

J. Vaughan

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Endeavour Hills. 3802.
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15th October 1986

The Reverend Little,
Archbishop of Melbourne,
St. Patrick's Cathedral,
Melbourne. 3002.

N. B.

Your Grace,

I write to you as spokesman for a group of parishioners, past parishioners and parents with children at the Holy Family School, Doveton, following a meeting last evening with Father Hilton Deakin.

As your Grace is well aware, parishioners from Doveton have expressed some concern in relation to the parish priest, Father Peter Searson, for some time now as is evidenced by correspondence forwarded to your office by people in this parish.

Concern over Father Searson's general behaviour have been growing for some time and has come to a head over the resignation of Mr. Graeme Sleeman as principal of Holy Family School. Graeme has undertaken not to make public his reasons for resigning his post at this stage,, however we seriously question why a school principal, who appears extremely competent, has an excellent relationship with both his staff and parents in the school, has innovative programs in the school and who has the respect of the local community, would resign his post without another job to go to.

It is widely known that there has been serious friction between Graeme and Father over the running of the school and I, together with a large number of other people, believe that constant conflict with Father has forced Graeme's resignation. We also believe that this resignation is a moral stand against what Graeme sees as an untenable situation.

When Graeme resigned a number of parents immediately attempted to find a resolution to the problem and we had talks with Mr. Alan DOOLEY of C.E.O. who acted for us in talks between Father and Graeme. We then followed the due process, as explained to us but unfortunately this did not succeed in reconciling the parties or resolving the problem.

Following this an informal meeting was advertised inviting parents and parishioners to meet in an attempt to find a resolution to the great problem in the parish. This meeting was held on 12.10.86 and was attended by approximately fifty persons, representing families of the parish. Many views were expressed at this meeting, all of which were derogatory towards Father. They were views of parishioners, who felt that they had been totally let down by Father and who were considering their commitment to the parish and in some cases to the Church itself, of persons who had left the parish for a number of reasons after confrontations of various types with Father, and of parents concerned for the spiritual and moral upbringing of their children and indeed in some cases the actual safety of their children. There was also genuine concern for the school as it is felt that Graeme's resignation is due to Father.

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The unanimous view of this meeting was that there is a serious problem in the Doveon parish and that this problem has been caused by Father Searson and also that the only resolution to this problem is the removal of Father Searson as our parish priest. Our feeling is that the parish is falling apart with people leaving to go to other parishes and we also harbour grave concern for the influence that Father can assert over the school and the school staff and pupils.

As Your Grace will be made aware by Father Deakin, we discussed the problems that we have with Father Searson at great length with Father at the meeting that he kindly attended and I will now attempt to briefly list the main points as we see them that leads us to believe that Father Searson is no longer capable of leading the parish.

Father has on two occasions produced a handgun. On one occasion he pointed it at a child who was cleaning the school and on the other he offered it to a child whom he had asked to go and turn on a hose and who was afraid of the dark. If in fact Father has a handgun he is breaking the criminal law as he does not hold a pistol licence. He also purports to have held the rank of a lieutenant-colonel in the armed forces. He is not recorded as having served in the Australian Army and it has been suggested that he was chaplain for a period with an American unit, however it appears that he wears an Australian army uniform which would appear to be incorrect.

Father's spiritual leadership is of great concern. At the opening mass of the school year he questioned senior students as to their attendance at mass during the school holidays, and those that admitted missing mass were refused the sacrament. At a home mass he berated the family home and said that the place was not fit to worship in because it did not have carpets. He also told the same parishioner not to pray for a dead parishioner as she was mentally retarded. In fact this person has a retarded daughter and is now questioning her faith. Approximately one week ago at a grade three mass he upset a number of children badly when he declared that mothers who did not work obviously loved their children more than working mothers. Our parish has a large number of working mothers and this comment caused great anguish.

Father has often made people feel embarrassed by telling them that they do not give enough to the parish, even though some of them are on pensions. People have also felt that veiled threats have been held out to them that if they do not give more money to the giving that their children will not be able to go to St. Johns.

Parents, especially women, feel that Father intimidates them and looks down on them. Women appear to be afraid to be alone with Father and many will not allow their children to be alone with him. It is said that even children at St. Johns are not allowed to be alone with him.

