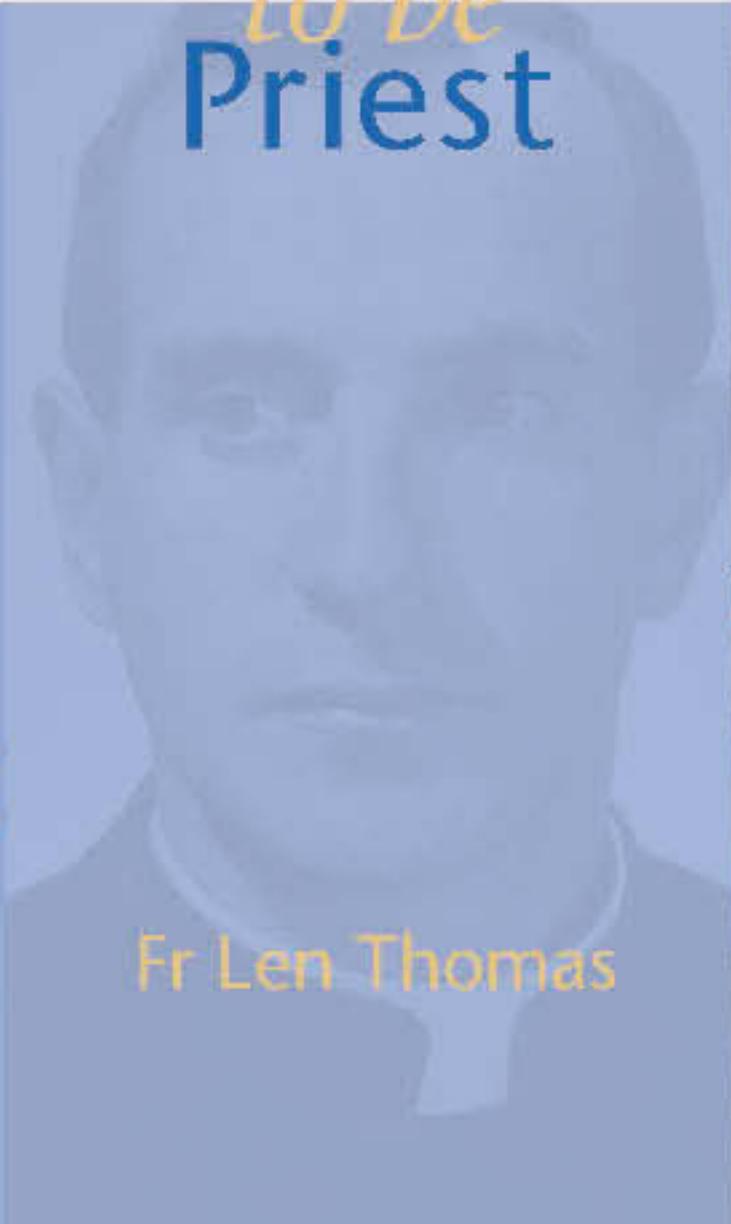




Free  
*to be*  
Priest



Fr Len Thomas



# Free *to be* Priest

Fr Len Thomas

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This story is any diocesan priest's story. Only the details are different.

To celebrate seventy years of life on 10th June, and forty years as priest on 24th July, I offer with thanks to my family, relatives, friends and connections this free book, and a book launch or two, rather than swell meals! Please read and enjoy.

*God loves to hear our stories*



## *All in One Floppy Disk*

Family, relatives, friends and others have freed me. The events of world and church have helped me to be a priest.

This book tells how people have freed me to be something of what God wants. Of course I need much more freeing for the task, as we all do.

This book is also a tribute to the wider secular society and its citizens who have shaped me. I enjoy their presence, where the Holy Spirit dwells.

This year is also a great time to empty much of life's accumulated papers, photos, remembrances and facts into one floppy disk, so that this earthly desk is cleared.

Finally, great nephews and nieces might want to know how some things came to pass. And who were those uncles and aunts anyway?



*Clarrie Thomas (nee de Mamiel, my inspiring mother)*

Part One



Early Freedoms

## *Free to Change*

**N**evil Shute's "A Town Like Alice" shown at Warrnambool cinema in 1956 was a powerful love story. So powerful that I ran home along the coast road to my lodging at 4 Japan Street, weeping, laughing and shouting to the ocean.

For three years since 1954 I had enjoyed working as a cadet journalist at the *Horsbam Times* and the *Warrnambool Standard*. My career seemed set. I was applying for future promotions to the *Melbourne Herald* and the *Ballarat Courier* while chasing stories, writing enthusiastically to beat deadlines, and meeting people who wanted to have their news in print. This was my passion. Telling the news excited me. Since mid-teens I hankered to tell people what was happening. And print it.

But tonight there was nobody to tell. My landlady and her son, the Careys, were asleep. It was near 11.00 p.m. I had news, good news. But there was nobody to listen.

I was in love.

Nevil Shute's love story had, in a perverse way, pointed me to another way of love. A love for many people, more than to one woman and family. This excess of emotion was, and still is, unlike me. So I remember vividly that October night in 1956, the year of the Melbourne Olympic Games. This was bigger than the Olympics.

I wanted to be a priest.

*To each of us, the call of the Spirit is unique*

## *Family and Parish*

I wrote to my parents at Bell Street, Hawthorn, that I would be home with some important news. The *Ballarat Courier* invited me that week to come for an interview as a D grade journalist. I replied quickly that I had changed my career from newspaper reporting. An exciting cadetship through the past three years at both the tri-weekly *Horsham Times* and the daily *Warrnambool Standard* had finished. I was twenty-one and a bit.

My father and mother waited quietly as we sat at the kitchen table after my brother and sisters had gone to bed.

“I’ve decided to be a priest,” I said.

“It’s a hard life,” said my dad, Bill.

My mother Clarrie said little, but years later she recalled: “I thought you might.”



*Our Generation (back row); Bill, Len, Val, Alby, Gillian, Colin (front row); Pat, Denise, Pam, Maureen, Elaine, Bernadette*

Our former parish priest, Fr Bill O’Collins, a Jesuit, had moved to St Ignatius church, Richmond, from our home parish of Immaculate Conception, Hawthorn. A family friend, Bob Slattery, had consulted Fr Bill five years earlier, then joined the Jesuit Order after finishing his Year 12 schooling. He went to the Jesuit Mission in India, apparently ‘for life’. Despite this I rang Fr Bill.

“What sort of priest do you wish to be,” Fr Bill asked. He knew our family well. We were involved Hawthorn parishioners for the past twenty years.

“I only know that I don’t want to be a Jesuit priest because I don’t want to go to India for life,” I said.

“Well you had better apply to the diocese,” he said with a wise smile. His acceptance freed me for the next steps.

*God’s ways are not always our ways*

## *Free to Write: Flashback 1*

“A budding journalist, eh?” Marist Brother Cletus grinned six years earlier, as we passed each other halfway along the small oval of St John’s primary school, now St Joseph’s school, Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn. His comment confirmed my first career path. I had just won an essay competition set by Hawthorn City, later Booroondara, Council. I was fifteen in grade 10. It was 1950.



*Aged 6, oil painting by my father Bill*

Cletus was a role model to us boys because he could kick a torpedo punt a long way, and taught with great compassion. He later endeared himself at St Teresa’s aboriginal mission, eighty kilometers out of Alice Springs where he became a father figure to local and mission people until he died and was buried there. In both Melbourne and out of Alice Springs he is remembered as a great religious brother, teacher, mentor and compassionate human being, a model Christian, one who frees. Cletus freed me to begin my first career. A budding journalist, eh?

Marist Brothers Oliver, Geoffrey, Paul, and others, helped to draw out our creative and sporting talents. These complemented family life, and the influence of the bustling Hawthorn parish. Many happy relationships were formed and talents fostered, even at Manresa kindergarten, when we were aged three to five.

Grandfather Alfred William Thomas had retired after a near lifetime as a proof reader at both the *Kalgoorlie Miner* and Melbourne’s *The Age*. As a 15-year-old making life decisions after World War 2, I wondered often about war trenches which we had to file into at St John’s school oval, the darkened windows at home, queueing for rationed bread in Liddiard Street bakery, and exciting headlines about peace at the end of World War 2.

The print media was my first passion.

*The pen is mightier than the sword*

## *Free to be Educated: Flashback 2*

For pocket money, my brother Bill, two and a half years older than me, washed dishes on some week nights at the boarders dining room kitchen, Xavier College. As Bill gained higher apprenticeship wages in furniture polishing, I was engaged also to do the dishes, and was paid good pocket money.

I decided to continue through to Year 12 at St Kevin's College, Toorak. The preferred Marist Brothers college, Marcellin, had not got up to year 11. My parents were probably anxious because our family of six siblings were stretched for cash. I was the first to try for such a higher education. The pocket money might help make it possible. Mum and Dad made no great objection to my career plans. Their generosity gave me real freedom. I chose St Kevin's, partly because I had friends there.

Because of freedom of choice given me by parents, siblings and teachers like Brother Cletus, I was able to help fund my own school fees and pursue my ambition to be a journalist.

## *Yes for News Writing: Flashback 3*

At the end of Year 11, headmaster Brother Rooney of the Christian Brothers, looked at my feeble results. He was surprised when I said I wanted to continue on to Year 12. I argued that I did not have to pass like everyone else, because only Year 11 was needed for journalism. The College instilled a sense of loyalty into students like myself who came from feeder schools. I was given every freedom to select various subjects and sports.

The change after ten years with the Marist Brothers at Hawthorn to the Christian Brothers at Toorak was a maturity climb into Years 11 and 12. Brother Kilmartin came in daily to lecture from a pile of stacked books, rarely looked at us, treated us as independent responsible people, and convinced me that I was free to take hold of this valuable asset called Education.

'Killer' as we called him could regularly deal with thirty to forty essays overnight, all punctuation and spelling corrected, with an incisive comment.

Some students mischievously tried overwriting, others wrote small spidery lettering. Still the essays came back.

Our first attempt at a book review showed that most of us had failed. He tore the set novel to bits: bad construction, insufficient character development, unreal storyline. We hadn't analysed it. We weren't thinking. We were gullible. We weren't in the class of former St Kevin's students like Bob Santamaria. Real freedom requires mental discipline and honest thinking and I was being educated to think before writing.

