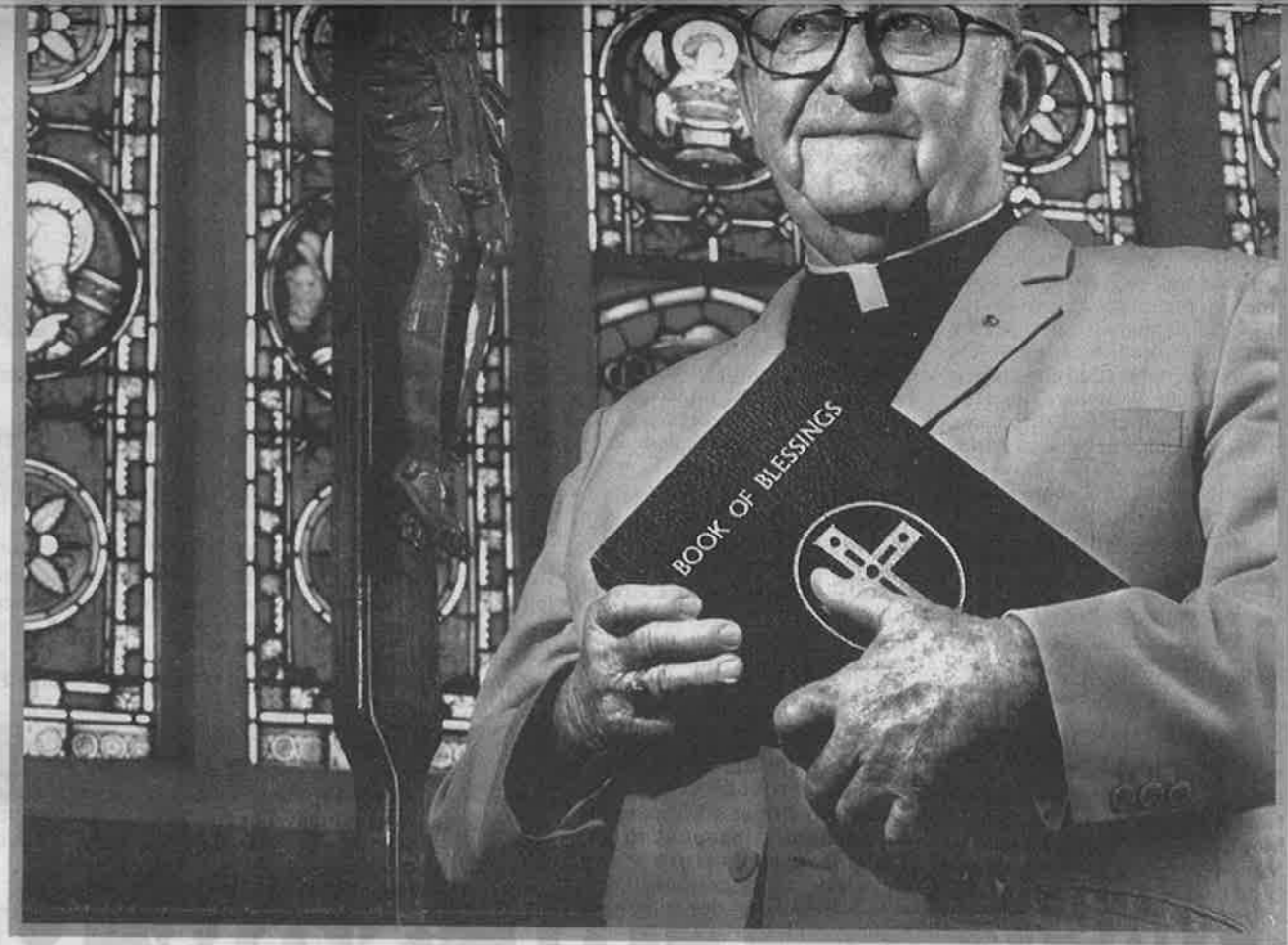
The allegations against Evans were first aired publicly in the *Illawarra Mercury* newspaper in November 1993, and the four young men who spoke to the *Mercury* in 1993 repeated their stories this week to the commission. They recounted incidents of molestation which began when Evans was a teacher at St Patrick's College, Strathfield, in the 1970s and continued through his years as

fondling them. Bishop Murray has not given evidence and his response to the visit remains unknown. What is known is that Brother Evans's career, far from being stymied, flourished in the years that followed. He had a popular Sunday night radio program on 2WR Wollongong, wrote a column for the *Illawarra Mercury*, opened the youth refuge Eddy's Place in 1988 and basked in the image of a man dedicated to caring for Wollongong's youth.

