

Len Egan Requiem. Homily d 16 June 2013

I'm not sure why we're here. Fr Egan said he did not want to go to heaven. He said there are too many people there.

Those who know him well will realise that was a comment of God's mercy. He believed that above all God wants people to be happy.

One day in St Catherine's obediently he allowed the nurse to escort him to the in-house movie. When they dimmed the lights he turned his chair around and read a book. The title of the movie was 'As it is in Heaven'.

A book lay open on Fr Egan's tray. He said it was the best book he had ever read. But he said that about most books. The pages of this book had not been turned for several weeks. The book was titled 'Speechless' by James Button, sub-titled 'A year in my father's business'.

Fr Egan spent 69 years as a priest going about his heavenly Father's business. He was born at Coburg on 18 October 1918, ordained in St Patrick's Cathedral on 23 July, 1944

He had a strong attachment to and affection for his parents.

Grace, friendliness, and wit characterised his style as he went about the business of being a priest; a manner learnt at home.

When he was preparing to enter the seminary, Fr Egan found he was baptised in the North Brunswick church where his parents had been married.

Baptism was a simple ceremony. Parents did not have to make an appointment or attend classes. Often the mother was still in hospital. Despite the simplicity of this initiation ceremony, Len would have heard a great deal about the baptismal call to live in imitation of Christ. There were sermons about it; parish mission talks were about it. Mass was a comment on it. And in turn baptismal life was a comment on the world.

For Fr Egan, faith was not essentially an internal mental act: he liked the self-assurance of 18 year-old Jack Negri who worked on a farm in Koo Wee Rup in the 1920,s and rode his bike to Mass every Sunday. Len loved that. It was not an expression of faith, it was faith. Faith was being a reader at Mass or taking

up the collection - as his father did at St Augustine's in the city; riding to Mass without your parents looking over your shoulder was exemplary faith.

In Koo Wee Rup his own parents travelled the 5 miles to Mass, on horse-back, horse-and-jinker, by bicycle or on foot. And they were the fasting days.

Faith was in free choice. Fr Egan told people they did not have to go to Mass; he wanted them to go freely, passionately, not out of obedience or the dread of guilt. He was reported to the Archbishop.

No wonder he admired St Paul, who wanted people freely to love Christ above all else. When he was 80 yrs old he attended lectures on St Paul's Letters at LaTrobe University, and found an affinity with the Apostle to the Gentiles. He wished he's done it earlier.

Like St Paul he journeyed. He stayed with the Negri relatives in Italy as well as with other Bulleen family connections. That was out of affection for them and out of his general admiration for migrants.

He had already practiced the art of migrant pastor at North Sunshine, adopting the compassion of Fr Con Reis.

Despite his love of language he learnt from Fr Reis that there were other ways of conveying your affection for a mix of European migrants.

For a while he lived in the school cloakroom. Then he found there was room in the inn and he lived there. He worried deeply about money, and interest rates, but the Archdiocese came to the rescue.

Here at St Clement's, Ugo Romanin urged him to invite the Scallabrinians to say Mass. The current chaplain, Fr Vito, said the first Mass in Italian. Fr Egan said 1200 attended those early Italian Masses.

Could that be true?

St Clement of Rome School, Bulleen, was the first Melbourne Catholic Primary School to include Italian in its curriculum. Sir James Gobbo had something to do with that.

When the Egan family moved from Hastings to the city the three boys attended St Patrick's College, the Jesuit school in East Melbourne. Marie, Vacluse Convent.

Len wanted to become a Jesuit. He approached the school vocations director who asked him if he had a devotion to Mary. When Len replied No the priest said, 'You are of no help to us'. John Caddy will sing the Ave Maria with discretion and the priests will sing the Salve Regina with gusto.

His Seminary days were happy. He made close and lasting friends. His first appointment was in Deepdene with Fr Godwin who according to Len walked about with his hands in his pockets and everyone loved him. While there, Len attended two films every Friday afternoon and, under two different pen-names, wrote two reviews of each film, one pair for the Advocate and the other for the News Weekly. He said it was just something you did. In that parish he attended a meeting of the Social Justice Movement, known simply as The Movement, associated with Bob Santamaria. It was just something curates did. He was friendly with Frank Meagher who represented a different understanding of the action of Catholics. For Len members of both sides had souls and, in their own way, were Catholics.

He got his love of the written word from his upbringing. Some of his Mother's elegant verse was published in periodicals. "She was born to read". When the family left Hastings for Canterbury she made frequent use of the local library. Len went there every Friday after school. Attending St Patrick's College East Melbourne with his brothers, Maurice and Terry would have done no harm to his love of literature.

His mother read the novels of Naomi Jacob. As Len was departing on a trip to Europe she urged him to visit Naomi at her home in Italy. Perhaps she knew he had once knocked on Graham Greene's door in Antibes in France, and that, bearing an introduction by Frank Sheed the publisher, he had called on the Catholic novelist Bruce Marshall who also lived in Antibes. Greene was out shopping, Len and Bruce became friends.

Len did as his mother suggested and stayed with Naomi, a Jew, for three days. Sounds like St Luke's Gospel.

It makes you wonder why, in Leo Morison's excellent anecdotal history of St Clement's first 25 yrs, a contributor described Len as shy man. Surely reticent, not shy.

