

## MY FIFTY YEARS AS A SYDNEY PRIEST: HOMILY AT GOLDEN JUBILEE MASS, ST ANDREW'S MALABAR 20 AUGUST 2016

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*The following article was first given as a homily at a Mass for family, friends and former parishioners on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood by Fr John de Luca, a retired priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney. It looks back on his various pastoral appointments during fifty years of ministry.*

A priest's first pastoral appointment usually sets a direction for his subsequent ministry. I was blessed to be appointed to the then decidedly unfashionable inner suburb of Surry Hills, at St Peter's Church in Devonshire Street. I loved my time there above mention. The people were generous and appreciative of anything that one did for them. Apart from a few landlords, they were far from rich. The world depicted by the novelist Ruth Park was very much in evidence. Memories of Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh were still fresh, and the tribal Irish presence was augmented by the newer waves of migrants trying to establish themselves in a sometimes hostile environment. The involvement of so many young people in the life of the church was inspiring. Not only did we have a Catholic Youth Organisation, but also a dedicated clubhouse, open nightly, for them to gather in, and a youth pastoral outreach with a junior Legion of Mary, giving teenagers a structure to help them think of others. I could go on, but I'll limit myself to one story concerning Joey, a twelve-year-old altar boy from a recent migrant background who came every morning to serve Mass, and who told me that his one ambition in life was to become a priest. One morning after Mass, Joey told me that he was in pain. I told him that he must tell his mother, which he did, leading to a diagnosis of stomach cancer from which he died some months later. Priests are usually reluctant to speak of pastoral conversations with parishioners, confidentiality being of utmost importance. However half a century later, I don't think that Joey would mind my telling you of one such exchange. In those days the thought of hospice care for children was an idea whose time had not yet come, so Joey was confined to a room in the old and forbidding former Sacred Heart Hospice in Darlinghurst, a far cry from its more modern replacement. Most

\*The community of Good Shepherd parish in Hoxton Park celebrated the golden jubilee of priestly ordination of Fr John de Luca on 17 July 2016. Fr John was ordained in St Mary's Cathedral on 16 July 1966.

afternoons I would walk up to the hospice (young curates were not allowed to own cars then) and talk with Joey. In the years following the Second Vatican Council many priests and religious felt compelled to re-evaluate their place in the church and in the world, often with good reason. We should be wary of criticising those whose shoes we have not walked in, but Joey, so young, with so little time left, and seeing things with the direct vision of childhood (as Scripture says, “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise”), simply asked me “Don’t they appreciate what they have got?”. Then he asked me if he were dying. No-one had told him. I dodged the issue, saying that I wasn’t a doctor and could not say. But the clarity of his insight has never left me, and I have no doubt that I am standing here to-day partly because of Joey. There has been a rush to canonisations in recent years, often of worthy candidates with whom we have no personal connection. But for me, Joey has always been my personal saint.

My appointment to Surry Hills parish was intended to give me time to prepare for audition and admission to the Sydney Conservatorium of Music where I had been asked to undertake a diploma course on behalf of the archdiocese in order to succeed Father Ron Harden as Cathedral Director of Music. The proximity of the Conservatorium and the Cathedral was the reason for this appointment. Fr Ron Harden, the then Director of Music at St Mary’s, had been stationed at Surry Hills during his time at the Con. But by the time of my second year in Surry Hills I was acutely aware that what was being asked of me was to the detriment of the people of the parish. Not only was I enrolled as a full-time student in a three-year course which also involved hours of daily practice, but I was being asked to take over many of Ron Harden’s jobs in the cathedral parish. With great sadness, I asked Cardinal Gilroy to give Surry Hills a really full-time assistant priest. He agreed to this, and sent me to be a chaplain at the Christian Brothers’ training complex at Strathfield, Mount Saint Mary’s, where I lived and worked for the next two and a half years.

