
A year with the Notting Hill Carmelites

Mark Greaves meets the director who came to admire the dignity of the Sisters and their candour about their faith

9 April 2010

At the end of the 1990s Michael Whyte put a note in the letterbox of the Carmelite monastery at Notting Hill asking if he could make a film about the Sisters there. The reply, a few weeks later, was cryptic: it was an interesting idea, it said, but now was “not the right time”.

About nine months later he dropped another note in the letterbox. The correspondence continued for 10 years until he received a call, out of the blue, from the prioress. He thought for a moment it was a friend winding him up. She asked him to visit the monastery to explain his plans in more detail; and, after being interviewed twice, he was given permission to start filming.

Except, he says, he did not know exactly what the film would be about. He knew very little about the Sisters’ lives. He had originally put the note in the letterbox because he lived nearby and his curiosity had been piqued by the tolling of the bells. After a few days’ filming, he started to panic. He says: “Nothing happened, basically. They were just praying.”

Whyte is telling this story in a wine bar at King’s Cross station in London. His words are mixed with the scraping of chairs, the clatter of plates and the sound of departures being announced.

During this panic, he explains, he thought seriously about scaling back his ambitions and

making a 10-minute film instead. He would save face, the Sisters could keep a copy of it and “everyone would go away happy”.

In the end, he spent a year filming what the Sisters did each day – praying, going to Mass, cleaning, gardening, and making altar breads. The experience, he says, had a profound effect on him: it made him question his beliefs and his sense of self and awakened a side to him that had “lain dormant”.

Whyte sits in the wine bar in a smart blue suit without a tie; his head has a healthy, waxy glow and a thick rug of hair. It’s nearly rush hour, and the atmosphere is far from contemplative; commuters and pulley bags flash past.

Each day he went into the monastery, he says, he would arrive before Lauds at 6.45am and leave after Compline at about 8pm. Every time it was like “stepping into a different world”.

He says: “It’s a very, very different atmosphere. There is a sense of peace and tranquillity. It’s extremely comfortable – almost like a home.” The monastery is only a few minutes away from Ladbroke Grove tube and the weekend crush of Portobello Market. But it is surrounded by a 22ft wall, and the sounds of the city are only heard very distantly. “It’s almost as if there’s a gauze or a sound filter” cutting it off from the rest of London.



He jokes about how hard he found it to fit in initially – he struggled not to say: “Hi Sister, how are you?” when he walked past people in the corridor (the Sisters are expected just to nod when they see each other). And he found the two hours of silent prayer difficult. “I’d sit there and think half an hour must have gone by and I’d look at my watch and in fact I’d been there just two minutes.”

He is also not a Catholic; in fact, he was raised, as a low-church Protestant, to have an “inherent suspicion” of Catholics. (When a Polish family moved next door, his mother told him: “You don’t want to have too much to do with them.”)

Gradually, though, he began to adjust to the monastic rhythm of life, and to find a “wonderful strength” in it. The silent prayer, he says, became “one of the best parts of the day”. He says: “You end up not thinking about trivial things. It’s quite a profound silence in that sense.”

He enjoyed it so much that he thought he would try and keep it up at home. But that proved impossible. “My house is a very lively place,” he says. (His wife works at home too and their grown-up children still use the house as a base.)

Whyte is pretty unassuming when he talks about the making of the film. He says it was an “organic” process, not planned, and that he thought he would broadly structure it around

the course of a day as well as of a year. “There’s no point in being too clever about it,” he says.

Although the film is mainly observational, it includes brief interviews with some of the Sisters. And it is remarkable how frank they are about their doubts, their feelings towards death, and the intensity of contemplative life.

Whyte says he did the interviews at the end of the year, when the Sisters were comfortable in front of the camera. At first they were a little wary and, when he set up his camera on the main corridor, would go the long way round rather than walk past him. But he spent hours filming them each day so that, eventually, they got used to his presence.

