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Parish priest faces inquiry

Professional conduct case, says church

By JOANNE McCARTHY

A CATHOLIC priest whose 20-year ministry includes being punched in the face by a school principal at Rutherford has been stood down from his Hunter parish pending investigation of a professional conduct matter.

NP, of St Michael's parish, Nelson Bay, was stood down on Wednesday. Maitland-Newcastle Catholic diocese confirmed in a short statement issued yesterday that the move concerned a professional conduct matter that required "independent investigation".

The Herald understands police are involved in the investigation.

A diocese spokeswoman refused to discuss details, saying: "Due to the fact this matter requires independent investigation, we are unable to comment further."

The diocese would not comment on the timing of the move, while Bishop Michael Malone is on a pilgrimage, or who initiated the investigation.

Parishioners at weekend Masses at St Michael's Church tonight and tomorrow morning will be told the popular priest "will not be involved in his usual parish ministry at this time".

One of his last major public services was at the funeral of former Port Stephens MP John Bartlett in February.

NP began his Hunter ministry at Muswellbrook in the late 1980s and moved to Toronto in the early 1990s.

He became parish priest at St Paul's, Rutherford, in 1995, where a long dispute between **NP** and Catholic primary school principal Mike Stanwell ended in court after Mr Stanwell punched the priest in the face in March 1999.

The dispute centred on the priest's opposition to Mr Stanwell's plan to extend Rutherford school to cater for an increase in enrolments of children from non-Catholic families.

Bishop Malone backed the priest on the extension matter, saying **NP** was the "higher authority", but the priest resigned from the parish in April 1999 after Mr Stanwell faced court and was put on a bond.

NP said in a letter to parishioners he was "not prepared to remain in a situation in which I have been abused and which I feel is a source of division in the community".

He was priest in residence at St Columban's, Mayfield West, in 2000, moved to St Patrick's, Swansea, in 2001, was on leave in 2003 and became parish priest at St Michael's, Nelson Bay, in 2004.

In a letter of support for Mr Stanwell in November 1998, which was written at the height of tension between **NP** and Mike Stanwell, a senior teacher who knew both men called **NP** "charming to a fault" with a "great rapport with the children" but she said the priest "liked to get his own way".

In its statement yesterday, the diocese spokeswoman said she could not comment on an independent investigation of a professional conduct matter concerning **NP4**, because it remained "current".

NP4 was stood down from his ministry in the Maitland area in September.

The Herald understands police are involved in that investigation.

Caption:

NP