His reading favoured non-fiction. He said the excellence of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh had spoilt him for other novels. Waugh would not have altered a word or a sentence of Len's one page profile of Ivanhoe parish prepared for his successor. The last sentence reads, 'As the new incumbent presents himself to the wide-eyed congregation, he need not fear that anyone will be mumbling to himself the words that York uttered about King Richard and Bolingbroke. (King Richard the Second, Act 5, Scene 2, Verses 23-25).

York. 'As in a theatre the eyes of men,  
After a well grac'd actor leaves the stage, are idly bent on him who enters next,  
Thinking his prattle to be tedious.....'

His parish weekly newsletters were, informative, witty, satirical, and collectable.

They lampooned the pretensions and follies of all of us, but without mockery or hate. They were self-deprecating.

A memorable entry was about the recovery of his old but beloved EH Holden stolen from the Huntingdale Golf Club. It read like the Song of Songs. You could not separate what was said from the way it was said.

(Simon Leys's essays help one to understand Len's poetic use of language)

He admired Priests who worked their way through Mass by simply turning the pages of the book, doing what is in red and reading what is in black....to borrow from the advice of someone else. Mass did not need embellishing.

In this it pleased him to have Mons Ronald Knox and Evelyn Waugh on side. Mass was something the priest did, the non-ordained did other things, like write novels, build houses, or take their children to sport. Like most who express strong views, he was inconsistent: he liked nothing better than to be accompanied by the likes of Bernadette Reed, John Caddy or Angela Grasso. He knew the intensity of the Eucharist should generate different songs and music forms,- to borrow from Fr Peter Steele SJ. He appreciated embellished forms of the Penitential Rite convinced that God would accommodate the contrite heart in a forgiving community. Above all God wanted his people to be happy.

It must surely have been the Eucharist which generated his gentle response to the hundreds of people who welcomed him into their homes. Although secretly he hoped they would gather on the Sabbath, he did not make distinctions. Everyone was valuable. I cannot imagine his getting used to saying in the modern Mass that Jesus died for many.

One of the first things he did on arrival at Bulleen was to take off his black coat, clerical collar, and black hat. He had found them burdensome in the heat of summer. There was something symbolic in it too. He said he wanted to strip away feelings of self-importance. He admired country priests for their lack of pretence, their casual dress, their humanity; their familial relationship with nuns.

And yet for him priests were important. They celebrated Mass, preached, did baptisms, and marriages, and cut the grass.

His weekly bulletins helped people know the relative importance of Church practices, teachings, and policies.

His model for the pastor could easily have been the Shepherd who knows his flock.

Pretty well everyone in Bulleen and other parishes could call him a friend. He certainly knew them by name and all wanted in some way to inhabit his mental and spiritual world. In Bulleen parish alone he would have visited each home at least 20 times. Each day, he used set out with his little book at 1.30 and return at 3.25, 2.55 Wednesdays.

He was recognised not by a collar but a red jumper. It took people's fancy. So constant and recognisable that it took on a meaning beyond itself: almost of transcendence like the girl in the red coat in the film *Shindlers List*. In my wild flights of fancy I pictured him doing his rounds on a black horse as his hardworking and kindly policeman father did around Hastings, in his distinctive uniform and tall helmet.

Len in his red jumper was accosted by a policeman as he rummaged through letter boxes looking for the names of residents who were not at home. He said the mistake Ned Kelly made was in shooting policeman.

He was welcoming. His graceful hospitality always depended on the generosity and friendliness of his long serving housekeeper Miss Merle Howe. ....It is generally agreed among priests that none was looked after better than Len. She looked after him in Yarraville, North Sunshine, Bulleen, Ivanhoe, during his retirement until his going to Justin Villa and to St Catherine's Nursing Home. And he could not have been looked after better than he was at St Catherine's.

Fr Egan told a visitor he had some excellent assistant priests. The ones who changed his religious views radically were two curates at Yarraville. Before he met them he said he had given only notional assent to the documents of Vat 11. It was beach crossing.

Retired, he took a back seat at St Clement's by sitting in the front seat. A critical explanation of the Gospel for an emerging homily was no longer needed and he described the Gospels as "rattling good stories".

Fr Brendan Reed who was resident here at St Clement's when Len came back to help, agrees with me that this was Len the writer of the imaginative poetic newsletter moved by the Gospel in a new way; grasped, as if for the first time, by its parables and inventive exaggerations - the way truth is found. Another beach crossing for Len.

That's my excuse for telling a lie about the title of the film shown at St Catherine's. It wasn't a pointless lie. As someone said. Truth is only believed when someone has invented it well. It makes you think of the congruence between the famous newsletters and the gospels.

The last line of Immaculate Conception, Ivanhoe, parish profile:

'The priest who starts Mass on time, and who does not dally on the way, would never have to worry about money'

The pain of his last days are over and he is inhabiting a world he hopes is not too different from this one; without its worries of course. As we pray for Len we pray for the family and friends he has left behind. His sister Marie and her husband Jim, his brother Terry and his wife, Helen, and their families.

Thanks

The Archbishop for celebrating and .....inviting me to deliver the homily.

The hospitality of Fr Waheed the PP. We are conscious of being visitors.

The extreme spontaneous practical generosity of the Parish personnel and parish school staff and community.

The Principal Michael Heenan and deputy Chris Atley

The Pastoral Associate Cecilia And parish secretary, Belinda.

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The musicians John Caddy, Bernadette Reed, and Angela Ryan

Fr Greg Bourke and the team who care so well for retired priests.