He says the Sisters’ candour about their faith – “about sometimes being on your knees talking to nobody, or going into this darkness, or losing belief in the presence of God” – gives them a “tremendous dignity” in the film. “It shows, I think, how strong their belief is, that they’re not scared to discuss these questions.”

Whyte clearly has a lot of admiration for the Sisters. He talks about their warmth and generosity and says they “could probably cope a lot better in our world than we are coping”.



And the experience of working in the monastery, he says, had a powerful effect on him. “You can’t spend a year in the company of people like that and not have your perceptions changed or your spirituality questioned. It had a profound effect on me – it opened up a world that I not been unaware of, but had put to one side. It made me question my own sense of self, my own beliefs.”

He finds it hard, though, to pin down exactly how his beliefs have been changed. He believes there is “something greater than ourselves... a sense of love and grace and understanding” that society would benefit from if it was able to tap into it. But he finds it difficult to “talk about a God”.

Yet being in the presence of the Sisters, he says, was “absolutely wonderful”. He picks out two moments in particular. One was very early in the morning when he walked into the choir where the Sisters had been praying silently for about 45 minutes. “There was this atmosphere

– it was tangible, it was extraordinary. I cannot explain it. It was this intense and profound atmosphere coming from the nuns themselves.”

Another moment was the night before Good Friday when the Sisters kept a vigil before the Blessed Sacrament. “I stayed with them for quite a long time and you just got a sense of going back through the ages, you felt a connection through the centuries.”

And he seems to have caught something of a Catholic bug: his next film, he says, is a documentary about the tour of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux. And he has another Catholic-themed project that he does not want to reveal just yet.

He admits that *No Greater Love* is not a “pacey, jump about, action-packed” thriller. But he says: “I think if you are patient with the film, and give it time, then actually you get into the [monastic] rhythm yourself.”





A TRIBUTE
To
Thomas Wesley Lambert

Principal, Sacred Heart College
Middle School
1981 to 1985
By
Terry O'Brien

Tom was appointed the first lay Principal of the Marist School, Mitchell Park in 1981 and I was invited by the Marist Brothers to apply to be his Deputy. Tom had worked in the SA public education system since 1966. During this time he was senior master in English at Keith, then Principal of Quorn and Ceduna.

Typical of Tom's managed and considered approach to a very new challenge for him, he closely monitored the lie of the land at the beginning, but there were changes on the horizon. I consider I was very fortunate to be appointed his Deputy, because I was to be carried along on an exciting new educational endeavour. It gave me a fresh outlook on education in general and Middle Schooling in particular. I will always be grateful to Tom for sharing that experience with him.

Middle Schooling, the education of students in Years 6 to 9, was up until Tom's intervention nothing more than a convenient division of the educational enterprise at this time. The South West Region of Catholic schools in SA began in 1976. It consisted of three tiers of schooling: co-ed Years 1 to 5; single sex Years 6 to 9; and co-ed Years 10 to 12.

Tom saw an opportunity for a major new approach to middle schooling. With the support of senior staff, some of whom were a little reticent at first, we launched into an educational revolution. We became trail blazers in the use of vertical grouping of students according to their educational ability and interest.

At the beginning this was confined to what might be called elective subjects (modules of work), and it was confined to our Year 8 and 9 students. Students under the advice of parents and teachers were to select their educational pathways – now that was different. All students would still have to study the core subjects of Religious Education, English, Mathematics, Science, Social Sciences and Physical Education.

Tom saw that there was no time to waste to get this going by the beginning of the 1982 school year. Modules of work in the Arts and Crafts, Music, Language, Social Welfare and the above core subjects were developed, involving countless meetings with staff and parents. Tom was the driving force. By the end of 1981 students going into Years 8 and 9 in 1982 were able to make choices from up to 30 different modules of work and were grouped vertically. He also introduced computing as an elective – a

bank of Commodore 64s was purchased for this purpose. To fit it all into the timetable we had in the beginning a ten-day program of eight lesson days: four lessons per day on core subjects, and four per day on electives. It was a timetabling nightmare but it worked.