Later, I felt uncomfortable that St Kevin's became a Public School, raised to a higher socio-economic status. Much later, I was proud to see my name on the honour board list of Old Boy priests.

*Quo Vadis? (Where are you going?)*

## *Newspaper Reporting . . . And Yet? Flashback 4*

Editor John Bollard interviewed me to work at Horsham as a cadet journalist, 1954. I had spent a year, applying for cadetships, studying typing and shorthand at night and working by day as a clerk at the engineers' office of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria in Church Street Richmond. Here, engineers designed train carriages for Morwell open cut coal transport. For me, the printed word seemed more powerful than electricity.

The *Horsham Times*, Monday-Wednesday-Friday, competed with *Natimuk Mail*, Tuesday-Friday, for sports news, courts, council, social events, and general Wimmera gossip. A new business world was opened for me. The competition was tough and exciting.

## *Horsham and Society*

Michael O'Brien, secretary of St Michael's Tennis Club, claimed me as his assistant secretary when I arrived at Horsham. We reversed our roles in my second year. This friendship, was fifty-one years old when I presided at his daughter Sophie's wedding in February 2005.

It has included early family relationships with Michael's and Mary-Lou's sons Steven, John, Patrick, Alexander and Michael's sisters Clare, Margaret and brother Paul. Such family and community involvement opened out contacts and friendships of great personal and professional value.

I joined Horsham Diggers football club for a season. My presence in the back pocket did not lift us off bottom place. But it did steer me into writing on the local football, cricket and tennis. One Sunday, working as usual from 9.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m., I proudly wrote up twelve cricket matches for the Monday paper. I kept that issue for years.

Only later on did I realise how dedicated to community were voluntary sporting club officials who both created and brought in the news.

Thanks to friends and a background of commitment to faith, I didn't miss the Sunday 8.00 a.m. Mass in two years at Ss Michael & John's, Horsham, before reporting for work. That was ominous. It also sounds impossible when we recall our busy Saturdays, playing competitive tennis in the afternoon, a quick meal at the O'Brien's place, a rush to film or dance, then to late supper at the coffee lounge to review with others the day's local sport. And bed by 1.00 or 2.00 a.m.

## *Voice of Others*

I often recalled Hawthorn when 1000 men and boys attended the first Sunday 8.00 a.m. Mass for many years under Jesuit Fr Fitzgerald. Once a year, the Mass was followed by a Communion breakfast in Manresa Hall. There were lots of apples left over. At a particular age, we pocketed them and went upstairs at the hall. While a learned guest speaker held the crowd spellbound, usually on important social justice topics like communism, we would roll the apples down from tier to tier in the upstairs balcony. Plop. Plop. Plop.

Through such fun, something must have stuck inside me and others. Hawthorn produced many vocations to religious life. Regular priestly visits to our homes and the inspiration of other Jesuit Fathers like James McGann, Pat Harper, Jim McNamara, and early German pioneers like Fr Pfeiffer made an impact.

*Horsham Times* racing reporter Peter Lovitt had a major reverse influence on me, just as Nevil Shute's film did. Using the by-lines Cross Court, Cush Cannon and Comic Court, Peter usually won Horsham table tennis and pool room tournaments, and he was fearless about investigating racing reputations. He graduated through most major daily papers.

When Mal Crawford asked him twenty years down the track, what was Len Thomas like as a journalist, his instant answer was: "Not ruthless enough." He was right. His style, in a reverse way, freed me to proceed from journalist to priest, from Horsham and Warrnambool to Werribee and Glen Waverley.

*Children of this World are Wiser than the Children of Light*

## *Free to Fail*

A priest candidate needed year 11 Latin, which I had failed at St Kevin's. The Victorian Education Board allowed me a late application to sit for the February '57 Supplementary examination. Again I failed, despite excellent teaching by a famous private Latin teacher, Mr Don Rankin. Happily, in a time of plentiful employment, the Postmaster General's Department employed me for a year as a salary clerk at Spencer-Bourke Streets Post Office. This allowed me to pay some home board and save for seminary fees. And also to live a full life on evenings and weekends in family, parish, scouts, theatre. And to study Latin.

Halfway through 1957 I asked Mr Rankin if I could sit for Matriculation Year 12, as well as Year 11 Latin. It was a moment of grace and freedom because I think he was as often frustrated by my efforts as I was. He agreed to help. I sat both examinations in December 1957, failed year 11 again for the third time, and passed the higher year 12 Matriculation at this first try.

*Never Say Die*

## *Encounter with Daniel Mannix*

The busy year 1957 included an early interview with 93-year-old Archbishop Mannix, and my mother's prayer interview with God.

In discussions with vicar-general Monsignor Arthur Fox, later Bishop of Sale, I asked if I could go higher and see the Archbishop about my request to join the seminary without Year 11 Latin. He said the Archbishop was on his annual summer holiday at Portsea but generously offered to arrange an interview for me. At the age of twenty-one and a half I took the long train and bus trip to Portsea for the interview with the 93-year-old head of the Melbourne Catholic Church. After I weakly put my case, about being a person of some work experience and keenness, Mannix said I had better follow Monsignor Fox's decision.

Back on the Portsea bus I re-planned the year.

## *Freedom & Family*

My mother walked the one long block to St Francis Xavier's, Box Hill parish church, from our home at 55 Dorking Road. Alone she knelt in the front pew, looked up to the large crucifix and as tears rolled down her cheeks said: "Why won't you take him? I'm willing to give him to you". She told me this thirty-five years later. It was one of the few times that she revealed deep emotions. Emotions were hidden, especially from children, among my parents' generation who had endured World Wars of 1914-18, 1939-45, and 1930's Depression.



*Mum, Len and Jerome at the twins 90th birthday at Lilydale convent - June 1994*

From the freedoms and turmoils of the late '50's & early '60's families were partly protected in our local self-sufficient parish community. This was the era of the musical 'Hair' and the Beatles and the reckless open-spirited society in

Melbourne, Australia, and throughout much of the English and capitalist society.

Mum, dad and family had decided to move house to Box Hill in 1956 after twenty busy, friendly community years at Hawthorn. My sisters Elaine, Pat, and Bernadette, had shared one crowded bedroom at our small Hawthorn home. Dad left for work daily before 7.00 a.m. and returned after 7.00 p.m. to help feed us and provide the new home at Box Hill.

Alby, the youngest son of mum's third sister Lily (Vickers) broadened our vision into politics and business. We were all outgoing, yet without a phone. Elaine rang the Postmaster General's office to ask for a public phone to be placed outside our house, to save the frustration of walking to distant shops. The PMG installed one quickly and unexpectedly. My parents did not drive. My brother Bill was a fully-fledged French polisher and bought a car. I had to fill in a year before the seminary would enrol me.

### *Festina Lente (Hasten Slowly)*

## *Free to Act*

Barry Humphries played Colonel Pickering in Peter O'Shannessy's 1957 production of *Pygmalion* at the National Theatre, opposite St Patrick's Cathedral. I answered an advertisement for unpaid 'extras' and joined the cast for the three-week season, with two other males and three females. We were the 'crowd' with little to say. We also did scenery and props. A free opportunity, without even Actors' Equity pay.

Besides name-dropping, what does acting as an extra alongside the Dame Everidge-to-be have to do with being a priest?

## *More Family & Community Memories*

Community living began for me in the tight family home, kicking a home-made footy in Bell Street, playing Monopoly during wet school holidays and cricket in the small Hull Street park. The most feared bowler, with underarm breaks and googlies, was an older local, nicknamed Hickey, who mesmerised us long before the 'Shane Warney' era.

Gerard Petrie, Bob Slattery and myself played tennis, table tennis, pool and other games over long hours for a 'silver tray', threepence, to which we each contributed one pence.

Live theatre began back home around the piano and in the backyard. My mother's sisters, Norrie (Ryan) and Doreen (Sr Many Jerome) taught piano into their 80s. Mum played the piano for our family Christmas carols and Irish song nights. I tried to take over, but without much success, when her fingers became less supple. Several of our family learned piano from Alison Linden (Carey) who became a long-time family friend.

At 12th Hawthorn Manresa scout group, scoutmaster Graham Langton encouraged us to sing and act around camp fires at Gilwell Park Gembrook, and at concerts in the former Lynch Street Scout Hall. In about 1950 we were in our mid-teens and as Senior Scouts we performed 'Trial by Jury'. I often revisit the Judge's Song while driving to pastoral appointments.

Our parents were involved in all our activities including the scout parents committee. Bill and myself went camping. With Gerald Gleeson I gained the coveted Queen's Scout badge. Elaine, Pat and Bernadette were caught in the surrounding social whirl. Alby, showed a flair for business and the outdoors at a young age.



*Trial by Jury 1953*



*Manresh Scouts about 1949*

## Theatre & Sport

Manresa Musical Society drew on enthusiastic backroom talents of our mothers. Elaine, Pat and myself played in musicals at Manresa Hall, directed by Bill Box, using authentic pre-war Princess Theatre scenery and costumes. In 1955, when doing National Service training, I went AWL (Away Without Leave), from Puckapunyal, so desperate was I to see 'The Merry Widow' production, and be with fellow comedian Gerard Petrie and other



*With my sisters Elaine and Pat in "Girls of Gottenburg", Manresa 1957*



*With Gerard Petrie in "Girls of Gottenburg"*

friends. I felt very 'unfree' without a leave pass on the bus to and from Puckapunyal, but very free to be backstage at Manresa that matinee.



*National Service 1955.  
Number 3/770471*

Parish scouting and amateur theatre freed us for many friendships and community skills. 1957 was an enriching year, full of mixed emotions and activity.

My thin junior sporting career included: member of St John's Under 14 premiership cricket team (usually 12th man); fourth in the combined sports mile at Glenferrie oval, aged fifteen; a few times 'off the bench' for St Kevin's First Eighteen; and one season only with Hawthorn YCW Football Club, premiers 1953.

*Go Hawks!*

## *Influenced by Ancestors*

My mother can claim ancestry from the author of Gulliver's Travels. Inside the main doors of St Patrick's Cathedral Church of Ireland, Dublin, is the bust and burial place of Dean Swift. In 1994 I visited and read the inscription:

"Here lies the body of Jonathan Swift, Doctor of Divinity, Dean of this Cathedral Church. Where savage indignation can no longer rend his heart, Go traveller, and imitate if you can, this earnest and dedicated Champion of Liberty."

