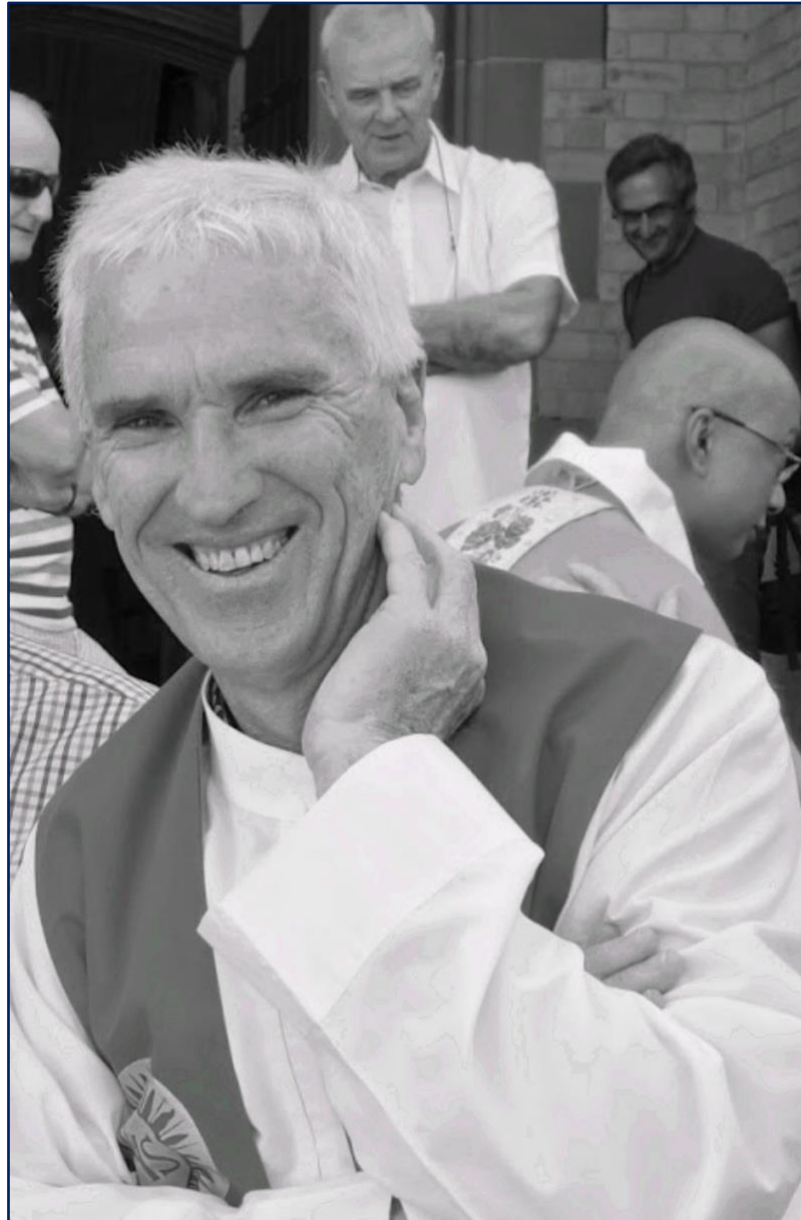


Stories from the heart

Steve Sinn SJ

'LEADERSHIP FROM BELOW'



SHARED WITH GOOD FRIENDS OF FR STEVE & FOR OTHERS WHO KNOW HIM WELL



It's wonderful to be back here at St Canice's and see so many people I love, and have come to love, to know their stories. It's such a privilege. I'll try to hold myself together. Up to now, I've not gone back and looked at my time here, I've not unpacked the stories, it's hard to do that.

I'll just say a few general things.

