



## Australia news

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# Sydney Catholic schools to remove name of Marist brother accused of sexual abuse

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A group of prominent Catholic schools are expected to remove the name of a brother accused of sexual abuse from a school building and scholarship program after campaigners warned he was “clearly not someone who should be honoured”.

The two [Sydney](#) Marist schools say they were never told of the allegations against Brother Geoffrey “Coman” Sykes, despite the Marist Brothers Catholic order having substantiated a complaint against him three years earlier.

Sykes worked at Marist schools across New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, including Parramatta Marist and [Marist College Canberra](#), for decades and was [honoured by senior colleagues](#) as an “amazing man and a wonderful Marist” after his death in 2013.

A new book by investigative journalist Suzanne Smith contains allegations that Sykes abused Glen Walsh, an aspiring brother. It says the abuse occurred on an almost nightly basis at a retreat in the NSW southern highlands. When Walsh was 18, he was allegedly abused more than 100 times.

Walsh left the order, became a parish priest, and made allegations about Sykes to Marist in 1997, which the order found to be unsubstantiated.

In 2017, Marist Brothers conducted a review of its initial investigation. Marist says [the review found](#) Walsh's allegations against Sykes were substantiated.

Despite this, both Parramatta Marist and Marist North Shore say they were not informed of the findings or earlier allegations.

Both schools continued to honour Sykes. Marist College North Shore has an entire wing named after the brother.

A scholarship program, named the Coman Sykes Memorial Scholarship, also exists at Marist Parramatta.

Bravehearts ambassador Damian De Marco, a survivor of abuse by a different Marist brother in Canberra, said Sykes' name must be scrubbed from the building and scholarship program.

"He's clearly not someone who should be honoured or placed on an altar," De Marco said. "He's not a role model."

De Marco said his efforts to raise the issue with individual schools and the Marist Brothers had been met with silence.

"The problem as well is that they're saying the right things on websites and media releases," he said. "In reality they're slamming the door in our face."

The Marist Brother provincial, Peter Carroll, said in a statement that the matter of names was up to each individual school.

"In respect of any names of awards and buildings, these are matters for individual school communities," he said.

The Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta said that Parramatta Marist had only "recently learned of the allegations against a former teacher at the school, Brother Coman Sykes".

"These allegations were published in a book released in August 2020 and the school was informed subsequently," it said in a statement.

The school will remove Sykes name from the scholarship.

“Though these remain allegations, the Parramatta Marist High school community takes very seriously its responsibility to victims of child sexual abuse,” the diocese said. “For this reason, and out of solidarity with all children and young people who have suffered as a result of abuse, a scholarship last awarded in 2018 will no longer be named for Brother Sykes.”

A spokeswoman for Sydney Catholic [Schools](#), responding on behalf of Marist North Shore, also said it had received no information about abuse crimes involving Sykes.

But she said signage at the school was to be replaced next year regardless.

“Marist College North Shore is currently being redeveloped to become co-educational in 2021, and all school signage is being replaced at the end of this year as part of that expansion plan,” she said.

Sykes’ victim, Walsh, became a whistleblower priest in recent years.

He had agreed to be a prosecution witness in the case against archbishop Philip Wilson, the most senior Catholic official in the world to be charged with concealing abuse.

Walsh took his own life in 2017, the night before he was due to meet with Marist for mediation on the Sykes claim, and two weeks before he was to be called as a prosecution witness in the Wilson case.

Wilson was convicted but later [acquitted on appeal](#).

Smith’s explosive book, *The Altar Boys*, details the treatment of Walsh after he decided to give evidence.

The book reveals that Walsh, a low-ranking parish priest, was summoned to the Vatican to meet the pope on 9 February 2016, after he had signalled he would give evidence for the prosecution in the Wilson matter.

Smith and Greens MP David Shoebridge have [called](#) for a police investigation into the last two years of Walsh’s life and his treatment by the church.

“Given the Pope’s authority over Glen, these actions can clearly be seen as an effort to intimidate him in order to protect the church,” Shoebridge told [the Sydney Morning Herald](#).

Carroll, the Marist provincial, said in his statement that it was “disappointing” that the book may be interpreted as suggesting “some malignant Church conspiracy”.

He said the timing of the mediation was not forced upon Walsh.

“The timing was to coincide with an appointment Father Walsh had in Sydney,” he said. “The meeting at the Marist Brothers’ Professional Standards Office was scheduled for 9.30am to allow Father Walsh to keep his afternoon appointment. Tragically, Father Walsh did not appear, because as was later revealed, he had taken his life the night before.”

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