Before long I was taking the cathedral’s probationer choristers for regular singing lessons; taking the senior students at the Conservatorium High School for weekly religious instruction; taking choristers to sing at weddings around Sydney on Saturday afternoons (Saturday was Ron Harden’s day off, and weddings were the principal source of revenue to enable Ron to run the cathedral choir); acting as spiritual director for the Ladies Conference of the

St Vincent de Paul Society which met weekly at Ozanam House, then located at Circular Quay; taking over Ron's liturgy lectures at the Xavier Institute of Sisters' Formation at Lavender Bay; and conducting the Cathedral Choir whenever Ron was away. All this was before I was even appointed to the cathedral staff from the beginning of January 1971.

During my time at Strathfield I was given another responsibility for the Church. I was asked to become Director of Music at St Patrick's College Manly, the archdiocesan seminary which then trained students for the priesthood for the whole of N.S.W. and beyond. This entailed three journeys from Strathfield to Manly and back each week. Fortunately by then I had a car, but, since I did not have a parochial appointment, I had no car allowance. This meant that I was always broke. The stipend from the Christian Brothers of \$40 a month did not cover the cost of running a motor vehicle. The Rector at St Patrick's College, Dr Harry Davis, from what funds I don't know, managed to give me \$5 per week, but even this did not get me out of the woods. The sound of the float rattling on the floor of the petrol tank on more than one occasion signalled to me that I would have about one hundred yards left, and then I would have to walk the rest of the way home! I don't think that people realise how much was expected of those in the lower ranks of the clergy in those days, and how different it is to-day.

When I arrived with an official appointment to the Cathedral presbytery at the beginning of 1971, I encountered the second of the four Deans under whom I served. This is not the time or place to talk about my musical involvement at the Cathedral. That is a story for another time. Here are a few comments about the pastoral life of the place as it was then, and of some of the personalities I encountered. The Dean, Vince Marley, forbade me to continue with the work at St Patrick's Manly. I was to devote myself completely to the Cathedral. This was probably just as well, since the workload was significant. Apart from housekeeping, there was no ancillary lay secretarial staff in the presbytery, and the front door bell was constantly ringing. The duty priest was expected to answer all calls, day or night, dispensing charity, advice, accommodation or whatever to anyone who sought help. The schedule of Masses, Confessions, Sacraments and special occasions, was heavy. As well, we were chaplains to Sydney Hospital, which in those days was a full hospital and the major casualty location for the city and the port of Sydney. Night calls to the hospital were frequent. My record

of being summoned to Sydney Hospital was less than the record of five calls in one night, but quite often there would be several occasions on which one was called! Disturbed sleep was considered part of the job. The calls were sometimes not for Catholic patients. The night matron had worked out that we would always come if asked, and so she took full advantage of that to offer pastoral care to those in need. I did estimate once that I was on-call for ninety hours in the six days each week that I was on duty for the five years of my time at St Mary's.

Saturday was my day off, so I was not so often asked to perform weddings. However in my time there I started The Cathedral Club, a meeting place for unmarried Catholics twenty-one and over, which resulted in a few good marriages, and which continued for a while after my departure from the cathedral. This took place in January 1976. The then archbishop, Cardinal James Freeman, asked me where I would like to go to after my time in the Cathedral. He suggested Concord parish, where as an auxiliary bishop he had been parish priest, and where he had been happy. I wasn't so keen, however, and declined, opting instead for Randwick North, where I knew that there was a vacancy. This would have had the bonus of being close to my family home in Coogee where I had grown-up, and where my widowed mother still lived. Jimmy Freeman, however, was wary. The parish priest, Fr Chris O'Donoghue, had a reputation of being difficult. The poor man was subject to extreme mood swings. These days we would say that he was bi-polar; then the usual description was 'manic-depressive'. The Cardinal agreed to sending me there, but told me that if I had any difficulty, then to come back and he would give me something else. This was jolly decent of him, but I was determined to stick it out, come what may. I have to admit that my time at St Margaret Mary's, Randwick North, was something of a trial, so I was not displeased when the senior auxiliary bishop, James Carroll, phoned me in mid 1977 telling me that they wanted me to go as assistant priest to Mona Vale. He told me that it was a lovely place (which indeed it was, and is), where he often went himself to spend time with friends. (As I later learnt, the connection was political; a constant trait in the life of that most political of prelates!). So off to Mona Vale I went for the next eight years.