I came to St. Canice's as assistant priest in 1993 and was the parish priest from 1997 – 2012. I've never employed anyone in my life, I've never applied for a grant, either from the government or the Jesuits. I have always relied totally on donations. There are different models for running things and I've always thought: I'm a priest, I don't want to be in an employer/employee kind of relationship. I once said to Elizabeth Strutt who ran the office for many years, I felt guilty I didn't pay her. "Steve," she said, "I am here because I want to be here."



Obviously, there are different models, and the parish is in many ways far better run than when I was here. I knew when I was here that the Kitchen was one incident away from being closed! I cut my teeth as a young priest running Corpus Christi Community, a home for 90 homeless, alcoholic men founded by Mother Teresa. The men did everything: the

cooking, gardening, cleaning, answering the phone. Those who could got breakfast for those who were unable to manage. The whole place was run by those men supported by the Sisters of Mercy and volunteers. That experience remains my template.

When I was here, I felt held by people. We were unselfconsciously a lay/religious community. Some of the volunteers lived in the parish apartment building, Merton, and we gathered every morning with other volunteers for 7:00am mass. I've never been one for a curriculum vitae. If a person goes to mass that's enough for me. I remember Sr Pat Byron came to me and wanted to volunteer. She was over 70 and couldn't find a place that would take her on. I said 'yes' and for many years she was the person people met when they came to the office door. She was magnificent! Dear Pat now has dementia. In a mysterious way her suffering is continuing the work of the parish.

I loved my time with the Jesuits here, especially after I was made superior! Phil Crotty and Aloysius Mowe, Mark Raper, Nguyen Van Cao, Steve Curtin, David Holdcroft, Frank Brennan and others over the years were challenging, supporting and loving companions. We shared the cooking and parish masses and every Wednesday evening we gathered for mass and a drink before dinner. The parishioners came to love those priests and I always thought they

were lucky to have such men, with such experiences, share the eucharist with them. **By the way, Aloysius has had a stroke that has incapacitated him.** He's now in Malaysia and I have arranged a Novena with a group of his friends, and we say a daily prayer during Lent. I share that prayer with you, he can hardly speak, he can't walk, his movements are very limited. I addressed it to Pedro Arrupe.

*“Dear Pedro,
please be with Aloysius
your companion in the Lord
in his moment of utter darkness and mystery.
Please intercede on his behalf before the Lord.
Ask the Lord to touch Aloysius with his healing hand.
And may Aloysius remind us, as you were reminded,
that we are utterly in the hands of the Lord.
Amen.”*

**We are in the Lord’s hands. And as we grow older,
we are more aware of that. And what better hands to be in?**

One turning point, I'll share with you when I was here.

I don't want to look at your faces because I think I will get upset. As you know, I used to swim at Bondi in the morning and come back for mass. **One Sunday, early in my time, I came back and there was commotion in the church. People slept in the porch and this Māori woman who was very powerful, her name was Crystal, Crystal and Rob, and they were having one hell of an argument. And Crystal drew a knife. Rob ran through the church and slammed the sacristy door closed. And she was gouging that door with a knife.**

I came in, late, and the congregation was in shock. I went into the sacristy and my sacristan Gerald, such a beautiful man, resigned on the spot. “That’s enough. You're doing nothing for these people, and it’s got out of control.

And that’s true, it was out of control. And of course, people in the congregation were saying the same thing. So, I had a choice. What am I going to do?



When I came to the parish, the porch was full of pot plants. They were there not for the beauty of the pot plants, but to keep people off the porch. Was I going to put the pot plants back? Where do I draw the line

on who is welcome? I went to the lectern and said: "Look, that behavior was unacceptable. Crystal and Rob will make an apology for that behavior. **But don't think we're any different. Don't think we don't stab one another in the back. Don't think we don't say things and do things to other people that take away their life in all sorts of different ways. The lives of Crystal and Rob are there for all to see, we live behind closed doors and use the gloved hand, at home and in business. We walk over one another, we are far more subtle, far more dangerous. And by the way, in half an hour, they'll be in one another's arms. Whereas we hold on to our anger, we hold on to our hurts and resentments. We are no different from them.**" This was a turning point for me. I got Crystal and Rob to write an apology and they sent me a letter and the envelope was addressed to the 'prisoners' of St Canice's. They didn't know how to spell 'parishioners.'

