

Into the Deep

SPECIAL ISSUE August 2003

Who's Bullying Who? An Open Letter to Bishop Coffey

Dear Bishop Coffey,

Given the reality that our diocese already has six parishes without a resident priest, and the prospect of another half a dozen priests reaching retiring age in the next few years, your decree of removal of Fr Speekman as parish priest of Morwell makes even less sense at this time. Unexpected illness or death of priests could make this dire situation even worse.

When reading your comment in the decree - "There is no doubt that Father Speekman is a very good person and a deeply spiritual man. He is intensely passionate in his love for the Church and in his vision for the spread of the Gospel. He certainly brings the best out of devout people." - one wonders why he can no longer remain as parish priest in your diocese. In the next paragraph you say he refuses to acknowledge that the Gospel cannot be imposed by force or threat. You then proceed to imply that he does not respect the basic human dignity of each individual and that he has unlawfully harmed people's good reputation. This is outrageous. And what about the harm you have done to Fr Speekman's reputation?

Your treatment of Fr Speekman and the parishioners of Morwell in this long and tedious process has been disgraceful and unjust. Your refusal to give reasons for your actions has led to unsubstantiated rumours which have questioned the character of Fr Speekman. When you said Mass in Morwell on the weekend of August 9/10 and still neglected to explain why the parish had lost its priest, it was a clear dereliction of duty. No wonder parishioners are angry and frustrated. Many others throughout the diocese feel the same.

Your case against Fr Speekman in the decree seems to be that he is confrontational and aggressive and that his pastoral and administrative dealings with people "can often be so assertive as to appear aggressive and bullying, leaving them frightened and hurt." This assertion is insulting and repulsive to all concerned.

I have experienced life under many parish priests and parish missions. On many occasions I could have felt bullied when I was told that unless I repent of my sins I could face the prospect of eternal damnation. Rather than feel bullied, I am grateful that I was warned. Perhaps warning of these realities is regarded as bullying these days, while other forms are permitted.

For instance, was it bullying when Greg Kingman was ostracised and 'encouraged' to leave Catholic College Sale when he protested that schools were not teaching the Catholic faith? Was it bullying when you publicly snubbed me at Sunday Mass a few weeks ago when I rose to do the readings after it became obvious that the rostered reader had not turned up? I walked to the front and genuflected, and you told me to sit down and called on someone else to read. I could have felt frightened and hurt. Instead I just felt sorry that you could be so petty. Is it bullying for the Vicar General of the diocese to write to parish priests and school principals urging them not to publicise "in any way" the talk by Mr Raymond de Souza in the Latrobe Valley in May. He said Mr de Souza had no authority to speak on the Catholic Church in the diocese. He did this in spite of the fact that no such authorisation is required for such a meeting.

These are just a few examples of 'bullying' to which exception can be taken. Sadly, it seems that Fr Speekman's 'crime' is that he has had the audacity to challenge Catholic schools to teach the Catholic faith in its fullness. He was also bold enough to support Greg Kingman in his initially private, then subsequently public battle to make Catholic education accountable. As a result, it seems Catholic education authorities have embarked on a campaign to get rid of this 'troublesome' priest. More sadly, you came down on the side of those authorities who have failed miserably in passing on the Catholic faith to thousands of children in 'Catholic' schools in the diocese.

It seems that those advocating that priests should not be authoritative and that all opinions are equally valid can never be accused of 'bullying' in this diocese. But those demanding that the truths and teachings of the Church be proclaimed in all their fullness are accused of 'imposing the Gospel by force' and 'bullying' others to accept this teaching.

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Father Speekman clearly falls into this category and has been ‘bullied’ out of office, despite the depleted number of priests in the diocese. Your treatment of this good and holy priest is appalling, even though, on your own admission, he “brings the best out of devout people.”

P. O’Brien

On behalf of the Confraternity of St Michael, Gippsland

P.S. I was tempted to write to the editor of Catholic Life to protest the article (July 2003) from Gippsland Art Gallery appealing for “nude, partially nude or otherwise” models to challenge the drawing skills of the artists in the community. On reflection I decided it was a waste of time and effort. Apart from the fact that my letter would not be published, I risked the accusation that I was ‘bullying’ the editor.

What’s the latest?

The Decree of Removal of Parish Priest (dated 31 July 2003) was effective immediately, making Fr John Speekman no longer parish priest of Morwell as of 31 July. He was given until 20 August to vacate the presbytery and until 22 August to decide if he would appeal to the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome.

The decree noted that Fr Michael Willemsen would supply for Morwell parish from the date of departure of Fr Speekman. This means that the bishop expected Fr Speekman to supply in the very parish that he was so ineffective in as to warrant his removal by decree, while he was no longer parish priest there, and while he would be dealing with the emotional issues of his removal, farewelling his parishioners, packing up his home, having no home to move to, and deciding his future. Fr Speekman felt unable to do this, and has not celebrated Mass in Morwell since his removal. Morwell parish has had visiting priests for weekend Masses but no weekday Masses.