The development on this exciting new initiative continued apace and was always being reviewed and fine tuned. It was necessary to see such a major change well bedded down before any further major changes were envisaged. It was an inspirational educational shift, and is still being employed at this school today with appropriate adjustments.

The three-day residential professional development in-service for team building and reflection each January the week before school commenced each year was introduced by Tom. This included not only the teaching staff, but all support staff including the groundsman. I might add this was not universally popular; a small minority found it a bit threatening I think. It was a great way to approach the new academic year.

Tom also saw the need to provide a big enough assembly space for the whole school and an indoor sporting facility. Plans were drawn up in 1985 for Marist Hall and work was completed the following year. Being a lover of music and performance, Tom upgraded the music faculty facility and continued with the annual Revue at the Flinders University Theatre. The Revue was begun in 1978 by Brother Leo Kavanagh, the previous Principal. This was an opportunity for students and staff, including Tom, to display their hidden talents. Tom had a great tenor voice and performed in later years in many musicals including "Les Miserables" – the signature tune of which was played at his funeral liturgy. These revues were a resounding success, but a lot of hard work for all those involved.

Anyone who knew Tom would appreciate the fact that he was a great host and enjoyed

socializing with confreres and friends. What follows is not an exclusive list by any means, but includes:

- The "happy" hours after school on Fridays were a great way to wind down after the feverish pace we worked at during the week (frowned upon these days with OHSW regulations)
- The "betting" syndicates were legendary, the trips to Broken Hill St Pat's Day races, and to Melbourne for the Victorian Derby weekend. The general arrangement for the Broken Hill trips was: make sure the half dozen staff going, could get away promptly at 3.00pm in a ready-packed van (including an esky of course); get to Broken Hill (500km distance) in time for the Calcutta out at the track that evening; retire to the Marist Brothers' school and catch a few hours sleep in one of the classrooms; breakfast with the Brothers; traditional walk along Argenta Street – main shopping precinct; out to the course for the first race; catch another few hours sleep Saturday night; breakfast with Brothers: Racing Mass at Cathedral; out to Silverton for a 'green' beer in the famous pub; then drive home and be ready for action early Monday morning. It makes you tired now thinking about it. But at the time we were younger and enjoyed every minute.
- The regular card nights playing poker with a select group of "gamblers" – a group of us continue the tradition started almost thirty years ago but maybe only a couple of times a year now, playing poker with rules according to Tom. Whenever Tom came to Adelaide he would always want to fit in a card night.
- Some of us had the privilege of going on the "May" camps to the Flinders Ranges with Tom and his family and their friends and relatives from Teachers College days. Tom's organizational

skills were legendary, but came to the fore especially on the trip up the Strzelecki Track to Coopers Creek – about seventy people (including 30 children) in a fleet of vehicles of all shapes and sizes were on this memorable trip. All went like clockwork, thanks to Tom.

- Tom loved a drop of “red”. One of his very favorites was a red from Hugo Winery in McLaren Flat. He introduced me to the Beef and Burgundy Club there. Monthly meetings were held as priorities, and school commitments circumvented them whenever possible. These were great fun, with superb meals and sampling up to eight or nine wines per night to match the menu. It was running the gauntlet for me to get back to Brighton after these meetings. Wouldn’t chance it today.

Word was spreading about what Tom had achieved with the Middle Schooling concept. Unfortunately for us at Mitchell Park, he was invited to give a talk about it in Brisbane at a Catholic Education conference about the middle of 1985. Reference was made about this by the Brisbane Catholic Education Office representative at Tom’s funeral on 28th April 2010. He said that Tom had convinced the powers that be in Brisbane at the time that they really couldn’t do without him – so he was offered a position which he took up before the end of that year.

Subsequently the SA Registration Board was high in their praise of what Tom had instigated at Mitchell Park for Middle Schooling and other schools were encouraged to find out how it worked. Tom has left a legacy beyond worth to the educational enterprise at Sacred Heart College Middle School. His contribution there is ongoing.