Dean Swift also founded St Patrick's mental hospital, Dublin and died on 19th October 1745, aged seventy-eight..

Two hundred and twenty years later, as I was on the traditional pre-ordination retreat, before being ordained at St Patrick's Cathedral Melbourne, Rev. George Thomas, an Anglican priest, unexpectedly asked to gain a special pass to sit with my family in reserved rows of the packed Cathedral along with nineteen other ordinands and their relatives and friends. He was half brother to my deceased grandfather. He and all other Thomas relatives on my father's side were unknown to us, because my grandfather came from the Anglican church to become a Catholic and marry my grandmother. He and his relatives were 'cut off' from each other, as often happened in pre-ecumenical days.

There is also a family rumour of a Baptist minister relative who died off the shores of Western Australia.

Doreen de Mamiel, my mother's twin, entered the Mercy order at age thirty, taking the name of Sister Mary Jerome. She taught typing, shorthand, piano, and any other musical instrument a child might bring along.

At the early death of her sister Lily she transferred to the Mercy orphanage at South Melbourne to be with the children, our cousins Denise, Pam, Val, Maureen and Colin. Alby the youngest came to live with our family. Gillian the second youngest went to mum's eldest sister, Norrie and Jack Ryan and family. I was most proud of the four de Mamiel sisters, for whom family meant everything.



*Grandparents Alf & Kate  
Thomas, 50th Wedding  
Anniversary*

Doreen's dedicated life, her religious name, and St Jerome's desert life inspired me to take Jerome as Confirmation name.

Auntie Doreen died as we sat around her bed singing 'Happy Birthday' on her ninety-sixth birthday. My mother Clarrie reached ninety-four and three months. Both were at St Catherine's, Balwyn.

My father died at our Box Hill home after a long-delayed holiday to Western Australia. He was nearing his seventy-fifth year. His sister Carmel reached ninety-four and her sister Rita was seventy-seven when she died. Both were extremely generous to their nieces and nephews. Many of my seminary study books were their birthday and Christmas presents. Their home at Moreland Road, Brunswick was open to us and to many people of different faiths. But it was especially open to church friends.



*(Rear) Alby, Bernadette, John, Aunts Carmel & Rita. (Front row) Mum, Dad, Elaine, Barry Craven & Bill*

These long lives all came from the Kalgoorlie goldfields. Grandparents Alf and Kate Thomas moved there from Victoria.

Such ancestors probably motivated my calling into religious and community service, into Christian unity, into cross-cultural travel, into mental health chaplaincy, into priesthood and to seventy years of life.

## *End of an Era*



Part Two



Priesthood Training

## *Free to Talk with God*

“Ain’t religion teejus?” a fellow seminarian drawled, American style, with a grin or grimace one Easter Week, as we headed for the umpteenth time to the chapel at Corpus Christi College Werribee, now the Werribee mansion and zoo.

Werribee and Glen Waverley were colleges titled Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ.

I was received into Corpus Christi College, Werribee, on 1st March 1958, with forty other men, young and not so young. We came to know each others’ parents as fine people, dedicated ‘salt of the earth.’



*1958 - Beginning at CCC*

Here for eight years, we listened to fellow students, to Jesuit lecturers, to the world of great minds and hopefully to God. But mostly we listened to ourselves. Was I meant to be here? Certainly I was free to be here, or to leave.

The College Crest was of the pelican which traditionally feeds its young with blood which it pecks from its own breast, a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ for us. We shared this image together in many ways.

Vatican 2 opened new doors. During Holy Week, with two others of our year, I was to chant the Passion in Latin on radio 3AW. We practiced Gregorian intonations for weeks. A week before this radio presentation, the Vatican instruction came out to turn our liturgies into English, from Latin. We had to relearn to chant the Passion in English. Somehow “cutting off his ear” and “heeeee said” never had the same solemnity.

*Duc Ad Altum (Lead Out into the Deep)*

## Vatican 2

Change hit our church in the '60's. Our seminary education helped us through it. We learnt flexibility even as we held to traditions. Many older Catholics were not so fortunate.

Jesuit leaders of prayer and lecturers in philosophy and theology, included Fathers Charlie Mayne, Jim McInerney, Ted Gryst, Brian Murphy and Sean Monahan. Syd Lennon taught chant. Robert Peterson sharpened our speech and diction. John Prendiville introduced the tutorial system of higher education. His uncle Lancelot Prendiville, who had baptised me at Boulder, later became the Archbishop of Perth.

Fr Joe Phillips, our traditional Scripture professor who occasionally holidayed in Perth, and was always prone to making puns, said on hearing that a learned Jesuit named Fr Robert North was coming to lecture: "When Robert North comes south, I'm going west." There was an undertone of permanency, of gentle resignation to a Higher Will.

Prayer, study, community living and personal development were our ambitions. We developed other freedoms also. Sport, long walks with friends on the Thursday 'day off', watering and bagging the tennis courts and being part of Wintergarten theatrical productions were among my relaxations, my freedoms. They complemented prayer challenges and study frustrations.

From December to March, several of us worked as clerks in the Grain Elevators Board, Melbourne. One year, expecting the wheat yield to be delayed, another student and myself took a night sorting job at Camberwell Post Office. But the wheat came earlier than expected. We were compelled to work in the city from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m, then to sort letters at Camberwell from 10.00 p.m. until 5.00 a.m. for more than a week, apart from getting to our own homes for breakfast, sleep and evening meals. "When do we sleep?" I asked. "Take every morning and lunchtime", my friend advised.



*Coach of 'Seconds', Glen Waverley*

“Come in”, Maurie Adams called out when I knocked on his door one afternoon at Werribee. I opened and looked in. Maurie was at his desk, calmly studying a book. On the window sill, looking at me with beady eyes, huge pointed beak and ugly long talons, was perched an eagle. “He’s alright. He had a broken leg when I found him on the ground among the trees. I bandaged him up. He often comes to sit on the window sill.”

Thank God for the ‘threshold rule’ meaning we were not to enter each others’ room. Thank God too for Maurie, ordained with us, who studied and became a doctor at the mission hospital, Kanabea, PNG. His early death, and burial at Castlemaine alongside his family, expanded the idea of our priesthood as we gathered to mourn his going to God.

Talking with God was natural in my family, schools and parish community. Eight years priesthood training at Werribee and Glen Waverley honed these skills.

## *De Te Vivere (To Live For You)*

### *Journalism Recurs*

“Lord Baden-Powell did not start the first scout troops. Boys did.”

So I wrote during a very busy spiritual year at Werribee. Journalistic and scout training bubbled to the surface. The Australian Catholic Truth Society published in 1960 my pamphlet, titled *Catholic Scouts*. Many former scout leaders attached to Catholic parishes, close friends of mine from the Catholic Scouters’ Guild, sought encouragement.

The pamphlet was sub-headed, **Our Catholic Scouts are Prepared**. It emphasized the initiative of young people and the support of older people. It recalled that boys gathered together and asked Baden-Powell to give them a charter and list of activities after the Boer War. Boys were seen as most useful during the siege of Mafeking, South Africa.

At Werribee the Philosophers Literary and Debating Society (PLDS) held regular evenings to allow students to express themselves. I found these evenings

fascinating and wrote and read occasional papers about Australian aboriginals, and spiritual matters. Professors and students encouraged these efforts to link priesthood training with social issues.

*Every Scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom  
of Heaven is like a Householder who brings out from his  
treasure Things New and Old (Matt: 13:52)*

## *Free to Develop Theatre*

Brian Bainbridge and myself, were to prepare the seminary annual play. My cousin Ken Ryan was in London. I wrote to him asking for the latest play suitable for an all-male cast. Alec Guinness was playing Lawrence of Arabia in Terrence Rattigan's play, 'Ross.' Sixteen scenes and a male cast of twenty-two, added up to the challenge we needed, to produce the Melbourne and Australian stage premiere.

"Akaba, Akaba, I have conquered Akaba" is the line that haunts me still. Desert scenes, innovative trolleys on castors, cameos of famous wartime figures, circled the mysterious figure of Brian Mayhew's 'Lawrence'. In the desert, Lawrence as classical hero contrasts neatly with Christian heroes like Charles de Fourcauld, St Paul and Jesus Himself.

Terry Yard of Tasmania, was a great theatrical companion. We wrote imaginative scripts, cast fellow students as they emerged from chapel or dining room, and entertained at every opportunity. And the 'Big Men Fly', by Alan Hopgood was a memorable three-act comedy which I took into parish communities at West St Kilda, East Preston, Dallas and Fitzroy. Theatre is a powerful training ground for gathering people and celebrating ritual.

*Liturgy is pure theatre*

## *Ordained*

On 24th July, 1965, with sixteen others, I was ordained by Archbishop Justin Simonds at St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne. It was a blur, except for the moments of lying on my stomach on the cold marble floor as a gesture of surrender to God and His church; of the huge resounding organ as it played the Magnificat; and finally blessing our parents, families and friends.

### *A Priest Forever According to the Order of Melchizedech*



*During Ordination, 1965*



*After Ordination with Archbishop Simonds*

# Part Three



# Ordained and Free

## *Free to Retreat*

The annual weeks retreat which priests, religious and seminarians do each year is a special time of meeting God and knowing myself.

South Australian priest Monsignor Tom Horgan famously explained it. He was waiting patiently to close the school gates late one afternoon. A teenager cycled around and around and around the schoolyard. Both eyed each other with some impatience. Finally the cyclist did a wheely and rode out with the remark: 'Drop dead fatso'.

"In three words he gave me my annual retreat. He reminded me I was mortal. He told me I was irrelevant. And he reminded me I was overweight".

Such is the annual spiritual retreat.

The two most dramatic retreats for me have been overseas, at Tamil Nadu India, August 2003, and at Taize Week, Munich Germany December 1993. Both times were spent sitting cross-legged on the ground, singing in foreign languages in extreme temperatures. Uncomfortably and somewhat unwillingly, I was reduced to listening. God was free to have his say.