Fr Speekman currently has the status of a retired priest in the diocese of Sale. (He may still supply for any other priest in the diocese, so how can his ministry be so awfully ineffective?)

Fr Speekman has decided to appeal to Rome. This appeal process suspends the Bishop’s decision until the result of the appeal is known, and means that a new parish priest cannot be appointed. An administrator will apparently be appointed in the meantime.

Believers Can Contribute To Atheism

“Believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion.”

Gaudium et Spes 19

What Can We Do?

Countless people have been asking what they can do about the injustice of the removal of Fr Speekman, what our rights are as laity, who we have recourse to.

It seems that our best plan of action is to write to the bishop refuting his claim that Fr Speekman’s ministry is ineffective. We, the people Fr Speekman has ministered to over the years, and particularly those now in Morwell parish, are in a good position to voice our convictions that his ministry to us is and has been effective.

We have most authority in stating what Fr Speekman’s ministry has meant *in our life*. We are the fruits of his labour.

Write brief letters about what Fr Speekman has achieved in your life. We hear so many stories of Fr Speekman bringing people back to the faith, deepening the faith of previously ‘lukewarm’ Catholics, encouraging people to become Catholic, enriching prayer life, helping people to appreciate the great Sacraments of the Church, teaching the truth in delicate situations and calling people to conversion in their hearts. Surely these are all stories of effective ministry? The Bishop needs to hear this. He has obviously not asked any of these sort of people, and goodness knows who he is listening to, or why he is not verifying rumours before acting on them.

As Bishop Coffey is not known for acknowledging or responding to letters of complaint, it is not sufficient to write to him alone.

All letters sent to the Bishop must be copied and sent to the Holy Father in Rome. The address is simply: His Holiness Pope John Paul II, 00120 Vatican City. Or you can send a copy to the Congregation for the Clergy, also at 00120 Vatican City, where Fr Speekman’s appeal will be sent to.

The answer from Fr Speekman himself, to the question of “What can we do, Father?” comes as no surprise: Pray.

Some Responses From Readers on the Removal of Fr Speekman

This is very disturbing. The fact that you all have my prayers goes without saying. This has been a constant topic of my prayers. I simply cannot understand your Bishop's behaviour, and that the Church allows it to go on. One can only assume his real motives.

D. McCauslin, Michigan

I think it may be worthwhile finding out more about your rights and those of the parish priest under Canon law. This may mean that the priest does not have to leave or alternatively may help bring about a more transparent reason as to why this has happened. I shall pray that you find the answer you seek. The laity in our Church have more 'rights' and more responsibilities than we think. I find it a source of comfort to realise how direct our, and the parish priest's, connection with Rome in fact is.

T. Bohl, Moe

Father Speekman will not rest until he 'wins the race' like Saint Paul, for Jesus. He has a vision for renewing the Catholic Church with that of the Catholic schools. Some people of short vision decided to terminate his ministry. For many people it is very comfortable to live with sin and justify everything that they do is all right because God is merciful. Jesus died on the cross for our sins BUT he expects us to follow Him and His teaching. It is a wonderful gift from God that from time to time God sends us prophets, who can remind us that we have a great privilege to be called God's children but also obligations to fulfil towards Him. What are we going to do with our prophet, Fr Speekman? Are we going to crucify him?

J. & M. Morrissey, Bateman's Bay

Archbishop Carroll, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a few years ago the following guidelines:

1. If genuine aberrations are observed, those who observe them should follow the Gospel directives of speaking with the religious concerned (Mt18:15-17).
2. If there is no reasonable response, it is appropriate for several persons to voice the concern.
3. If there is still no satisfactory response, the complaint should be taken to higher authority which would usually be the local Bishop.
4. If in a serious matter there is still no satisfaction there can be recourse to Rome. I believe in such cases, the Bishop and religious concerned should be informed of the action that is being taken.

Note also that under Canon 212§3:

"They [Christ's faithful] have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the Church. They have the right also to make their views known to others of Christ's faithful, but in doing so they must always respect the integrity of faith and morals, show due reverence to the Pastors and take into account both the common good and the dignity of individuals."

If Bishop Coffey ignores such 'manifestations', the matter should be reported to Rome as per 4 above.

W. Ghysen, Canberra

Can we guarantee that priests who are courageous enough to remain orthodox will not suffer the same fate?

B. Axten, Morwell

Bishop Coffey, I am writing to add my objections to the many I'm sure you will be receiving on the dismissal of my parish priest, Father John Speekman. To know you have done this fills me with tremendous sadness.

Father Speekman teaches just as Jesus did. He is a good man, totally honest and true. Not only my parish, but the diocese – and eventually you especially – will miss him sorely. He is an outstanding example of what a priest should be. What a huge loss. The persecution he has received has been a disgrace. And why? What good reason did you have for this? I challenge you to come up here to Morwell to tell us what wrong Father did to merit his dismissal as my parish priest.