When I look back, I feel so grateful that we stayed together. The office volunteers, the kitchen teams, the street people, we were together for all those years. It was never them and us, the parishioners and the Jesuits, it was always just us. We all worked very hard and supported one another. No one resigned on me (Gerald returned!), except once. To my horror, the Finance Committee as a body resigned one time. Not because I was doing anything wrong but because I wasn't doing anything. That did shake me a bit because they were upright parishioners, one and all. But like the Wilcannia Boomerangs, they came back, and I tried a little harder.

Arthur Rolfe was on that Finance Committee. I had this idea of building a columbarium in the church, both for the homeless and to set aside money for the upkeep of the church. Arthur challenged the idea of setting aside money. "The upkeep of the church is the responsibility of the parishioners," he said, "to live in faith is to live year by year and not have the security of such a fund."

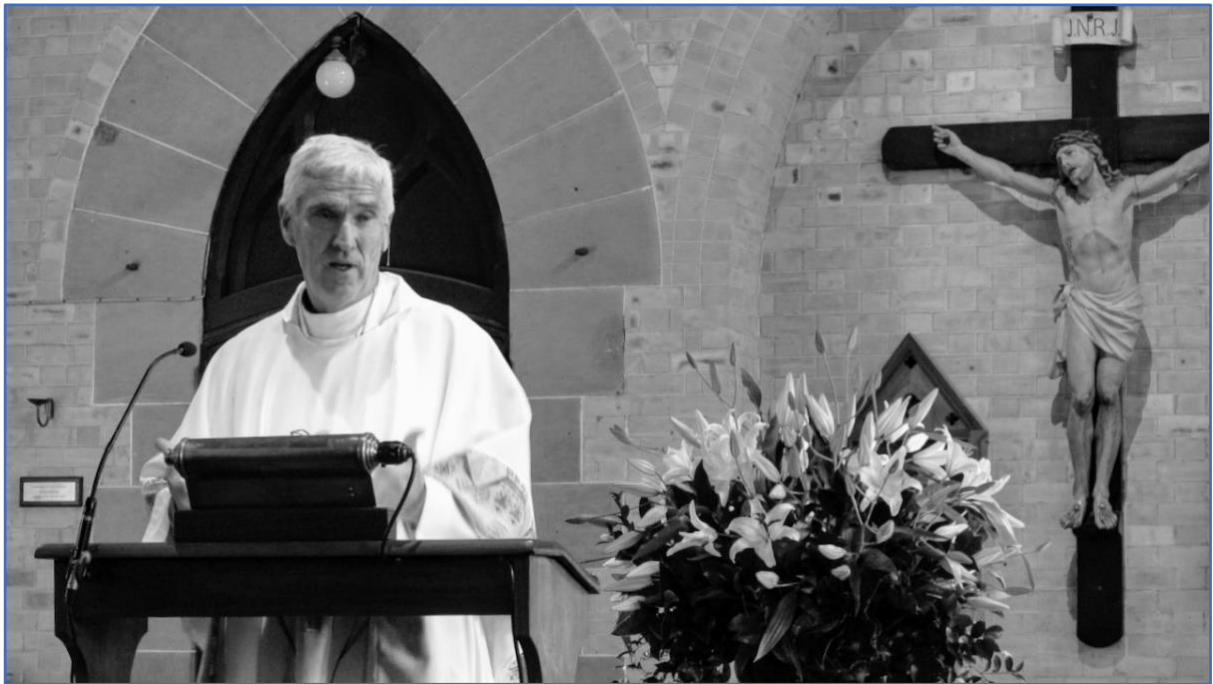
I was taken aback by that view. What faith! I don't have that faith and went ahead with the columbarium, but I'll never forget Arthur's intervention.