At the Brisbane CEO he firstly worked as a Senior Secondary Consultant. When he left this

appointment to take up the position as Principal at Kingaroy (an amalgamation of two schools), three positions were required to fill his job at the CEO – further indication of his energy and willingness to accept new challenges. Tom then moved to Gladstone as Principal, but with the onset of some health problems he decided that it was a timely reminder that life is short. So he decided in 1998 to “pull the pin” in order to do those things that he imagined he would like to do in retirement, i.e. light farming and in particular breeding horses. He always dreamt of bringing in a Melbourne Cup winner.

However, with the onset of further health problems about three years ago while he and Sue were caretaking the Larne property near Elliston SA, this was not to be fully realized. I remember the day clearly in January 2008 when he came to our front door – you guessed it – to organize a card night. He was breathless just from walking from his car. This was not the Tom I had known. I was devastated. But typical of Tom he was very philosophical about it all.

Shortly after this Tom and his wife Sue moved back to Kingaroy so he could access appropriate treatment from the Mater Hospital in Brisbane. This treatment was not successful.

It was difficult for me to watch how his illness shaped the last three years of his life. Tom and Sue were very courageous in taking the decisions about the inevitable outcome of his illness which took him from us on 21st April 2010. As Tom himself put it recently – he ran out of puff. Over his last six months Tom was so blest to have such a loving carer in Sue.

I am very grateful that Tom has touched my life and I had the opportunity to work with him. He remained a faithful friend and a great mate for thirty years. We shared many great times together.

Vale, Tom, and thank you.

WATER MY CLAY
By Tom Lambert (circa 1989)

*When I look at my life,
At the peaks and the dull times,
Through the crises and troubles
And changes I've made,
Though I thought I was changing
Myself through decisions,
It was God who was kneading
This clay, every time.*

*When I think of the people
Whose lives have touched my life,
The sad ones, the glad ones
And the ones that I've loved.
Can it really be chance
That placed them in my way
Or were they the waters,
The waters of change.*

*If our clay dries and hardens,
Becomes cracked and brittle,
The Lord cannot mould us
And help us to grow.
And like earthenware pots
Fired before their completion,
We might shatter whenever
The winds of change blow.*

*But prayer is the water
That keeps our clay supple,
Able to bend in God's gentle hands.
So we must learn to open
Ourselves to his shaping
So that one day completed,
Before him we'll stand.*

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The wardens at St Mary's Cathedral Sydney say they are "entertained" by questions asked by the occasional visitor to the basilica ... such as one last week who, looking inquisitively at the painting of Our Lady of the Southern Cross, asked: "Is that a picture of Mary MacKillop?"

"No, sir, that is a picture of the Virgin Mary. But there

is an Australian touch to it ... she is titled Our Lady of the Southern Cross."

Impressed, the visitor then asked "Oh ... when did she visit Australia?"

When leaving the university car park, a lecturer asked one of his students to check if one of the indicator lights on his car was working properly.



"Certainly," said the student. The lecturer got in the car, switched on the engine and turned on the indicator.

"Is the light working?", he called to the student.

"Sort of," the student replied.

"What do you mean?", called the lecturer.

"Well, it's going on and off!".

One fine spring morning, not long after he was transferred to his new parish in Texas, Father O'Malley walked to the window of his bedroom to get a deep breath of the beautiful day outside. He then noticed there was a jackass lying dead in the middle of his front lawn. He promptly called the local police station. The conversation went like this:



"Good morning. This is Sergeant Jones. How can I help you?"

"And the best of the day te yerself. Dis is Father O'Malley at St. Ann's Catholic Church. Dere's a jackass lyin' dead on me front lawn."

Sergeant Jones, considering himself to be quite a wit, replied with a smirk, "Well now Father, it was always my impression that you people took care of the last rites!"

There was dead silence on the line for a long moment. Father O'Malley then replied: "Aye, 'tis certainly true. But we are also obliged to notify the next of kin."



