

Dunedin school Kavanagh College to be renamed after sexual abuse investigation

Otago Daily Times

By Daisy Hudson

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Dunedin's Kavanagh College will be renamed after an investigation found its namesake failed to take appropriate action over claims of abuse.

The school will become Trinity Catholic College from January 1, 2023.

The Bishop of Dunedin said the church had previously let survivors down badly.

The change has been welcomed, but the time it took, and some of the investigation's findings, have come under fire.

An investigation began in 2020 after several abuse victims complained former Catholic bishop of Dunedin John Kavanagh failed to act on claims of sexual abuse by priests.

The church's national office for professional standards engaged an independent investigator to look into abuse complaints while Kavanagh was in office from 1957 until his death in 1985.

In a statement, Metropolitan Archbishop of Aotearoa-New Zealand Cardinal John Dew said records showed that seven priests, two brothers and one lay teacher sexually abused children, and in one case an adult, during that time.

The investigation found Kavanagh knew of complaints related to two priests: Father Freek Schokker in about 1963, and Magnus Murray in about 1972.

He did not know of the other cases, because complaints were not made until some years after he had died.

In the case of Murray, it was determined he admitted abuse to Kavanagh and was sent to Australia for treatment.

Kavanagh did what he was required to under canon law at the time, Dew said.

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"In the case of Fr Schokker, Bishop Kavanagh should have investigated the complaint, but failed to do so."

Schokker was working in the diocese when he was accused of abusing two young people.

He left New Zealand at some stage after the complaint, and died in the Netherlands in 1993, age 81.

Murray became a priest in the Auckland Diocese in 1979.

He was jailed for five years in 2003 after admitting 10 offences against four Dunedin boys from 1958 to 1972.

He was laicised — removed from the priesthood — in 2019, and lives in a rest-home.

"I accept that some survivors may not be happy with the decision that Bishop Kavanagh acted properly in respect to Magnus Murray," Dew said.

"But that was in the context of canon law of the time.

"We take immediate action on complaints of abuse today."

Survivors and former pupils have long called for the school to be renamed because of concerns about Kavanagh.

The decision on renaming the school was up to Bishop of Dunedin Michael Dooley.

He said the decision was made in consultation with the school and community.

"Given that Magnus Murray then went on to abuse other children after returning from Australia, I believe the church at the time let victims down badly.

"The issue is the attitude of the church at the time, which often did not believe victims of abuse and made it difficult to pursue justice and the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

"Having the college named after the bishop of that time represents for a number of people the systemic failures of that time and contributes to their trauma," he said.

Male Survivors Otago manager Michael Chamberlain said the announcement marked a significant day for survivors.

He acknowledged the public support Bishop Dooley had shown survivors of faith-based abuse, and hoped it would be the first step in similar changes being made by bishops around the country.

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However, he criticised the investigation's findings that, apart from in one instance, Kavanagh had done no wrong.

"The report confirms what survivors know, that the system is broken.

"Bishop Kavanagh failed to act, period."

Former pupils Christian Unkovich-McNab and Sam Murphy began advocating for a name change in 2018.

Last night they said they had met a lot of survivors who made it clear just how much a name change would mean to them, so they were delighted by the news.

But they were disappointed an independent review was necessary, and by how long the decision took.

"Nonetheless, we think it's an important step towards healing for survivors and growth for the church and school.

"We can once again say we are proud to be ex-pupils of Trinity Catholic College."

- Otago Daily Times: Public Interest journalism funded through NZ On Air.

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Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828-865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

Samaritans: 0800 726-666

The Depression Helpline: 0800 111-757

Otepoti Collective Against Sexual Abuse (Ocasa): (03) 474 1592

Male Survivors Otago: (03) 425-8018