Arthur died of motor neurone disease. The last time I saw him, he was lying in bed. The family had a hospital bed in the apartment on Macleay St. Arthur used a straw to have a whiskey with me but this time he couldn't even do that.

He said to me: "I can see him." He was looking at a large mirror on the wall facing the bed. I looked at the mirror and all I could see was Arthur's reflection in the mirror. "What do you mean you can see him? All I can see as you Arthur".

He repeated: "I can see him."

I looked again, saw only Arthur, and said, "Arthur, I think you're beginning to see things."



"No, he said, look."

And I looked more closely and on the right side there was this large cross with the body on it, the corpus. And I realized that Arthur and that body were one and the same, neither could move. **We all say we want to be like Jesus and come close to Him. Arthur had never been that close to Jesus. Arthur couldn't move on his bed and nor could Jesus on the cross. Arthur didn't die alone. None of us do.** Even though he died a harrowing death - you can't breathe in the end - he could see Him. My sister has motor neurone disease. I don't even want to think about her ordeal, but I know that surrounded by love and her faith He is with her "all the way" as Harold Holt once said. She inspires me as Arthur continues to inspire me.

Cardinal Ted Clancy was my bishop when I began at St. Canice's. He called me in one day and asked why I didn't wear a collar. "It gives good witness," he said.

"I just want people to meet Steve," I responded, "and the collar gets in the way of that."

I told him I had just come back from Thailand and there I saw saffron robed Buddhist monks sitting on the platforms of railway stations, a begging bowl in front of them.

“Imagine the witness value,” I said, “if the Archbishop of Sydney sat outside Central Station with a begging bowl in front of him.”

Ted replied: “I wouldn’t have the courage to do that.”

He used to ring me regularly and always begin apologetically. “I’ve had this complaint,” he would say, “and I’m only ringing because I feel conscience bound to respond to it. I don’t want you to do anything, I just want you to know there is this complaint.” I never wanted complaints, but I used to think they meant I was doing my job well.

When George Pell became Archbishop, I decided to get on the front foot and went and told him all that was going on in the parish. After that, whenever he got letters of complaint his stock response was: “I agree with everything Fr. Sinn is doing.”

George made a great impression when he visited the Kitchen. The men would crowd around his table comparing their rings with his Bishop’s ring.

Now that’s a ring, George could have said, channeling Paul Hogan!

I got a few ideas for tonight from today’s parish bulletin. Let me just have a look. I am looking at the anniversaries of deaths (in the parish bulletin). This week was the anniversary of Chris Gration, we all could say so much about Chris. He stood beside me as an acolyte for many years, gave out communion, was parish council chair. Many of us went to his funeral in Canberra, we know his story and hold him in our hearts with love. Also, Daniel Luiz, Maria’s son who died young. Maria used to live down at Woolloomooloo, a lovely lady, Daniel’s death led her even closer to God. She often spoke with me about Daniel. Michael’s Musgrave’s mother, Constance. Such a good and strong influence on Michael. Paddy Meagher SJ. Geoff was a scripture scholar; he spent his life in India before returning to Australia to die. He had a large tumor, the size of a lemon, on the side of his face. Just before he died, he said to me: “Steve, if only we knew the immensity and the depth of God’s love” This man, so disfigured, was transfigured. Bill Antico, Virginia’s brother. All these names that are part of the fabric of my life and the life of the parish.