### *Indian Ashram*

Six days at Shantivanam ashram, Tamil Nadu, one hour taxi drive from Trichi, in 35 degree heat, with Hindu and Camaldolese hermits, topped off five weeks in India July-August 2003. Former English Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths popularized this ashram, called Forest of Peace. He lived here for many years, to bring about East-West dialogue. He died and was buried near the chapel in 1993. His ashram took me out of my comfort zone, maybe into God's. To Tamil and English chants, prayer and ritual, including morning Eucharist, we visitors joined the Hindu-Christian community at 6.00 a.m, 12.00 noon and 6.00 p.m. for prayer, followed by meal. With two hips now replaced, getting down and up from the floor or low stool was my challenge. So was trying to eat with the right hand only.

### *Munich And Taize*

The Munich retreat, in light snow, was the annual event of Taize community,

between Christmas 1993 and New Year 1993, in a country far from their own headquarters. For me, far from Australia, the mystery that is prayer was lived out for six days in a mixture of German, French, Latin and English song and prayer, in the mystery that is God, and in the winter of Munich.

Each day I bussed or took a train, to join more than 10,000 European backpackers at a large hall set in a large stony parkland. The military brought our lunches, some light snack with an apple and bun and tea in a mug, as we sat on the cold ground outside. It was hard to find an Englishman or woman. Taize spirituality has seeped into our multi-cultural church music and devotional life, “perhaps not so penitentially.”

## *Appointments*



- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>St Mary's Geelong (&amp; Drysdale)</i><br/><i>Christmas 1965-Easter 1966</i></li> <li>* <i>Sacred Heart West St Kilda.</i><br/><i>1966-68</i></li> <li>* <i>Holy Name East Preston:</i><br/><i>1969-71</i></li> <li>* <i>St Ambrose's Brunswick 1972-77</i></li> <li>* <i>All Saints Fitzroy team ministry</i><br/><i>1978-80</i></li> <li>* <i>Holy Child Dallas administrator</i><br/><i>March-October 1980</i></li> <li>* <i>St Paul's Kealba Nov 1980-</i><br/><i>Jan '81</i></li> <li>* <i>SS. Peter &amp; Paul's South Melbourne</i><br/><i>Feb-July 1981</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <i>St Paul's Kealba administrator</i><br/><i>August 1981-Jan '82</i></li> <li>* <i>St Thomas More Hadfield parish</i><br/><i>priest Jan 1982-Dec '90</i></li> <li>* <i>St Mary's Ascot Vale administrator</i><br/><i>31 March - 31 July, 1998</i></li> <li>* <i>St Mary's Williamstown</i><br/><i>administrator Lent 2004</i></li> <li>* <i>Mental Healthcare chaplaincy 1991---</i><br/><i>Part-time:</i></li> <li>* <i>Australian Catholic Relief,</i><br/><i>Melbourne director 1971-93; Vic rep on</i><br/><i>National Committee 1972-1982.</i></li> <li>* <i>Ecumenical Affairs Commission</i><br/><i>member June 1978-December 2004</i></li> </ul> |
|--|---|

## *Northern Suburbs*

That's 'wog food' someone said.

I had brought to the family evening meal some pasta and Italian ice-cream one Monday, my 'day-off'. It was the early '70's and I was based at Brunswick, where most parishioners were from the Mediterranean. My family always expected me home on Monday nights. Mum cooked Aussie meat and potatoes as usual. But someone made it clear that evening. Not 'wog food'. Not in the '70's.

Most of my appointments have been in northern suburbs. But our family lived in Melbourne's east, with fewer migrant families. Divisions were sharper then.



When my right hip was replaced in 1989, the family home at Box Hill was the place to recuperate. My brothers and sisters have continued mum and dad's tradition of hosting me for meal and bed on my free days, Bill at Box Hill, Elaine at Wangaratta, Pat and husband John at Ferntree Gully, Bernadette at South Oakleigh and Alby at Castlemaine.

Their varied meals now include 'wog' food as do most Melbourne and Aussie homes, thanks to our cosmopolitan society.

The daily priestly routine of early morning Masses was most apparent for me in early parishes, West St Kilda, East Preston and Brunswick. Later I was fully plunged into being a 'hyphenated' priest in a parish and also directing Australian Catholic Relief's city office. And more often I was drawn to people on the margins of our society.

### ***West St Kilda***

\* Aged thirty at West St Kilda, I got my first car.

Before Sacred Heart Mission began its modern outreach, we priests mostly visited families in their homes. We had few structures. On Sunday nights I often took a few youngsters into the Pallottines coffee lounge off Little Collins Street. One night, cars banked up and there was little room to manoeuvre out of the laneway entrance. I tried several times. Finally, a 14-year-old asked to 'have a go'. I gave him the keys. In three movements he reversed out of the lane, and returned the keys. I drove home humbled.



### ***East Preston***

\* Alan Murphy and I decided that we would play the Saturday footy match as usual for East Preston seconds. The difference was that he was to be married that day at 5pm and I was the celebrant. We agreed that he would go off at half time and myself at three-quarter time. But two other players got injured and we decided to play another quarter each. He and I got to the Holy Name church on time. His wife Carmel still enjoys the signs of mud, mostly on me.

And my days of competitive football and tennis, were about over.



\* Kevin Sertori, Roy Burns, Carl Plunkett and the Carter family taught me Solo late into Friday nights. In my last year of competition tennis at East Preston, I was dropped from a semi-final team mostly because I was still too tired from the previous night's cards. But the experience enthused and freed me to switch to regular priests' solo schools over the past thirty years.



### *Ecumenism*

\* Ecumenism came alive for me as assistant priest 1969-71 with Irish parish priest Fr Tony Cleary. Over many mid-afternoon and late night coffees, Fr Tony and Dr Percy Jones, vicar for ecumenism, helped to turn the 1972 Eucharistic Congress into an ecumenical event. They plucked out international names to invite to Melbourne. They helped turn around the traditional format of Congresses.

Melbourne's Ecumenical Commission has grown to be Ecumenical and Interfaith under Fr Peter Kenny. My thanks to many pioneers, plus long-serving members and friends, such as Basil, Margaret G, Denis, John, Margaret M, Max, Gary, Shirley and the newer enthusiasm and skills of Franco, David and diocesan publishers.



\* Fr Tony often contrasted his pioneering work in the Legion of Mary with the Ecumenical movement. Whereas Legionaries spent months on a Day of Information, now he could go to the Ministers' Fraternal and speak with several other ministers. The following Sunday, Catholic Church information would go out to hundreds of people who attended local Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist (later Uniting church) and other East Preston congregations. Furthermore, he and I learnt a lot from other ministers, especially when washing dishes after our monthly light lunches.



East Preston Anglican church presented the front circular fountain, now a garden, when Holy Name church was built in the 1960's. It ceased to be a fountain when it attracted too many 21st birthdays or buck's nights and became dangerous.



\* Namesake Players theatre group used the Rose Shamrock Hotel, the original Kingsbury High School, a Latrobe University theatre and our own parish hall for two years of live theatre. This occupied many hours of my recreational time at East Preston.

A less-known highlight was the response of a professional producer who we engaged, freely, to produce ‘Come Back Little Sheba’, as part of the Eucharistic Congress emphasis on social affairs. He presented us with a complicated set design with about a dozen walls, doorways, windows and various floor levels. Apprentice carpenter, Michael Smith, son of Leo and Pat Smith, made the frames and together we bought canvas and size glue to make the walls. The producer flicked his middle finger on a ‘wall’ and commented: “Tight as a drum”. We felt professional.



*With author Wendy Cahill  
at ‘East of Shamrock’  
Launch 2001*

~

\* Thirty years later in 2001, Holy Name parish history ‘East of the Shamrock’, was edited by Wendy Cahill. I joined Pat Cahir, Jim and Margaret King, Joyce and Alan McGrath, Berna Foster, Alan Murphy, Vic and Ida Whelan, Brenda Hubber and others in two years of monthly meetings to provide technique and information, although I was living at Ivanhoe West. The written word still called.

~

## ***Brunswick***

\* Teenage and young adults of the Walsh, Scerri, Bertoncello, Nelson and Grillo families conducted weekly religious education programs for government school children at St Ambrose’s Brunswick for several years. Their inspiration came through Our Lady of Sion sisters such as Mary Barbuto and Agnes Narbour and from University chaplaincy camp motivators such as Frs Bob Maguire, Eric Hodgens and Barry Moran. The young peoples’ grasp of life-centred catechesis led me into pastoral understanding of ‘pre catechesis’, and to the seven months Religious Education course at Manila’s East Asian Pastoral Institute 1976-77.

~

\* Fr Luciano Secolari inspired us when he visited 500 Italian families per month at Brunswick over many years. He did not drive, so went on foot or by tram.

One memory is of ‘Luce’ enquiring week by week of myself and parish priest Fr Frank Little, later Archbishop, about driving him to San Remo on a particular date. We constantly checked diaries to see who would be available to chauffeur this long trip. With a few days to go, Frank and I realized Luce was going only to San Remo ballroom, Fitzroy.



### *Fitzroy*

\* Opposite the front door of All Saints Fitzroy there is a bench that easily takes three or four of the street men. When we began rehearsals for ‘And the Big Men Fly’ to be performed at the House of Welcome and Fitzroy Youth Club, I sought some publicity by opening the presbytery door and calling to the inebriated men sitting opposite: “One Two Three - Carn the Crows”. They would stagger up almost as one and join the footy cry. They were wanted, connected, not outcast.



### *South Melbourne*

\* As assistant priest at South Melbourne, I met our parish priest Fr Bob Maguire at the supermarket one midnight. He was buying breakfast cereals. I was caretaking Cecilville, a house for young homeless single people in the parish, which he started. Why were we both buying breakfast cereal at midnight? For the same reason: Our live-in clients would eat cereals up to midnight if possible, rather than cook, eat or even shop for foods they could not afford. There would be none left for breakfast.



### *Social Justice*

\* Late in 1980 when Fr Paul Dalton returned from pastoral planning study overseas and released me from one year of being administrator at Dallas, the diocesan consultants agreed that I could do a three months summer survey of the 235 Melbourne parishes to see what they do about Social Justice.



