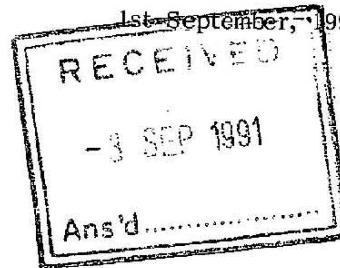


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WOLLOMBI NSW 2325

1st September, 1991



Most Rev Bishop L. Clarke
High Street
MAITLAND NSW 2320

Dear Bishop Clarke,

I write as a very concerned non Catholic husband and father of a Catholic wife and four Catholic children. When I married 16 years ago I promised the priest who married us that I would assist in raising our children as Catholics and that I would support my wife in the practice of her Faith. Until the last year or so, keeping this promise posed no difficulty. I have enjoyed sharing in the religious life of my family and was a very active participant and helper in our previous parish - Manly. Since moving to Wollombi and the Cessnock parish, however, the situation has changed drastically and now for the first time since I've known my wife she's lost enthusiasm for her Faith and does not attend Mass in Cessnock at all now as the last couple of times we attended Mass there the atmosphere was so hostile we deemed it inappropriate to take our children there.

My wife was understandably quite devastated when Masses halted so suddenly at St. Michael's Wollombi, but was prepared initially to see the parish priest's point of view that it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep outlying churches open due to priest shortages. However, what she couldn't understand was Father Ryan's completely uncompromising attitude to the Wollombi people. For some reason he appeared never to enjoy coming out to Wollombi from the start. He never stopped to mingle and chat after Mass as the other priests would and he made it obvious that he couldn't get away from the congregation quickly enough! Even the night of the final Mass, he would have departed without a word of comfort to the very saddened group - it was only the group's determination in forming a circle barring access to his car that made Father Ryan stop and speak to them. My wife was among those present who were trying to gain a couple of concessions. One request was that the possibility of a Mass just once a month be considered - but that was refused. (Even though we have since learned that a former assistant priest at Cessnock did offer to come to say Mass once a month in his own time, but Father Ryan refused to accept that offer). Another request was that the congregation be permitted to use the church as a gathering point for prayer meetings. That too was refused for the time being but Father Ryan stated he would get back to us on that matter (which he never did). Parishioners then realised that while Father Ryan was the parish priest there would be no chance of Masses being celebrated out here again, so their next action was to send representatives to you seeking an assurance that the church would not be sold. My wife was one of the two representatives who met with you. They didn't receive the assurance sought but were advised that nothing would be done in a hurry re selling, and there would be discussion and consultation before any such decision were made! The next thing we knew, the altar and side altars had been torn away and removed! The manner in which this was done surely added insult to injury - no concern or sensitivity was shown to the families who had contributed towards the original installation of these altars and statues, and the mess left in the wake of the removalists epitomised the total disregard of the feelings of the Wollombi people during this entire episode. I know my wife has suffered a lot of injury and bewilderment and she's only been a parishioner a few years - what must those who have been resident here all their lives be experiencing - very staunch and honest Catholics, they deserve more respect!

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Everything Father Ryan has done contradicts what he preaches. His sermons are full of the need for good strong Catholic communities and the need for caring, loving and understanding. We had a good strong Catholic community out here which he has effectively crushed, and with no signs of love or care since. In fact he's practically "declared war" with Wollombi residents, having been heard state publicly recently that it was his impression only druggies, drunks and thieves were moving into Wollombi. What sort of comment is this from anyone, let alone a Catholic priest?

Now it seems inevitable that St. Michael's, along with the church at Nulkaba will be sold next week. But I wonder if the short term economic gain will be truly worth the bitterness, hostility and genuine heartbreak that the sale of these churches is causing. There appears to be much more to it than merely the sale of two buildings. I have not known of another parish that has been so divided and unhappy as Cessnock is at the moment. We know so many sincerely committed Catholics in Cessnock who are very unhappy and confused in their Faith at the moment.

Catholics are renowned for rallying to financial causes. If the main problem was a financial one I'm, sure parishioners would have responded generously to reasonable requests, but at the moment the parish appears so split it will be some time before it will operate as a happy unified parish again.

Yours sincerely

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