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By now X4 was aware that other students had been assaulted by Evans and soon afterwards he made a statement to police and spoke to Detective David Ainsworth in Wollongong. Two brothers — code-named X5 and X6 — told the royal commission they also lodged complaints with police around that time, detailing an incident in 1984 when Evans molested them both at their parents' house.



Response unknown . . . Bishop Murray at St Francis Xavier Cathedral.

Photograph by ILLAWARRA MERCURY

Detective Ainsworth, however, allegedly told X4 that too much time had elapsed and that prosecutors had advised him the evidence was not strong enough to charge Evans. "I expressed my disappointment and I said that I was concerned about this person, Michael Evans, who I thought was fairly vicious and had a big problem," recalled X4. "He [Detective Ainsworth] just said: 'We're just not going to go ahead with this'." The brothers, X5 and X6, said they never heard from Detective Ainsworth after lodging their statements with police.

The following year, the Christian Brothers appointed a new provincial, Brother Julian McDonald. Brother McDonald told the commission that, when he began his duties in Sydney, he was never briefed about the allegations against Evans, nor about X4's meeting with Bishop Murray or the existence of other victims.

He said he first learned about the Evans matters in early 1991 when

X4's mother contacted him and he responded by travelling to Wollongong and meeting Police Superintendent Pat Cassidy. It was there he heard about the previous police investigation and the failure to prosecute.

Several months later, Brother McDonald removed Evans from Edmund Rice College. The following year, another scandal erupted when Brother Hocking — who had conducted the 1990 inquiry into Evans — pleaded guilty to aggravated indecent assault of a youth at Eddy's Place.

By then Michael Evans had secured a job as project manager of the University of New England's joint education campus in Coffs Harbour, which is where he was living when the *Illawarra Mercury* finally exposed his activities in October 1993.

In the public scandal that ensued, Brother McDonald and Father Lucas agreed to meet six of Evans's former victims at a steelworks in Wollongong. The former Edmund

Rice students outlined their allegations against Father Comensoli and Brother Evans and they were told that both men were being put into psychological counselling.

One participant, X9, told the royal commission that Father Lucas said "he would prefer it if we didn't go to the police". But Father Lucas and Brother McDonald had a different recollection. "My understanding — and this is my very best recollection — was that the consensus among the young men was that they did not want to take the option of going to the police," said Father Lucas, "and I certainly would have acquiesced in that."

The former students, however, did go to police not long afterwards and, in October 1994, Father Peter Comensoli was jailed for 18 months after pleading guilty to sexually assaulting two boys aged 11 and 16. Two months later, Brother Michael Evans drove to a remote spot on the Queensland coast and committed suicide.

A HISTORY OF ABUSE

The career of Brother Michael Evans:

1974: Joins Christian Brothers.

1979: Sexually assaults 16-year-old student from St Patrick's College, Strathfield, while on football camp. Student does not report incident.

1982: Transferred to Edmund Rice College, Wollongong, where he becomes principal. Sexually assaults 17-year-old student at West Wollongong presbytery. Student does not report incident.

1983: Sexually assaults 18-year-old former student, in the West Wollongong presbytery. Victim complains directly to Bishop Murray of Wollongong.

1984: Sexually assaults two brothers at their parents' house. Brothers do not lodge complaint.

1988: Establishes Eddy's Place, a refuge for homeless Wollongong youth.

1989: Previous assaults are reported to a Catholic priest, Father M, who takes them to police and Bishop Murray. The bishop appears "unruffled".

1990: Deputy provincial of the Christian Brothers speaks to police and assures Evans's victims that the headmaster is undergoing counselling. Police decline to prosecute.

1991: Evans is confronted with allegations by the new Provincial of the order, Brother Julian McDonald. Evans angrily denies them but is removed as principal of Edmund Rice. Writes column for the *Illawarra Mercury* attacking the church.

1993: *Illawarra Mercury* exposes Evans.

1994: Police reactivate investigation. Evans commits suicide in Queensland.



Committed suicide . . . Brother Michael Evans.

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Toyota Motor Corporation Australia ACN 004 384 338 is recalling the following vehicles for the condition described below.

VEHICLES AFFECTED

Toyota Camry and Vienta models produced from start of production in November 1992 through to 11th March 1994 within the vehicle identification number (VIN) range listed below are being recalled.

NOTE: The VIN number is stamped onto the manufacturer's plate on the vehicle firewall.

VEHICLE IDENTIFICATION		
VDS	FRAME NUMBER	
	FROM	TO
53SK10	09000001	09025988



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