*Brunswick 1975, first communion for Mary D’Cruz (Samuel)*

From Kealba I visited 150 parishes. Most reported the good works of St Vincent de Paul society, which I preferred to name ‘social welfare’. Only two parishes, Richmond and Collingwood, had social justice groups. This was despite the best efforts of Columbans, Jesuits, Catholic Relief office and others to give Social Justice a higher profile after the Eucharistic Congress’ support for Action for World Development. I wondered then about how many Catholics are as touched by church organizations as I was.



## *Hadfield*

\* Twenty-five Years of Saying ‘Yes’ was the slogan for a large religious and social celebration at St Thomas More Hadfield, mid 1990, when I was twenty-five years ordained. I was pressed by some priests to get my mother to say a few words, from the front pews where she sat in place of honor with her twin sister, Sr Jerome. She answered: “I’ll wring your neck.” Only some of our family are happy to be up front.



*Childrens' farewell from Hadfield*

In the hall, I was presented with a football, and challenged to lightly torpedo it down into the crowd, to a feeble “Carn the Hawks”.



\* While at Hadfield and even after leaving there, I continued to share in many family gatherings, weddings and baptisms. Among them were friends Tony and Carol Mifsud and of course Rotary was still a part of ongoing activities. With Josie and Terry Schembri and family it was baptisms and short breaks to the Sunshine Coast. Bill and Marg Whittle share with me the fortunes of their ten children and the Kenyan Eucharistic Congress pilgrimage, arranged by Fr Kevin Toomey. The pilgrimage included travel to Rome, Jerusalem, Malta and the U.K.



## West Ivanhoe

\* As priest-in-residence at St Bernadette's, West Ivanhoe I was told not to do anything except to say three Sunday Masses and back up the parish priest on his day off. Jack M would look after maintenance, Jack M the gardens, Jack S the church. That is all. Timewise, my parish involvement would be 0.05 hours. Soon I discovered Joanne (house), Bernie (maintenance), Simon, Mark, Jack (grounds), and their family members Sheila, Virjeana, Vito, Peg and Di, among others.

Then, around the church, Yamna, Joy, Marie, Patrina, Sarina, Marg, Alma, Abel, Nance, Tony, MSC Sisters Frances and Carmel, Christian Brothers Len and Mark, Michael, Patrick, Philip, Vince, Kevin, John T and numerous others.

Then again, parish leaders of prayer, of decision-making and of finances, Agnes & Italian prayer group, Phil and Marg, Chris, Wennie and Trish, Fran, Erin, Peter and Pam, Lynne, Bernie, and Bernie, Joe M and Michael M, and other collectors & backroom counting teams. Fred, Dom and others bringing weekend bread, Joe, Michael, Peter and St V. de Paul serving needy families.



Especially welcome at West Ivanhoe priest's house are people whom I have known for up to fifteen years, discharged into the community from Larundel, Mont Park and other hospitals. For them a fortnightly 'pizza night' has been a hospitality highlight of the 2000's. And a great learning experience for them and for me.



*West Ivanhoe Confirmation for Daniel Marinac Sept.1999*

One wrote with thanks: 'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me' (Matt 25:40).

The church frees us to dive into the deep to do this.



## *Ivanhoe Cluster*

\* In the wider cluster of Ivanhoe, East and West parishes, Fr John Rogan, Fr John Cunningham, staffers Georgette Colaci, Ruth Villani, Leanne Earl, Helen

Rogan, and previously Sr Joy Hanrahan, plus Margaret, Merle and Eddie, lead the list of friends, who respect my limited 0.05 of weekly presence in parish life. Both Ivanhoe and East Ivanhoe also have lists of devoted parishioners, and friends too many to mention here.



\* For a ‘priest-in-residence’, there’s still the random outside enquirers, the daily phones, mail and weekly rubbish bins, and “Have you got the key to...?”.



**Almost all parishes where I have been have such leaders who have added to my list of friends and acquaintances. And all parishes have many unseen praying people who remind us to be friends of Jesus.**



In preaching the Word at three Sunday Masses almost every week for forty years and trying to bridge the gap between our lives and God, I am enriched by the variety of family and parish community cultures and the variety of God’s weekly Sunday messages to us all.

Catholic people from every walk of life enliven their priests. So do families. So does the rhythm of the church’s Sunday Masses and parish events. All these are freeing.

## *Chaplaincies and Other Pursuits*

### *Chaplaincies*



- \* *CBC St Kilda*
- \* *St Monica's Epping,*
- \* *St Joseph's North Melbourne*
- \* *Trinity College Brunswick*
- \* *Mercy College Coburg*
- \* *St Joseph's Technical College South Melbourne*
- \* *Therry and Sancta Sophia colleges*
- \* *Broadmeadows*

Christian Brother Gerard Brady is one of dozens of teachers who have freed me by their religious and humanising influence. He showed great tolerance when I drove from Melbourne to Ocean Grove to conduct a school Mass one afternoon in the early 70's. The boys were well prepared, but I sensed an air of tension. I took it in and declared: "Let's run to the beach and breathe in God's ocean air." The boys were gone as if it was Friday afternoon's last school bell. Gerard and I laughed as they came back and we all prayed.

"Teach them to pray, and form their conscience" Brother Frank McCarthy said clearly at my first college chaplaincy, to CBC St Kilda. It's still with me.

### *Challenged by the Card School: A Flashback*

"Would you like to go to Mont Park," Bart King said quietly during our usual Friday night solo game, mid 1990. "Ok" I answered, then "prop". The game went on. Prop Cop. Prop. Cop. Sometimes Misere. Sometimes Solo. About half an hour later I asked Bart what did I say "You begin in a month as full-time chaplain at the asylum because I'm finishing, I'll show you the keys next week" Real Solo!

I suspected that it was time to resign from being parish priest of Hadfield, a busy community of Catholics linked together by faith and bound by nationality and cultural roots. Some were Irish, some born Aussies, but mostly Italian and Maltese background. After nine years I was wilting and felt the need for a new challenge, a change, a freeing-up.

Bart and the card school had detected this. I began as Mental Health Chaplain after Christmas 1990, following a nurses' strike.

## *Another Flashback*

In 1979, the same priests' card school had discussed who should go to All Saints Fitzroy as part of the experimental 'team ministry' with Collingwood and East Melbourne. I had returned freshly from a seven months renewal catechetical course at the East Asian Pastoral Institute, Manila, Philippines, after twelve years in St Kilda West, East Preston and Brunswick. Change was in the air, and in my lungs and heart.

"What about you?" someone said. I wondered: "Why not?". Within a couple of weeks I was formally appointed to All Saints Church, by the Archbishop, who was not a member of the card school.

## *Journalism Tendencies Recur*

Fr Chris Barnett's deep belly laugh as he told story after story about priests, set up material for the Collected Humour of Melbourne Priests (CHOMP). Fr Brian Cosgriff who loves telling stories, added most to the collection. As we drove to Castlemaine, Fr Jack Brady provided yarns of priests in the north west corner of the diocese. I collected and edited CHOMP in 1995 as far as licence would allow, for private circulation among clergy.

## *‘Dogs in Space’*

Fawkner Cemetery dug a grave so that Michael Hutchence, lead singer-turned actor, of INXS hard rock band, could mourn realistically the death of the heroine in this R-rated film, ‘Dogs In Space’.

When renowned producer Richard Lowenstein asked the parish priest of Fawkner, to play the part of a priest, the answer came back: “Try Len Thomas. He’s been in Wintergarten.” From the nearby parish of Hadfield where I was parish priest through the ‘80’s, I found the invitation irresistible. I turned up with a white soutane, not the expected black with white dog collar. Lowenstein took one look, smiled and said: “That’s good”.

Where would the chief mourner, Michael Hutchence, the other mourners and the priest, stand at the graveside? He followed my suggested placings, then said: “What words do you say?” I gulped, and with a raspy voice because of a cold, began “May the angels lead you into paradise ...” He used these words under the list of credits with sombre effect.

Catholic film critic, Fr Fred Chamberlain, summarised the film simply as “Drugs, sex, violence and language.” Only the last poignant graveside scene was breathtakingly pure and silent. It showed the futility of the story’s content. A zoom lens took in my right ear then skyrocketed to leave us like ants around the grave. I was signed in and out of Actor’s Equity, and paid fifty dollars. The film was allowed only a short season and to be shown at late hours in one cinema. I went wearing an overcoat. Twenty years later I bought a copy of the video for six dollars.

## *Free to Work in Community*

“Would you replace me in Rotary?”

My “yes” meant that I was inducted into Broadmeadows Rotary Club lunchtime Tuesday, 29th March, 1983, at the request of Broadmeadows parish priest, Fr Frank Murphy. He felt he needed to be replaced as a representative of church ministers after many years local service. Friendly Rotarians like genial

Matt Ryan ushered me into the wider community, taking on from where newspapers left off. The weekly Rotary business and social meal, with guest speaker is almost as rigid as Sunday Catholic Mass.

Some Hadfield parish families were reluctant to send their children to Catholic secondary colleges Therry and Sancta Sophia in Broadmeadows. This suburb was very dependent at that time upon government, council and community support for housing, schools and essential services.



*Receiving Rotary Community Award, Paul Harris Fellow, from Ray Wilton, Bundoora, About 1998*



*Rotarians Three. Tony Mifsud, Fr Mal & myself*

As parish priest of Hadfield, I encouraged parishioners to be involved in community development and support. Many took up this challenge. My small part, as a member of

Broadmeadows Rotary Club, was to show some leadership. Parishioners softened when I returned from Rotary lunch each Tuesday for seven years and when the Rotary raffle gained us hundreds of dollars annually. Some

older teenagers got supervisory positions at school holiday programs in Broadmeadows. Rotary freed me then, and through the next two decades, to be aware of the wider community to which the local parish belongs. Freedom is catching.

It was natural to transfer to Bundoora Rotary Club after 1990 when I began mental health chaplaincy. I remember Ray and Lorraine Wilton and other Rotarians and wives who came to Larundel asylum to help sing Christmas carols in the wards. They recognised the work of face-to-face chaplaincy and pastoral care for patients. They awarded me the Paul Harris Fellowship.

In Rotary style I have been given official positions, one year at a time, in both Broadmeadows and Bundoora Rotary clubs, since 1983.