It is felt that a lot of Father's actions are strange, e.g., he turns off lights and heaters in the school when people are meeting there, he appears to like confrontation with people at the school, on 8.10.86, he knew that there was a meeting of parents at the church and school to discuss school programs. This meeting was at 6.45 pm and we arrived to find the gates and the church locked. The school gates are locked early when the school is in fact part of the safety house program.

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The handling of parish finances is also of great concern, together with the many occasions that Father appears to tell lies. In a parish newsletter on 12.6.86, Father wrote that the matter of a new church was discussed by the Board of Management and the Pastoral Council and a choice was made from five plans 'that were submitted (free) by leading Melbourne architects.' This was a lie as members of the Board of Management were not consulted and in fact Peter Pratt, a parishioner of 22 years, enquired with McCarthy, Collins & Purtell, architects, of 14 Howett St, Sth. Yarra, as to the cost of the plans, and was informed that the parish owed \$17,000.00 for the plans to date, and in fact that they had written to Father asking for payment of the money owed.

Father Deakin indicated that he came to see Father in early May in relation to the proposed new church and that no permission had been granted to go ahead with it. In fact Father had submitted plans to the Berwick Council for Town Planning Approval on 23.4.86, prior to even discussing the matter with Father Deakin. In church he stressed that he had received the go ahead to proceed with new church when in fact Your Grace had assured a parishioner in writing that this was not the case.

On 10.6.86, the parish debt was listed as \$126,566.00, whilst on 22.6.86, it was listed in a brochure to parishioners as \$146,432.00. On 10.6.86, 307 contributors were quoted as giving \$912.00 per week with expenditure of \$1048.50 per week, and on 22.6.86, weekly expenditure is quoted as \$1140.00 per week. On 20.7.86 after the giving campaign ended, the newsheet quoted that from 260 contributors with a giving of \$850.00 per week, the contributions had grown to 302 people giving \$1415.00 per week. We would seriously question these figures which vary considerably.

Father had two new tennis courts built and the two existing courts resurfaced at a quoted cost, as per newsletter, of \$9,978.00. Enquiries made reveal that the price was in the vicinity of \$30,000.00. The contractors, W.M. Loud (Aust.) P/L., 135 Market St, Sth Melbourne, can confirm this.

I believe that Your Grace would also know of the school bus issue where Father embarrassed the school by intimating that he had obtained a loan to buy the bus when he had not done so.

These above matters have caused great concern in the minds of the people and we wonder if the financial affairs of the parish are in order. Five persons have allegedly received pledges purporting to be signed by themselves when in fact they have not signed them. This has led to further conjecture.

After Graeme Sleeman's resignation, I was one of the parents who spoke to Father and he offered a possible reason for the resignation as the fact that Graeme had had a heart attack at his previous school, and that he had a problem with his home life. These were straight out lies as were other things that he stated that day.

Your Grace, these are a few examples of our grave concern for our parish and as discussed with Father Deakin we would humbly ask that Your Grace move to save our parish from falling apart. Already a number of long standing parishioners have left, e.g. Van Der Werff's - 30 years, Chadwick's - 21 years, Pratt's - 22 years.

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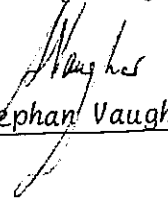
The local press and also a section of the national media are aware that there is a problem in the parish, having been approached by two anonymous complainants. At this stage we disassociate ourselves from any anonymous complaints to the press.

Overall it is felt by a number of parishioners, what are now ex parishioners and also parents of children that Father Searson is unfit to continue to carry out his parochial duties. He appears to have divided the community, alienating certain groups within the parish and to a lot of people he has no credibility at all.

We would request that Your Grace look at Father's actions in the light of Canon 1740 & 1741 as we feel that Father can no longer fulfil his duties within the parish. I would also implore Your Grace to consider this matter with the utmost urgency before the parish disintegrates further.

I attach a petition signed by members of the parish in relation to this matter together with letters from parishioners detailing their conflicts with Father Searson.

Yours faithfully,


Stephan Vaughan