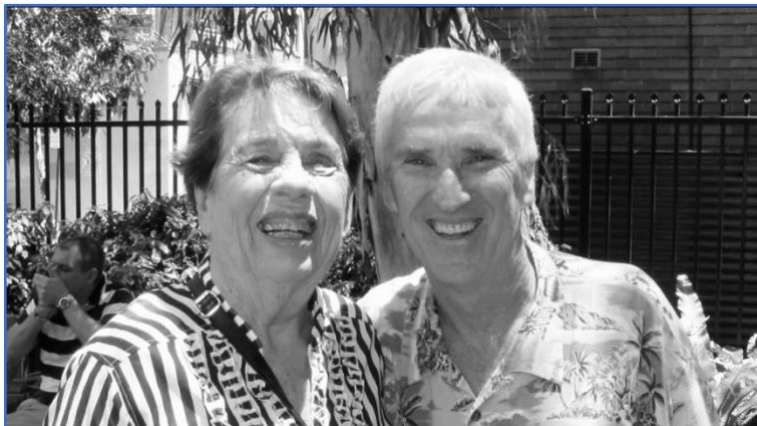
A parish community makes space for the worst of times. I think of Jenny Campbell, I think of Nick Waterlow. It is the only place where death is given a transcendent meaning, the place where community and ritual transforms those worst of times. Many of us are here tonight because of the death of someone close to us. Deaths create a parish community. So do the other sacraments. I remember parishioners waiting for me to come to anoint them before

they died. I learnt how powerful it was, to be with, to touch and anoint the body. The same when I brought communion to a sick person, it felt such a small thing to offer. What wasn't small was the faith of the one receiving the host, and the human contact. All I want when I am about to die is to be anointed and if possible, to receive communion. And to know I'm not alone.

It is said you can't get sober on your own, so you can't believe on your own. I can't. Most of the time I thought I was running the parish, but there was this small, quiet voice inside me that sometimes I listened to that reminded me that there was someone else giving life to the parish, some other Spirit that was in the hearts of the people. I could feel it as I gave out communion, in their faces. It was such a relief to let go of this feeling of responsibility for the parish and go with the Spirit, to see with the eyes of faith. I think of Lourdes Jacob, so frail, she could hardly walk to church and such faith, I think of the conversations I have had over the years with you.

*Steve, we know what a great homilist you are. Maybe you could share the story of Dennis O'Brien telling you what he thinks of **your homilies.** (laughter)*

"Well, even better than Dennis is Nola Rowe. Richard Leonard, a very good homilist, writes his homilies. Afterwards, he'd be mobbed by people wanting a copy of what he had to say. Nola Rowe emerged from this crush, and I said to her, **"Nola, you've never asked me for a copy of one of my homilies."**



"That's because you've got nothing to say," said Nola. Nola was never backward in coming forward and I did lead with my chin!

I do tend to have long pauses in my homilies. My mother once loudly called from the congregation when I was first ordained: "Get on with it, Stephen." (laughter) Another time I was giving a homily, **I must have been questioning the word "God" and Mum called out: "He doesn't mean it!"**

I went through the AIDS thing here in the 90s and remember the ravages of AIDS. **I remember Tim Conigrave. He was buried from here. Before the mass his friend, Nick Enright, came to me. "You're not to use the word 'God'," he said.** A strange command before mass but I understood what he meant. **God is a word that hasn't been kind for many people, it is a harsh word to say, it's impersonal not relational. I don't like the word I must say. Nick didn't need to tell me that. We need to really encounter one another and find him in one another.**

We hold the treasure. That treasure is his presence in us. We are sacred. The divine lives in us. We have that dignity. Every single person here has that dignity of being a child of God. We call God my father, so, I am the Father's son or daughter, and we are brothers and sisters. All the language we use about God as you know, is analogous. Our language relates to the world we know, God is beyond us, God is a mystery. So, you know, perhaps we can talk about the holy mystery, rather than God.

A very funny thing happened once. I came into the church; it was empty and there was Karl. Another time I walked into the church, the same Karl was there, naked as the day he was born. Thank God I walked in and not an elderly parishioner paying a visit. In any case, Karl was there – dressed this time - he had pulled up a chair in front of the large cross on the back wall of the church, with the life size Jesus hanging from it. The feet of Jesus are blackened and worn away by the kisses and caresses of those who pass by. The cross was given to the parish after a Mission at the turn of the last century. They used to have Missions in the parish to renew the faith of the parishioners. Karl had pulled up a chair in front of the cross and I overheard him say as he was looking at the corpus: **"You think you've suffered."** (laughter)



"Can you talk about Mick Lorden, manager of the Kitchen for many years?"

