



DIOCESE of
PARRAMATTA

MEDIA RELEASE

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Tested by Fire: Extraordinary story of the burning of a historical icon captured in new memoir

2026 marks the 30-year anniversary of the devastating fire that ruined the heritage-listed St Patrick's Cathedral in Parramatta and Parish Priest at the time, Monsignor John Boyle has released his first book about the historical event that captivated the public, politicians and the Australian media.

On 19 February 1996, an arsonist lit a fire that ripped through St Patrick's Cathedral which took 40 firefighters from 6 brigades a whole day and evening to pour 13,500 litres of water onto the flames every minute. As Boyle states in his book, "it was like fighting the devil with water pistols."

The devastation was felt nationwide with Prime Minister Paul Keating visiting the site several times, along with NSW Premier Bob Carr, Governor General Sir William Deane, the heads of the Anglican and other churches and even the Rebel bikie gang coming to assist in the aftermath.

The arsonist Jason Humphries watched the Cathedral burn. He was captured, arrested and sentenced. Monsignor Boyle later went to jail to forgive him which received praise and backlash from the community.

The extraordinary tale of loss, grief, resilience, rebirth, rebuilding and community spirit is expertly and entertainingly told in Monsignor's own words. *Tested by Fire* was launched at a special event on Thursday, 31 October 2025.

Speaker on the evening, Fire and Rescue NSW Commissioner Jeremy Fewtrell AFSM said, "These events don't just happen and our firefighters go to them and walk away without thinking about them anymore. They have a personal, direct impact on our people as well. There's that empathy between the firefighters and the people who are experiencing the loss."

"I think Monsignor Boyle has done such a wonderful job capturing all the elements of the story," he said.

The book was commissioned by Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv, the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, who asked Monsignor Boyle to document not just the fire, but also the faith, service, and dedicated community that supported the rebuilding of the Cathedral.

"Monsignor Boyle is one of the most qualified living witnesses to write an account of the destruction of the old St Patrick's, which was a shocking and emotionally powerful event. His book also chronicles how the Diocese responded to the challenge of rebuilding the Cathedral after the fire," said Bishop Vincent.

"Readers will be treated to a fascinating account of how Divine Providence accompanied the efforts not only to construct a stunning new Cathedral but to create a seamlessly cohesive architectural marvel," Bishop Vincent said.

Tested by Fire explores Monsignor Boyle's pivotal role in the Cathedral's rebuilding, working closely with then-Bishop Kevin Manning, and world renowned Roman-born architect Romaldo Giurgola – who was also the principal architect for Australia's New Parliament House. Giurgola's St Patrick's Cathedral design respects the cathedral's heritage while embracing modern liturgical design.

"It looks a bit strange at first – the seats face each other," Monsignor Boyle explained in reference to the new cathedral rebuilt and dedicated on 29 November 2003.

"The idea is to gather around the altar. In Catholic worship, the altar is a central piece of furniture, and the design reflects community and shared worship."

About St Patrick's Cathedral

St Patrick's Cathedral Parramatta is more than just a building – it's a living piece of Australia's history.

Parramatta is known as the Cradle of Catholicism: it was one of the first places that Mass was allowed to be said, it has one of the country's oldest Catholic schools, the oldest mortuary chapel, the first Sisters of Charity convent, and where the first nun was professed in Australia. Its parish registers are filled with the names of the pioneering priests and parishioners who helped shape the early Church.

Designed by Romaldo Giurgola, the Cathedral has a unique layout that brings people together, with congregants facing each other around the altar to encourage community and participation. For over a century, St Patrick's has been at the heart of Parramatta's spiritual, cultural, and social life.

About the Memoir

Tested by Fire is published by St Pauls Publications in collaboration with the Diocese of Parramatta, ahead of the 30-year anniversary of the 1996 fire. Monsignor John Boyle served as Parish Priest and Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral from 1991 to 2000.

***Tested by Fire* is available for purchase at the St Patrick's Cathedral bookshop or at St Paul's Publications: tinyurl.com/Tested-By-Fire**

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****Download images here: tinyurl.com/mons-boyle****

For a press copy of the book or to arrange an interview, contact:

Belinda Gadd, Communications Manager. **M:** 0456 290 969 **E:** belinda.gadd@parracatholic.org

About the Diocese of Parramatta

The Diocese of Parramatta is the Catholic Church in Western Sydney and the Blue Mountains and is home to over 320,000 Catholics with 45 parishes and churches. The Diocese educates more than 43,000 students across its 80 schools, employs more than 5,500 people and cares for thousands of people in need through its social services arm, Catholic Care. Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv was appointed the fourth Bishop of Parramatta in 2016. He is Australia's first Asian-born Bishop, and the first Vietnamese-born Bishop to lead a Catholic Diocese outside of Vietnam. You can read more about [him here](#).