## Work Camps

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*One month work camps;*

\* *Papua-New Guinea Milne Bay,  
January 1964*

\* *PNG south-central highlands (Bema,  
Kanabea), Jan '69*

\* *PNG Kairiru Island Wewak, Jan '73*

\* *PNG south-central highlands (Bema,  
Kanabea, Putei, Kubuna), Jan '75*

\* *Western Australia Beagle Bay aboriginal  
mission, Jan '76*

## Overseas Explorations

*“Wanted: fifteen healthy people to join a work camp to PNG next January, pay your own plane fare, and prepare with a monthly group meeting to bond and raise funds”.*

The parish priest goggled when I put this in Brunswick and East Preston parish bulletins and even more so when we received more than twenty enquiries each time. We needed fifteen people to get cut-rate group fares. Group bonding, fund-raising events and cultural study were prerequisites and became valuable parish social events.

“It changed my life” Roy told me this thirty years later. Mixing cement in mid-30 degree heat changes everybody’s life. A few older wise heads, such as Philippa Slattery, gave the stability and expertise to groups. To help locals build a teachers house, or a small school, did wonders for parishioners and friends. These work camps enriched my understanding of aid and development programs of Australian Catholic Relief. They also endeared me to young adults who took their holidays to work in poorer lands.



*At Beagle Bay, WA. 1975*

An aboriginal lad and myself were on the hot tin roof of a mission office which we were building at Beagle Bay. At 8.30 a.m. I was extremely thirsty so I mentioned that we should get an orange from the kitchen. Suddenly he was gone, then returned with two oranges. I hoed into mine like a man staggering in the desert. But where had he

gone? Back on the ground, he was sharing his orange with two other lads. I was most embarrassed and felt deeply the real meaning of community and sharing, which he taught me that day.

Melbourne Overseas Mission leaders, Frs Cyril Blake, Pat Harvey, John Turner, Ron Lowe, sisters of St Joseph of Cluny, and various lay missionaries at Bema and Kanabea south eastern highlands of PNG, were generous hosts to some of our groups. So were Marist Brothers at Kairiru Island, off Wewak.

## *Free To Travel*

“This chookhouse is better than a nun’s convent in Papua-New Guinea,” Swiss lay missionary, Pierre Comte told fellow trainee priests who practised carpentry at Corpus Christi College, Glen Waverley.

‘We’ll come and build them a convent,’ said Ken Bray, and his ‘shed’ friends. With the blessing of Jesuit rector Fr Charlie Mayne, Melbourne seminarians began annual work camps in PNG. They pioneered Melbourne Overseas Mission.



*With Mal Crawford, Brian & Brendan Broderick, Mrs Fallon & Schoolgirls, Goodenough Island PNG, Jan 1964*

As sub deacon at Christmas 1964 I joined Mal Crawford, Bren and Brian Broderick to help build a school off the east coast of Papua. We did our homework, reading everything possible about the matriarchal society of the Trobriand Islands, only to be told as we changed planes at Brisbane that our destination was Goodenough Island, not Trobriands. Such is missionary life.



*Serious Missionary with Fr Jim Fallon, MSC at PNG 1964*

## *Caritas, formerly Australian Catholic Relief (ACR)*

Would I be assistant director of Melbourne office of Australian Catholic Relief, Fr Brian Walsh asked me in 1971. He was very busy preparing for Melbourne's Eucharistic Congress.

John and Lorraine Mascini, Mary Crotty, Missionary of the Sacred Heart sister Gabrielle Smyth, Sister of Charity Una McAllister and entrepreneur John

Roseman were among many who freed me by their experience to help shape the Melbourne and Victorian promotion of Project Compassion through the '70's and '80's. We worked alongside Peter Thomas, director of Catholic Radio and Television and officials of Freedom from Hunger, Austcare, Melbourne Overseas Missions, World Christian Action, Trading Partners and others.



*First African Cardinal Ragambua (Tanzania) Launches 1993*

Sr Gabrielle, a long time friend of many priests and religious, urged me often to write these life stories which are my words, but her spirit and yours, my family and friends.

Cardinal Knox rang through to ask us to provide \$1,000 to bring out Sr Stella from Tamil Nadu, India. She wished to study artificial insemination in cattle and to take home a small herd. Our first press conference for her, and her tour to Victorian farms, and long return by sea to Calcutta several months later, set in progress a long standing 'milk bar' project which has continued through the works of other agencies. There are many Mother Teresas in India.

Quarterly conferences to ACR national office in Sydney broke into my parish time through the '70's and '80's. Development education invaded all aid agencies. Parishioners were most understanding of their hyphenated priests. On one occasion when we were both at Brunswick, Fr Frank Little, gave the thank you talk as Vicar for Laity to an overseas aid organisation in the city, then dashed off to another meeting, while I left a Brunswick meeting to come late to the city and receive his cheque for Catholic Church overseas aid work.

*Many Other Things Too Many to Record*

## Overseas Study & Holiday Events

- \* India visit for ACR national office to 6 capital cities Caritas projects March 1972
- \* Student tour to Indian capitals, Bihar Jesuits, & Bangladesb, 1973
- \* Manila Philippines 7 months sabbatical East Asian Pastoral Institute 1976-77 plus one week Jakarta, Indonesia, for ACR
- \* Nairobi Kenya Eucharistic Congress & Rome-Jerusalem Fr Toomey pilgrimage, plus Malta, Dublin, London with Bill and Marg Whittle, August 1985
- \* Nepal Kathmandu-Trisuli-Chitwan with Fr Barry King, April-May '87
- \* Alice Springs-Birdsville light aircraft tour, pilot Fr Barry Hughes Sept-Oct '89
- \* Vietnam & Thailand refugee camps on Cambodian border, October 1990
- \* Munich Germany, Belfast and northern Ireland, Dec '93-Jan '94
- \* Antarctica Ross Sea & Scott's hut on Russian ship *Akademic Schokalskiy* with Barry King, February 1995
- \* Venice mental health institutes & Vatican 11th International Conference 'Disorders of the Human Mind' Nov 25-30, 1996
- \* Jordan-Israel-Greece-Turkey study tour of Cath Theol College, September 2000
- \* India tour to Bihar-Jharkhand, Bangalore mental health clinics, and Bede Griffiths ashram, 22 July-26 August 2003

## Overseas Travel Frees the Mind and Heart

### Philippines



*With Asian Refugees Manila, 1977*

unload, to simplify, to stop living by the clock, to empty myself of all that cluttered my priestly life. I wanted to be free.

Besides, my watch strangely needed winding every twenty-three hours, so I was constantly observing to see if it had stopped. I took Bill's

\* 'Leave your watch behind because it will take in water in the Philippines hot climate', said Bill my brother. I was taking my first sabbatical, after twelve years solid parish life at St Kilda West, East Preston and Brunswick. I wanted to



*Australia 'a last hope' for Viet Refugee, Manila 1977*

advice. I haven't worn a watch for twenty-eight years. But I know where the clocks are wherever I go. It becomes a useful conversation piece with: 'Could you tell me the time?' Like walking a dog.



\* At Manila, the East Asian Pastoral Institute seven months course of Religious Education opened minds to other cultures. A young Thai priest enriched my table tennis techniques. A Sri Lankan religious brother joined me for a daily swim in the pool, and in regular jeepney dashes to airconditioned picture theatres. Australian religious sisters expanded my understanding of our religious heritage. Varied attitudes of fellow Australians, from Western Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria were more striking than shared ideas with Japanese, Chinese, Pacific Islanders, and people from India. The course in Religious Education loosened me to return with a more open heart to Melbourne parish life.



*At EAPI Manila 1976*



### ***Ireland, Nepal & Antartica***

\* Try singing "Where the mountains of Mourne go down to the sea" during a cold winter day at Northern Ireland's giant causeway. I choked as our Irish musical and cultural heritage bit deep like the wintry weather.



*Antarctica 1995*

Fr Mal Crawford had met me on 2 January 1994 to attend Fr Pat Colgan's inspiring local ordination at Belfast, and the northern coast tour. I had prepared by making my annual retreat at the Taize Christmas-New Year spiritual gathering, Munich Germany.



*White Water Rafting with Bart King on Trisuli River, Nepal, 1987*



*On Russian Ship from Antarctica, 1995*

A month was nearly enough to satisfy visits to Dean Swift shrines in Dublin, to former Hadfield school principal Agnes Kavanagh at Waterford, to a 42nd year production of Agatha Christie's 'The Mousetrap', to south England relatives named Parsons, and to a Thomas ancestor baptismal place at Merthyr Tydfil, Wales.

## India

When did you come to India last?

Thirty years ago.

When are you coming again?

In thirty years time.

India is exhausting and exhilarating, like the cross and resurrection. Australian Jesuit leaflet, *News From India*, printed reflections in Jan-Feb 2004, of my visit in July-August 2003, as follows:

*"Bob", "Len", we called out to each other.*

*I was first through immigration at Kolkata airport, previously called Calcutta.*

*Fr Bob Slattery towering over the front rows of waiting people, thrust two x 100 rupees bills into my hand and told me to go back in and get a pre-paid taxi voucher for 180 rupees. Gingerly, I hesitated until the next passenger emerged. Then I walked quickly back through the large immigration doors, smiled past two armed soldiers and to the booth official who gave me the voucher and change. Soon Bob was jostling among taxis outside the airport to find a driver willing to accept this base rate voucher, rather than negotiate, with me trailing behind. We were off to St Xaviers University College, Park Street, Kolkata, near midnight.*

*"Why is he stopping? Bob scowled.*

*"There's a red light," I suggested.*

*"But there's no cars about," he grunted.*

*Despite some culture shock I realized that this was Bob Slattery, former St John's school Hawthorn parish and family friend, who had survived fourt-seven years in India and knew how to look after himself and others, speaking Hindi language of course. I had come to visit him.*

*Culture is "in your face"* Next night the Jodphur Express pulled out one hour late to take

*us six hours overnight to Kodarma railway siding. Here Bob scuttled among buses, all facing different directions, to choose a nonstop “speedier” bus to Hazaribagh two hours away. The bus engine started up as we got seated, but stopped every few metres to take fresh passengers, in vacant seats, then in the aisle, then up the back ladder on to the roof, then to let people hang on the back. But first to collect their fare.*

*“Nonstop must refer to the engine only,” Bob smiled. At the same time he commended private bus owners who had improved bus services in this northern state called Jharkhand, now cut off from Bihar.*