After Mick died, I got in touch with Karen, his daughter. "I'm not going to go into a church and hear what a wonderful man he was, to hear lovely things about someone who ruined our lives as children. We moved from house to house, in the middle of the night, avoiding the rent collector, the gas and electricity used to be turned off, there was no food in the house," she said to me on the phone. I said I understood.

Unbeknown to me, at one time Mick was doing odd jobs in Potts Point for elderly parishioners like fixing their bathrooms. He used the parish account at the local hardware store to buy all the things he needed to do the job. I would get calls from these ladies saying they had paid him, and he hadn't finished the job. (laughter) They had trusted him because he worked in the parish! When I confronted him, he said: "I work like a blue-arsed fly, and you are expecting me to do it for nothing?"

I said to Karen: **"Why don't you come and tell Mick's story as you know it."** Karen did come to her father's funeral, I stood beside her as she unloaded on him, much to the shock of the kitchen volunteers in the congregation. It was such an important thing for Karen to do, she told her truth with love, there was no sense that she was out to put Mick down, she just

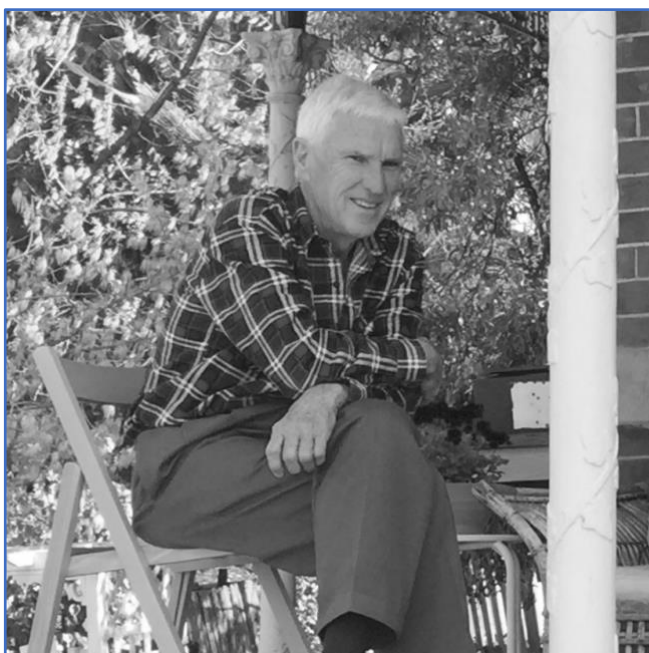
wanted the truth to be said. Mick would have been proud of her. Karen and I are still in touch with one another. I buried her husband. He had dementia. Now, she's living in the UK, on the coast in Kent. She married this wonderful fellow, Tim. When I was over in the UK, we had dinner together at my sister's. She rang me recently to say that Tim has vascular dementia, he leaves the gas on, and she can't leave him alone. "Maybe I've been picked out," she said. "Maybe this is my lot."

Mick was an Irishman from Cork, had gone to England for work, could do everything and nothing well. A survivor, very private, a closet gambler I expect. He avoided doctors because they might tell him he was sick. He **was faithful to the kitchen. Every morning he'd be there, cigarette ash on the food. (laughter)** The volunteers loved him, and I did too. We used to have a beer at the RSL in Paddington. I got to know his estranged son. Our relationship had its moments, but I couldn't have done without him.

"Tell us about the work you're doing in Bathurst."