ONCE A PUN A TIME

A man rushed into a busy doctor's office and shouted, "Doctor! I think I'm shrinking!!" The doctor calmly responded, "Now, settle down. You'll just have to be a little patient."

Two hydrogen atoms meet. One says, 'I've lost my electron.' The other says, 'Are you sure?' The first replies, 'Yes, I'm positive.'

Did you hear about the Buddhist who refused Novocain during a root canal? His goal: transcend dental medication.

A vulture boards an airplane, carrying two dead raccoons. The Stewardess looks at him and says, 'I'm sorry, sir, only one carrion allowed per passenger.'

Mahatma Gandhi, as you know, walked barefoot most of the time, which produced an impressive set of calluses on his feet. He also ate very little, which made him rather frail and, with his odd diet, he suffered from bad breath. This made him (Oh, man, this is SO BAD, it's good) a super calloused fragile mystic hexed by halitosis.

Evidence has been found that William Tell and his family were avid bowlers. However, all the Swiss league records were unfortunately destroyed in a fire, so we'll ever know for whom the Tells bowled.

Two Eskimos sitting in a kayak were chilly, so they lit a fire in the craft. Unsurprisingly, it sank, proving once again that you can't have your kayak and heat it.

WISDOM FROM MILITARY MANUALS

'If the enemy is in range, so are you.'

-Infantry Journal-

"Whoever said the pen is mightier

than the sword,

obviously never encountered

automatic weapons'

-General MacArthur-

'You, you, and you ... Panic.

The rest of you come with me.'

-U.S. Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt.-

"Any ship can be a minesweeper. Once."

-Maritime Ops Manual-

'The only time you have too much fuel

is when you are on fire."

-Unknown Author-

'If you hear me yell: "Eject, Eject, Eject!",

the last two will be echos.

'If you stop to ask "Why?,"

you'll be talking to yourself,

because you're the pilot.

-Pre-Flight briefing from a 104 Pilot-



On a day like this, 170 years ago, Br. François had the sad duty of informing the Institute that their loved brother and friend was dead: "On Saturday 6 June, at half-past four in the morning, our good Father Superior went to sleep peacefully in the Lord, after a serene decline of three quarters of an hour... In these sad circumstances, we invite you, very dear brothers, to unite your tears and hopes to ours. Mourn for a good father, a worthy Superior and Founder, a holy priest of Mary, our support, our guide, our tender consoler. Mourn because death has taken from us one who knew so well how to share our sufferings and to direct our steps on the path of salvation... It falls to us now to recall and follow attentively his last and most influential teachings; to bring them alive in one each of us, imitating the virtues we admired in him, and, more than ever, coming closer together around our good and tender Mother".

Br. Emili Turú,
Superior General



Our deceased and their families...

- * **Br Thomas Lynch**, St Paul's College, Auckland.
- * **Norma Kellow**, Bendigo. 8 May, 2010; aged 82 years. Friend to many of the Brothers over the years.
- * **Kevin Irwin**, Ballarat, 27 May, 2010; Marist Brother for a short time who maintained close contact with those with whom he trained.
- * **Nathan Cameron**, former student at MacKillop College, Swan Hill. Died of a heart attack while playing football, aged 19.
- * **Mrs Nancy Scally**, Perth. Mother of Tom Scally, a former novice.
- * **Mrs Sheila Reid**, May 2010. Wife of Frank (dec.) former teacher at Champagnat College, Wangaratta, and affiliated member.

For those who are unwell ...

- * **Br Majella Fitzpatrick**, Sale.
- * **Br Kevin Hogan**, Netley. Suffering irreversible spinal arthritis.
- * **Br Henry Spinks**, gravely ill. Former Provincial of the New Zealand Province.

Thanks expressed...

- * **From Geoff and Neville Colvin**, on behalf of the family, for prayers for the repose of the soul of their mother, **Joan**.

Contact details for Mrs Margaret Dwyer
(Eugene's mother):

St Joseph's Rest Home
112B St George's Road
Northcote. Victoria 3070.
Personal Phone: (03) 9481 5831
Reception: (03) 9489 8444



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