### ***Soccer in India***

*“We must go to the footy match,” Bob said a week later. His school at Charbi, mostly of Santal tribals up to year 10, were in a decisive soccer match against city school St Xavier’s, Hazaribagh, mostly Hindus up to year 12.*

*“They should be warming up. But I’m not their coach now. I can’t interfere,” Bob said revealing the European missionary stepping back, to allow the local church to increase. We waited for the delayed start. Great sporting days at St John’s school and Hawthorn parish flashed before my mind as I felt the spirit. We were barracking for the underdogs as in much earlier Hawthorn days. Today it was the younger tribals from Charbi. Suddenly, rhythmic slow clapping from midfield and a voice said: “Go.”*

*“Where?” I asked.*

*“Out there, to be introduced to all the players by the team captains.”*

*Bob and I looked distinctly more Western than the many hundreds of spectators, although he and other Jesuits from Australia and New Zealand are now naturalised Indians. I was the honored foreign visitor. So, flanked by two soccer officials and feeling like Prince Phillip at Wembley, I strode out and shook hands with all the players. Because I had said a few words at the Charbi school assembly earlier that week, I couldn’t help responding best to the looks of recognition and hope of the Charbi boys.*

*Sport is a great leveler and source of pride and endeavour, especially in a country like India where gaps between rich and poor are extreme. How pleasing and symbolic that the match was a tie, 0-0.*

*This visit to Hazaribagh, India, as to other developing countries, may have helped me as a Melbourne diocesan priest, to listen more closely to people who are different in their lifestyle and their search for equality before their God. News from India (Jesuit Missions).*

## **Lumen Gentium (Light to the Nations)**

## *Mental Healthcare Chaplaincy Can Be Freeing*

“Where is your church?” many ask.

“Here. You and I. We’re church,” is one answer I give sometimes. It sometimes disarms tensions, even fears. Sometimes brings new light. Sometime brings hope.

“But you. What church are you?”

“I’m interchurch. For any Christians. Or anyone. Also for people of other faiths like Moslems, Buddhists. If they wish.”

This answer frees me as much as it sometimes frees the enquirer.

My lapel cross, or hospital badge draws attention. Sometimes it frees people, but it also allows others to remain aloof. Chaplaincy for people who suffer mental illness can be a release, a revelation. A moment of good news.



*With Art Therapist Larundel  
& Thomas Emling Hospitals,  
Claire Humphrys-Hunt*

Very often people free me to be priest. To listen. To feel the pain. To hear the need of the moment. I’ve learnt to wait and listen. To be invited. And to be welcoming.

The trick is to focus on the ability, not the disability. As one man once told me: “I am not schizophrenic. I do not suffer schizophrenia. Sometimes I am visited by schizophrenia.”

### *Friendship Offsets Loneliness*

Most Sunday mornings after church service, patients from Larundel and Mont Park would come to my home for a chat and cuppa. I lived two years at 6 Main Drive and two years at Gresswell Road, Mont Park, another two years at Plenty Road, Larundel.

My 60th birthday in June 1995 was at the three bedroom house in Gresswell Road, for ‘religios’ on Friday night, ‘resos’ on Saturday morning, ‘rellies’ on Saturday afternoon, and ‘the rest’ on Saturday night. Twenty or thirty people attended each party.

As resident Catholic chaplain for six years I was never lonely. The chaplaincy department was busy with many tasks and a variety of people. Visitors came from the wards. Others who had been discharged often returned to the hospital grounds for friendship and security.

Mont Park, Larundel, and Plenty hospitals between Bundoora and Macleod housed many hundreds of people suffering mental illness, when I began ministry there late 1990.

Now called Springthorpe housing estate, the three campuses included about forty wards on fifty acres, an inter-church chaplaincy, a clinical pastoral education (CPE) course for chaplain-pastoral carers, two chapels, and a house built for Catholic chaplain, Fr John Brennan, about 1970. We also covered services at Janefield.

### *Into the Community*

“Where are all the patients now?”

“Living alongside you in the community”.

Hundreds of patients and medical staff were re-allocated to community houses, group homes, clinics, major hospital wards. Sometimes patients could not return to their own family, because of past disruptions, stigma in our society, and lack of understanding.

Mental health chaplaincy has taken me in and out of both public and private institutions. Spiritual relationships flourish inside and outside both. People on the edges of society and of all persuasions have been the voice and face of Christ throughout.

Now in the community, people discharged from asylums and hospital psychiatric wards need friendship, to be accepted, and to make contact. Loneliness often underlies mental illnesses. Phone calls and home visits, especially ‘after hours’, occupy much of my time.

The World Council of Churches assembly in Canberra 1991, which I attended with some fellow Catholics from Melbourne's Ecumenical Affairs Commission, included a short elective program called 'The Gospel for the Differently Abled', directed by an Anglican and a Uniting Church minister, both severely disabled, yet ordained. I came away from their presentation of lives lived in disability with a heightened sense of my own ministry among mentally hurt people. I too was disabled. My first hip replacement two years earlier had cut short tennis and squash. Yet I was able to minister.

Fr Kevin Mogg of Catholic Social Services, backed by Archbishops Frank Little, George Pell, and Denis Hart, have continued to support my role as mental health chaplain. Mentally hurt people have abilities along with their disability. They demonstrate that we are all equal, made in God's image. Despite disabilities, we can free each other and teach each other.

## *Made in the Image and Likeness of God*

### *Friendships*

"You Catholics all know each other", a Uniting Church lady said recently. My life has been enriched by people and associations, both religious and secular. Cross fertilizing between parishes, schools, religious orders, church organisations, and sacramental events such as funerals, or the annual fetes, do open out peoples' interest in others. So do secular events.

Fellow priests and religious come close to being most important to me. From our first days at Werribee, and our mutual concern for God's people, friendships deepen as we meet at regular diocesan and local religious, family and social events, and annual reunions. Mal Crawford and Jim Scannell are my best de-briefers and companions in finding ways to rest from over-work. So are card schoolers, Barry Hughes, Kev Burke, Dave Ryan, Vic Rubeo, Joe Micallef, Tony Kerin and Kevin Mogg.

Holidays have been with Jim Coakley, Bill Bainbridge, Peter Foley, Brian Cosgriff, Peter Robinson, Mal Crawford and more recently with Ivanhoe cluster parishioners David and Jacq Jones.

The friendships and understandings of people of the future, especially relatives, have motivated me to write 'Free to be Priest.' Our branch of the Thomases is ending. But there lives on Elaine and the Cravens (Bernie, Rosemary, Mark, Danny, Celia, Emma, Monica, Lucy and Brigid), Pat, John and the Frosts (Christine, Steven, Bernadette, Matthew), Alby Vickers and family (Ruth, Linda, and Owen), Alby's sisters Denise, Val, Pam, Maureen and brother Colin and their families, and the Ryans (Doreen, Ken and Carmel). Ken Ryan provides our de Mamiel family tree.

## *Education in the Sea of Life*

\* Eight years philosophy and theology to prepare for priesthood, 1958-65, was the greatest plunge into the deep.

\* The live-in multi-cultural seven month Religious Education course at East Asian Pastoral Institute, Manila, Philippines, 1976-77, was a most inspiring sabbatical splash to open up priesthood for me.



*Mental Health Conference  
Rome, Nov '96*

\* Parish community life from 1965 until now has been the 'pier to pub' or 'English channel' marathon swim, in all currents.

\* Australian Catholic Relief, Caritas, 1971-93, and Melbourne's Ecumenical Interfaith Commission, 1978-2004, have consistently helped steer my ship into the deep, where Jesus wants us to be.

\* Mental healthcare chaplaincy has been most deepening for me since 1990. This has been coordinated through many years in turn by Revs. Drew LeLean, David Leach and Sr Rosalind Cairns, auspiced by the Healthcare Chaplaincy Council of Victoria.

Annual conferences, and the presence of other churches' chaplains, has been a major part of my education. Supervised by David Stark, I completed one clinical pastoral education course at Repatriation hospital Heidelberg July 1993, during daily chaplaincy at Mont Park.

\* Short courses by government, and church include:

-Ministering to Persons with H.I.V./A.I.D.S, Fairfield Hospital, 2-4 June, 1992.

-Sexuality Training program, by North Eastern Metropolitan Psychiatric Services,

Dec 1993.

-Prevention & Management of Aggression, N.E.M.P.S, November 1995.

-Disorders of the Human Mind, 11th international conference, Vatican City, 28-30 Nov 1996.

\* The degree in Bachelor of Social Science (Pastoral Counselling) completed part-time in 2001 at Australian Catholic University was a time of youthful duck diving with very few belly-whackers. Originally I wanted to study one unit of counselling, but was freed or encouraged to continue through the degree, part time, for six years.



*At Graduation B.Soc Sc (Pastoral Counselling),  
Jeff's Shed, 2001.  
(Rear) John, Bill, Self, Alby, Denise, Ken.  
(Front) Pat, Sr Joy, Billie Mullaby, Fr Mal*

\* The daily pastoral grind can sap spiritual energies and insights, unless we look around for the most acceptable and juiciest waves, or use flippers.

\* Last February 2004, preparing to enter 'three score years and ten' I began the Graduate Diploma in Spirituality and Spiritual Direction through Campion Spirituality Centre, WellSpring (Baptist) Centre and Melbourne College of Divinity.

It's given me pause time and inspiration for one-to-one consultations, for my partial presence in the Ivanhoe cluster of parishes and for being part of the wider aspirations of Melbourne church and society.

Who knows, I may be of continued use as a venerable spiritual mentor, to people crying out for something beyond our mere material lives.

I may become more fully *'free to be priest'*.