Well, I turned 65 and I thought, well, I've got about 25 years left, what am I going to do with them? **I saw that people coming out of prison needed a place. From the presbytery dining room, I could see the people living on the porch of the church and I thought: "Why don't I find a place where they can put their feet under my table and not the porch of the church?"**

At mass on Sundays, we could hear the people in the kitchen downstairs, the dogs barking, the laughter and occasional fights, the wonderful volunteers, and the smell of a BBQ, but it was still them and us. I wanted it to be us. I decided to find a house and invite people coming out of prison, or anyone God sent, to come and live with me. We have two houses, one for men and one for women, and a unit for men. Marie Bourke, a Franciscan, she worked in Africa for over twenty years, runs the house for women. For any Victorians here, her brother is Francis Bourke, a Richmond legend. I try to get under Marie's aura!



You ask what I am doing in Bathurst. I'll tell you a story.

There's a fellow who lives with me, he grew up with a violent, sadistic father.

"Why have you got crooked fingers?" I asked him. He told me his father would hold his hand on a table and smash his fist on his hand. His father broke his jaw four times. He used to get his head in one hand and smash it against a wall. I've got heavy wooden doors in the house

that are split because he has smashed his own head on the door. His father used to sit him in the middle of the room and say: "Find the word maggot in the dictionary and fill out 4 foolscap pages with the words: 'I'm a maggot.' I mean it's unbelievable. The guy was so traumatized. **And he lived in this world of self-hatred and self-abuse. I didn't realize when you are traumatized you don't feel physical pain. You bash your head, cut yourself and you don't feel it.**

"Anyway, he used to play these games on the screen all night, he couldn't stop and was not able to get up in the morning. It got to the point where I felt I couldn't cope. **There's a part of the Our Father that says, 'give us this day our daily bread', and I just thought 'Lord, just give me bread for today. I can't do this. I just need bread for today.'**

When he said to me "I can't stop" I said: "What about trying to pray." About two weeks later, he came to me. "Look, I put my head on the ground as a penitent. (I don't know where he got the word penitent from). I didn't know what to say. I didn't have any words. I didn't know if there was anyone there. And I certainly didn't think I could ask for anything. My father's voice was in my head saying, 'this is all fuckin bullshit. You're a fuckin idiot.'

We were sitting on the verandah. He was so vulnerable sharing that experience, so sincere. **And he allowed me to place my hand on his arm, skin on skin. I don't think he'd ever really felt tenderness. I realized that for the first time he was emerging from a bottomless, enclosed, cave of self-hatred – I am a maggot, I fuck up, I am a failure – into the possibility there was someone out there that he could talk with, who was good.** We reel-off the words of the Our Father. He was experiencing for the first time that there is someone else there. That's prayer, the awareness that I am not enclosed in my own hell, there's someone else there who is good. It was such a beautiful moment.

Two weeks later, I was in another room and for whatever reason, I heard him explode. I came in and he was in a corner crouched like an animal. I got down on my haunches and held his arms. He trusted me to touch him. I put my head against his head and said "**Lord, take this evil from him. Take this evil from him Lord and put love there.**" **The change was immediate. He quietened; his body relaxed.**



And he's been a different person since. His eyes are different. They engage, they are not tormented. **Jesus sent his disciples out. And gave them authority over the unclean spirits, and every kind of disease and sickness. We can do that with one another just by being kind to one another. This was an extreme moment, but all the ways we listen to**

one another, forgive one another, we are driving out the evil spirit. We have that authority to bring about a different kind of culture.

He now likes to hug me. Before I left for tonight, he asked me for a hug. He's a human being. After that experience, we read the story of the Gerasene demoniac. We recognized that demoniac.

"The most important thing in the world is to be where God wants me to be. God wants me to be where I am now. I know that. It's his work. It's not mine, it's not ours. It's his Spirit at work in our lives and it's a daily thing".