The parish priest at Sacred Heart Mona Vale, Father John Keenan, was a much loved elderly Irish priest from Galway, or at least I thought that he was elderly. In hindsight I realise now that he was ten years or so younger

than I am to-day. But perhaps I am having difficulty in accepting that I really am old now. The presbytery at Mona Vale was totally inadequate for the task expected of it. John Keenan had been told to build a new presbytery, and had submitted plans for a proper presbytery, but these were rejected by the authorities, so he gave up on the idea. I spent most of the next eight years living in a converted garage in the property that the parish owned in Newport. The dampness of the site did nothing for my back pain I have to say, but I did enjoy a level of independent living that was denied to most assistant priests. However I did not stay an assistant priest for long. Father Keenan's health was precarious at best, so I was asked by the regional bishop, Thomas Muldoon, to take on the role of Administrator. I declined, but the bishop insisted, so I agreed reluctantly, knowing that in all probability I would be accused of trying to push Father Keenan out. And indeed that accusation was levelled against me by some in the parish. However, I had determined to complete the task assigned to me, raising the money needed to build a new two-storey classroom block, and the long overdue presbytery, with daily Mass chapel and Parish Centre on the one consolidated site. Previously church, presbytery, school and Mass centre were all in different locations. That task completed in 1984, my time at Mona Vale came to its logical conclusion just before the separation of the Archdiocese of Sydney into the three constituent dioceses which are now its present configuration.

During my time at Mona Vale, as in every parish I have served in, I was supported by many wonderful people who are the heart and soul of the church. I once heard the story of a priest visiting Rome meeting with a member of the Vatican Curia, the central administrative office of the Church. The official asked the visitor what it felt like, visiting the heart of the church. The visitor replied: "No, we are the heart, you are the periphery". I am glad to have always been with those at the coal-face, and to have never been burdened with the woes of high office. But a particularly happy memory of life at Mona Vale relates to the co-operation between the various Christian denominations. I have never anywhere else been so involved in the personal lives of other clergy, and the lives of the congregations that they served. Without wishing to devalue the support that I have received from fellow Catholic priests over the years, I feel that honesty demands that I acknowledge the friendship and encouragement that I received there from Uniting Church, Anglican, Baptist and Orthodox colleagues. And it was at

Mona Vale that I was glad to welcome the first curate ever to be assigned to my care, Father Brian Moloney who had been one of my choristers in the Cathedral choir, and who sings with us still at Mass here to-day.

After eight busy years at Mona Vale, which included the pastoral care of Mona Vale Hospital, and running the Catholic section of Mona Vale Cemetery, years that were probably the most productive of my life, I was asked by Bishop Patrick Murphy to relieve for two months at Asquith while the pastor was recuperating from a heart ailment. Though a brief appointment, Asquith introduced me to the then young Father Michael McLean, who also continues to sing with my small choir, Schola Nova, and who is with us to-day. But also at Asquith I met a nephew of my Italian grandfather's second wife, (in fact my stepmother, whom I had never previously met until about this time). In this small world, even brief encounters are not without significance.

A somewhat longer interlude followed Asquith in my appointment to the parish of St Agnes, Matrville, next door to us to-day. Though not a large parish, Matrville required a second priest since it had the chaplaincy of Botany cemetery. Hardly a day went past without a priest from Matrville being required to conduct a funeral at the cemetery or crematorium for some Catholic person who did not have much contact with a local Catholic parish or priest. During the eighteen months I was at Matrville I lost count of the number of funerals at which I was called on to officiate at, but I will never forget the day I was scheduled to conduct eight funerals! With the briefest of introductory time, never having met the mourners before, one had to work very hard to do the best for people whom one would almost never meet again. Two occasions stand out in my memory from this time: the funeral of a well-known drug dealer who had been very publically murdered (for which I later saw my photograph in the Daily Mirror, and the insulting reference to 'a brief service'), and the first Jewish cremation that I had been asked to undertake. I am reminded that Pope John Paul II would often recite Kaddish at the burial of Jewish people in Poland during WWII when there was no one else able to do so.