*Deo Gratias (Thanks Be To God)*

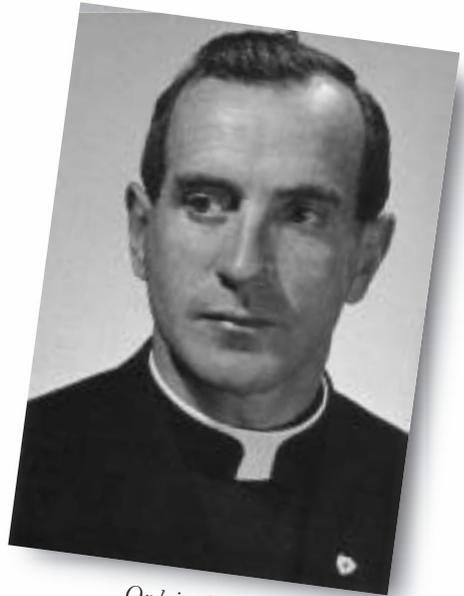




*60th with Elaine & Benadette (50th)*



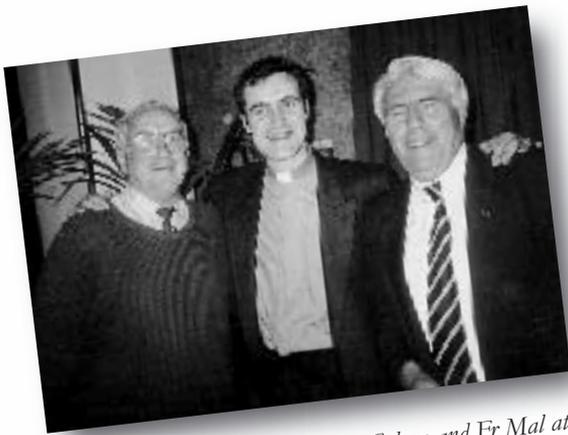
*Taken at Glenferrie after the kindergarten concert*



*Ordained 1965*



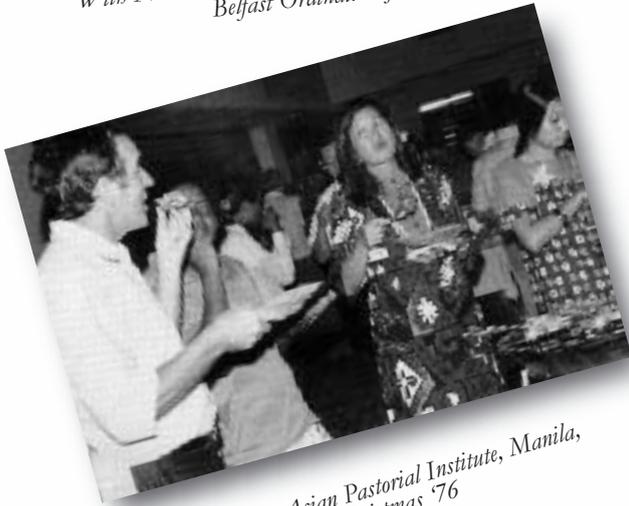
*Our family: (Back) Dad, Elaine, Bernadette, Len, Pat, Bill (Front) Alby, Mum, John Frost*



*With New Columban Priest Pat Colgan and Fr Mal at Belfast Ordination Jan '95*



*25 years with Fr Michael Mulcaby*



*At East Asian Pastoral Institute, Manila, Christmas '76*

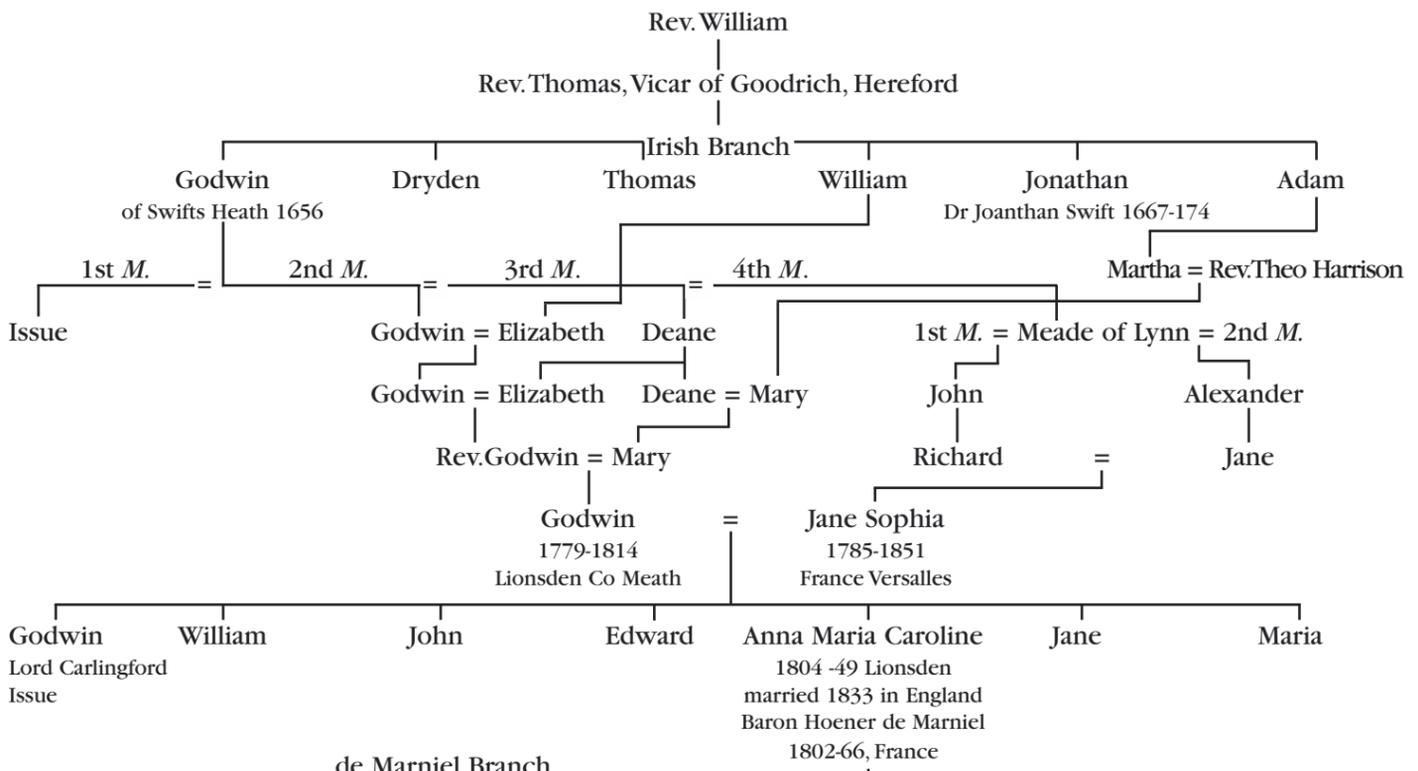


*Sr Jerome and Len*



*With Mal Crawford PNG '64*

# Family Tree



I. MARGARET

II. JACK

III. FERNANDAH

1. Harold
2. Leyser
3. Josephine
4. Ruby

IV. HAROLD

V. NORA

1. Jack
  - (i) William
  - (ii) Mervyn
2. Eva
  - (i) Mary
  - (ii) Patricia
    - Peter
    - Kathy
    - Marika
  - (iii) Shirley
    - Maureen
    - Jacqueline
    - Edmund
    - Stephen
    - Peter
    - Therese
    - Elizabeth
    - Mary
3. Crosby
  - (i) Marie
    - Peter
    - Barbara
    - Kathryn
    - Noreen
    - Alanna
  - (ii) Colin
    - Margaret
    - Gerard
    - Jennifer
    - Jeffrey
    - Patrick

VI. JAMES M. AUGUSTA BEXTREAM 1901 - PADDINTON WA

1. Honora m. Jack Ryan
  - (i) Doreen
  - Darren
  - (ii) Carmel
  - Derek
  - Brendan
  - (iii) Kenneth
2. Clarice M. W. Thomas
  - (i) William
  - (ii) Leonard
  - (iii) Elaine M. B. Craven - Bernard, Rosemary, Mark
    - Daniel
    - Celia
    - Emma
    - Lucy
    - Brigette
    - Monica
  - (iv) Patricia M. J. Frost
    - Christina
    - Stephen
    - Bernadette
    - Mathew
    - (v) Bernadette
3. Doreen (Sr Jerome)

4. Lille M. A. Vickers

- (i) Denise
- Narelle
- Cheryl
- Noella
- (ii) Valerie
- Julie
- Susan
- (iii) Pamela
- Sandra
- Mark
- Clayton
- Tamara
- (iv) Maureen
- Rebecca
- (v) Colin
- Adam
- Barry
- (vi) Gillian
- Gavin
- Damien
- (vii) Albert
- Ruth Linda
- Owen

VII CAROLINE

1. Veronica
  - (i) Elizabeth
  - (ii) Josephine
2. Louis
  - (i) Virginia
  - (ii) Christopher
  - (iii) Veronica
  - (iv) Nigel
  - (v) Jonathan
  - (vi) Nicholas
  - (vii) Fiona

VIII OSWALD

1. Oswald
  - (i) Brian
  - (ii) Margaret
    - Patrick
    - Brenden
2. Edward
  - (i) Milton
  - Lawrence
  - William
  - Phillip
  - Colleen
  - Terese
  - Kathryn
  - (ii) Joan
  - (iii) Maureen
    - Ronald
    - Stephen
    - Trevor
    - Rodney
    - Paul
    - Melissa
  - (iv) Lynette
    - David
    - Gregory
    - Shelley
  - (v) Maxwell
    - Rebecca
    - Rachael
  - (vi) Pamela
    - Glen
    - Mark
    - Anne

Maree

Christine

Leesa

Anthony

(vii) Geoffrey

3. Gertrude

4. Harold

(i) Derek

(ii) Wayne

5. Phillip

(i) Judith

(ii) Jeanette

(iii) Lorraine

(iv) Michael

(v) Robert

6. Mercia

7. Laurence

IX HENRY

X GEORGE

1. Oswald

2. Nocah

(i) Robert

Paula

Kerry

Carmel

Chas

Judith

3. Hilda

(i) Charles

Christopher

Gary

Dianne

Julian

Myree

Carmel

(ii) Joyce

Raymond

XI ERNEST

1. Mavis

(i) Maureen

(ii) Ann

(iii) Veronica

2. Roma

3. Gordon

4. Nina

XII ETHEL

1. Harold

(i) Robyn

Susan

Nicole

Kathryn

David

(ii) Rosemary

Scott

Jennifer

(iii) Trevor

John

Craig

(iv) Carmel

Belinda

Robert

(v) Janet

Therese

Regina

XIII CATHERINE

XIV ARTHUR



"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."

*T.S. Eliot in Little Gidding*



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