I was very lonely when I came to St. Canice's. I remember the first person I met in the parish. I didn't know anyone. I'd been working in Melbourne. She was this swarthy Greek woman, a week's growth on her face, wearing a dog collar around her neck and with a whistle to scare people off. And wearing a schoolgirl's dress, big hairy legs. And a lot of lipstick and makeup. Any case, she was sitting there on the steps, **and I sat next to her. And she really listened to me. She understood I was lonely. She let me share with her how I was.**

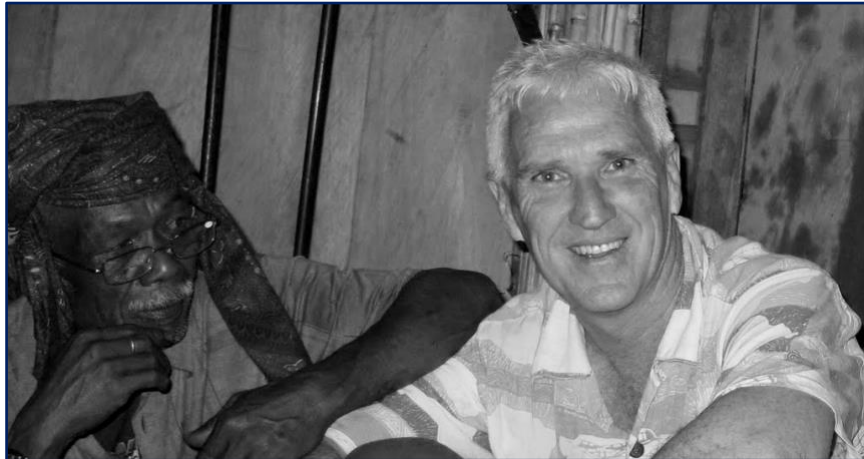
We are still in regular touch with one another. She lives over in Maroubra. One Easter, she became a Catholic. She was so nervous about it all that she settled herself beforehand with a bong and floated through the whole ceremony. She says to me on the phone. 'I love your guts'. And I know she does, and I love her. If I start to look around now, I can see that love. What a gift it is to be in a parish.

Any other questions?

One of the features of your time here, apart from your compassion, was that you used to say mass barefooted, and you could recite the gospel by heart.

"Well, I don't often say mass publicly now, but the reason I used to learn the gospels by heart was when **I started off, I didn't feel I had anything to say. And then I realized, well look the main thing is the Word.** It doesn't matter what I have to say, the Word is powerful, and I thought I'll learn it. **It was so easy to learn it, it became immersed inside me during the week. I came to realize that in those gospels, those stories and passages, there's not a superfluous word. Every word contributes to the whole. I proclaimed the Word and after that it didn't matter what I said, so long as it was brief!**

The bare feet. I'm told Bart Cummings never came back to Canice's after he saw I had bare feet! I have a very good friend **Chris Laming. He came back from India and was saying mass at his old school, St Aloysius College, and he processed in with bare feet. I just wept when I saw him.** I thought it was so beautiful and vulnerable. And if I had my way, we'd all walk into the church barefoot. But then I thought if everyone left their shoes outside, they would be pinched. For me though, it just felt right.



Are you connected to Railaco parish still?

“Michael (Musgrave) and I often talk about Railaco and it's wonderful that the work has continued with Michael's leadership. I keep in touch through Michael. I've always

felt that a parish is not about us. If we make those who are poor, those on the outside, the centre of the parish, the parish will look after itself. So, I focused on the street people and the kitchen, the street retreats and the house for refugees and the parish of Railaco in East Timor.

We had a parish council and a finance committee, but our focus was on doing things. I remember Robert Barnes, a much-loved parishioner and lawyer, returning keys after cleaning the toilets in the kitchen yard, sweat pouring off his face, happy to help and have the chance to talk with street people who came to use the toilet while he was cleaning it.

Barbara Campbell then invited all gathered to mention the names of those not with us, who have died. Many names were called out, remembered and the gathering concluded. Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace, Amen”.

13th March 2022 Elizabeth Bay

Fr Steve came to St Canice's in 1993 and was parish priest from 1998 to 2011.

