

Doveton

26th October, 1986.

Mr. Stephan Vaughan.
REDACTED
ENDEAVOUR HILLS, VIC.

Dear Mr. Vaughan,

You have gone to considerable trouble in your letter of the 15th October, 1986, to bring to my notice certain allegations relating to the parish priest of Doveton.

I am aware that such correspondence is not easy to compose. It appears to me that you have sought to inform me of the views garnered from interested parishioners. You have taken great care to provide me with "chapter and verse".

In my office as Archbishop I am well aware that any parish priest is exercising at local level responsibilities which are closely associated with the mission of the diocesan church.

Since he exercises his office following my appointment and on receipt of faculties necessary for the exercise of many priestly functions, it must be presumed that I have confidence in that priest until the contrary is proved.

It happens that priests sometimes act in a way which causes distress to some people. Sometimes it will be because people have misinterpreted his entirely innocent action; at other times it will be because his intended course of action has not effected the result that he anticipated; sometimes in the best interests of people he may find it necessary to be cruel to be kind. There can be other reasons which follow understandable human patterns.

Again and again those of use engaged in commitments for the welfare of people find that "one man's meat is another man's poison."

The first major pastoral lesson that I experienced in my first parish was to hear both sides of a question.

As Archbishop, I have also found that while some parishioners can have strong reactions against a particular priest, others can find him of immense benefit for their spiritual growth.

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Long experience has brought home to the Church that the removal of a priest is rarely of benefit to the priest or the parishioners. Over the years, the internal law of the Church - the Code of Canon Law you quoted - has built in strong protection for the tall poppy who is in the vulnerable position. The further canons to 1740 and 1741 demonstrate the sensitivity with which the Church seeks to support the man in the hot seat.

I thank you most sincerely for the respectful nature of your letter. That offers an added authority to the contents.

Furthermore, you demonstrate a respect for the feelings of the parish priest and a wish to follow those procedures which have been seen as proper.

It is also an acceptable principle that an understanding and healing process by both sides of a particular contention can lead to a reconciliation. That is a far more dignified and respectful result than the removal of the parish priest, a course of action which must necessarily follow certain established procedures.

The process of working through that required procedure can also be a very painful one for all parties concerned.

The particular allegations made against the parish priest also take on a special colour as they are viewed within the context of the resignation of the principal of the parish school, an action which has promoted high emotional reactions from many quarters.

I provide these observations so that you and those whom you represent can gain a greater understanding of the situation and possible consequences of the action taken.

Furthermore, understandably any effort to find a replacement for any parish priest who has felt strong opposition to his ministry in that parish can be difficult. This is a factor which all of us must keep in mind.

At this stage I shall seek to clarify the issues, take appropriate counsel, and follow that course of action which I judge the situation to require.

Please note that I greatly respect the love for the parish of Doveton demonstrated in your letter and your wish to take the necessary steps which experience has established as most confirmatory of all parties.

Since you have taken on the role of spokesman of the group who provided further written confirmation of their allegations and feelings on the matter, I have presumed that this letter will suffice as a reply to all.

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With cordial greetings and best wishes,
I remain,

Yours sincerely in Christ,

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ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE

cc. FR. H. Deakin
FR. P. Seavon
FR. T. Doyle