A. Kennedy, Morwell

Bishop Coffey, We would like to express our disappointment and deep hurt we feel at your decision. Our parish has never been in better shape. We had a caring priest who proclaimed the word of our Lord as it was meant to be taught according to the Catechism and the teachings of Rome. As this seems to be Fr John's major crime perhaps the real reason, and the underlying problem should have been addressed - i.e. the Catholic Education Office. This action could ultimately destroy a very good priest and indeed the faith of many Catholics in the hierarchy of the Church. We will always hold Fr John in the highest esteem and respect.

B. & R. Vanderzalm, Morwell

Morwell Parishioners Meet with Bishop Coffey

I wonder what would have happened if Fr John Speekman had, in a meeting with a couple of parishioners, raised his voice, poked the woman in the shoulder, called the man 'gutless', made false accusations based on rumour, and refused to answer legitimate questions? ... Would there be complaints to the bishop? Rumours of abuse and bullying? Letters threatening him with suspension maybe? A decree of removal?

Well, our own bishop Jeremiah Coffey was guilty of all these things in a meeting on Sunday 10th August, with Helen Palma and John Henderson from Morwell Parish. A group of parishioners waited quietly outside Sacred Heart church in Morwell after Mass and Baptisms to ask the Bishop what has convinced him that Fr John's ministry is ineffective. (Unfortunately, a few 'hecklers' appeared and embarrassed themselves by losing their temper, causing a scene and shouting abuse at us.) The Bishop agreed to meet with two representatives.

In talking to the Bishop, we indicated that all the Morwell Parishioners wanted was to ascertain the basis for the issuing of the Decree. However, he was unable to offer any explanations. To call it a discussion would be farce as most of our questions or comments went unanswered. For example:

Has the Bishop acted as a spiritual father to his priest?

Our recent Planned Giving Campaign shows pledges are up by 10%, with 36 new contributors. Isn't this some evidence of Father's effective ministry?

Why did the Vicar General not consult with Father over the false rumours that prompted a letter from the Vicar General threatening Father with suspension?

The Bishop accused John Henderson of being gutless for being involved in the demonstration outside his office. The Bishop was clearly upset at the demonstration and banners in Sale on May 1st.

The Bishop indicated that he hasn't spoken to Father John during times he has visited Morwell and Churchill, and that there has been lack of verbal communication for many, many months. The Bishop admitted that he could have done better in that regard.

It was mentioned to the Bishop that there has been an increase in people coming back to the faith - there are many younger people and they openly tell that it is due to Fr John's ministry in Morwell.

The Bishop seemed incensed that Father put information in our Parish Bulletin - surely the Parish is entitled to know what is happening!

At one point during the meeting, Bishop Coffey raised his voice and poked Helen in the shoulder. She reminded him that she could construe this as abuse and bullying, and he smiled bashfully.

The Bishop admitted that he loses his temper and raises his voice sometimes, but had no comment as to why Fr John should be persecuted so severely for lesser deeds.

The Bishop was informed that because he had not acknowledged the correspondence sent to him by the Parish Council and parishioners, this caused the frustration that led to the Sale demonstration. He was asked why he only listened to rumour and gossip being spread by the very vocal minority opposed to Fr Speekman. (He denies listening to or acting on gossip, yet admits he hasn't spoken to Fr John. What does this lead us to conclude?)

It was mentioned to the Bishop that this whole sorry episode could have been over in 5 minutes if he had handled the original (and only official) complaint (of Fr John raising his voice in a parish Sacramental team meeting) in the way any leader should.

H. Palma & J. Henderson, Morwell

Mismanagement in the Hierarchy

“Sean Patrick O’Malley, the 59-year-old Capuchin friar who has become an expert at taking over troubled Catholic dioceses, was installed yesterday as the sixth archbishop of the scandal-racked Archdiocese of Boston in a solemn ceremony overlaid with sadness and hope.

At the heart of his 35-minute homily, he spoke of the depth of the clergy abuse scandal, acknowledging “our mismanagement of the problem of sexual abuse,” and included the church hierarchy in a list of those who have harmed young people. O’Malley’s predecessor, Cardinal Bernard F. Law, resigned in disgrace in December after enduring a year of criticism for not removing abusive priests from ministry.”

From an article by Michael Paulson, The Boston Globe 31-07-2003

Across most of the world, bishops and archbishops are being severely dealt with for *not* removing priests who have been persistently *unfaithful* to the teachings of the Church through *criminal* activity. Here in Sale diocese, our Bishop *removes* a priest who is persistently *faithful* to the teachings of the Church and has *not* committed any crime. How can we have faith in his moral leadership?

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Newsletter of the Confraternity of St Michael, Gippsland