After my eighteen month sentence at Matrville, finally I was to be given a parish that I could call my own in 1986, that of St Luke's at Revesby. In those days it was standard practice for a priest in the Archdiocese of Sydney to have to wait for twenty years before being trusted enough to be a parish

leader, and my twenty year's wait was now ended. It was said amongst the clergy at that time that the day a curate became a parish priest was the day the mouse turned into a rat! A cynical comment, surely, and even the biology is wrong. But there is a real sense of responsibility falling on one when such an appointment is made. And Revesby was a definite challenge, with 2,300 people at Mass each weekend, two assistant priests, a parish school with over 600 pupils, some thirty active groups within the parish, two pastoral nuns working full-time for the parish, and the chaplaincy of Bankstown Hospital to boot! I had never had a migraine headache before going to Revesby, and fortunately have not had one since then! The appointment to Revesby was further complicated by the fact that it was the first of the limited-term parochial appointments to be made in Sydney. Previously when a priest was appointed as a parish priest, he was given tenure, stability being deemed necessary to properly do the job. By 1986 the Australian bishops had successfully petitioned Rome to allow them to make limited term appointments of, say, six years, and I believe that I was 'numero uno', as they say. After six years at Revesby I enquired what was to happen next. I was given the option of continuing for another term, or going elsewhere. I opted for a middle position, accepting re-appointment, but, as it seemed prudent, for only a further three years. So in 1995, after nine years at Revesby, I was once again without an appointment, but not for long! During lunch one day at St Luke's, Cardinal Clancy phoned me, and as I had predicted to others at table, asked me to go to Drummoyne as Administrator for a while. I had no prior knowledge of that particular appointment, but from my years in the Cathedral, I know that the diocese generally worked on the principle of the dyke: if there is a hole, you plug it. It was common knowledge that the Drummoyne parish priest had resigned, and I was, as it were, the first cab off the rank. So off I went to Drummoyne for six months, keeping the seat warm for someone else whom the archbishop wanted to reward with 'a nice parish'.

But what to do with me post Drummoyne in 1995? Once again a call, or rather a summons from an auxiliary bishop, this time Geoffrey Robinson, who told me that the archbishop had said that I was too senior to mess around with (or words to that effect!), and asked me what I wanted to do. I replied that I would take whatever I was offered, and what I was offered was the parish of St Mary and St Joseph, Maroubra/Beach where I was destined

to spend the next twelve and a half years, my longest appointment ever, and the one which saw me into retirement. “In my beginning is my end” or so the old saying goes. My last parish was to be the one in which I was born. Strange twist of fate, and it was not of my own doing. The usual ecclesiastical practice was never to appoint a priest to the place where he was born, following the Gospel wisdom that ‘a prophet is without honour in his own country and amongst his own people’. Whether that was the case in my regard is for others to say. Whatever may or may not have been achieved during my time at St Mary and St Joseph’s is also something for others to assess. It certainly represented a challenge somewhat different from any previous appointments in that it made me aware of how our church is changing. This was an amalgamated parish, with one priest where there had previously been four; one church building where there had once been two; and a parish school on a site far from the church and parish centre. There was a broad spectrum of parishioners from vastly different socio-economic levels (some extremely wealthy, abutting a very large public housing precinct. Not everyone there approved of me, so 2007 when the then Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal George Pell, offered a just retirement package to the senior clergy of the archdiocese (in terms superior to that of any of his predecessors), that I accepted the final Episcopal offer that brought me to the stage in which I am to-day.

How many years more, if any, that I will be given is known to God alone. I don’t believe that I have been an ambitious person, in fact clerical ambition has always appalled me. My uncle, the late Father Mick Slattery, said to me once when I was a newly-minted priest: “There are two sorts of priests in this diocese: those who work, and those who get on”. I have always tried to be included amongst those who work. My human failings are obvious enough, and I am ever grateful to those who have forgiven me for them. I would like to thank my late parents for the start in life and the example of hard work that they set me, and for all the members of my extended family, especially those who are with me to-day, for the love that they have given me over the years. And a special word of thanks for all those whose lives have intersected with my own over the years, hopefully for the betterment of us all. May God’s blessing remain with you always.