

Troublesome Priest

From Australia Peter Bore tells the story of Father Peter Kennedy, sacked by the Vatican from St Mary's Catholic Church Brisbane.

There are two St Mary's churches in Inner Brisbane suburbs on the Southside of the river. St Mary's Anglican Church at Kangaroo Point is one of the oldest churches in the region having been built first as a wooden structure in the 1840s and subsequently rebuilt in stone in the 1870s. (White settlement of Brisbane began in 1828. The aboriginal inhabitants and their sacred sites have been here for tens of thousands of years.) St Mary's Anglican Church is small but thriving by today's standards, in part because it has a renowned organist and is home to a similarly renowned choral ensemble.

St Mary's Catholic Church, South Brisbane, is a large concrete, though not unattractive, building opened in 1893. Until two years ago it had a congregation of almost a thousand. Father Peter Kennedy who led the church for the last 30 years has nurtured a community which showed concern for the homeless, for the role of women and for homosexuals, indeed anyone who might be described as marginalised, dispossessed or treated unjustly by society. Perhaps predictably, he eventually came into conflict with the Vatican and much publicity ensued. Peter's status as a Catholic priest was revoked and he had to leave St Mary's Church. Most of his congregation left with him and established the St Mary's Community in Exile, (in the language of today, SMX.)

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In 2009 Sea of Faith in Australia wrote expressing its support for Peter's attempts to make the church inclusive, for encouraging people to think for themselves and question dogma from any source. We included, as a token, a copy of David Boulton's book *Who On Earth was Jesus?* David was due to speak at our conference in late 2009 and was subsequently invited by St Mary's to give the homily at their services the weekend he arrived in Brisbane. David and Anthea were staying with us and thus Judith and I attended St Mary's that weekend.

That was our introduction to St Mary's and since

then we have been occasional attenders, never knowing quite where or how we fit into the community but always feeling welcomed and accepted.

Peter Kennedy was the son of a drinking, gambling and sometimes violent Irish Catholic who nevertheless was committed to providing the best education he could for his son by sending him to St Joseph's College, a Catholic boarding school in Brisbane. He went on to the seminary and after completing his time there he was assigned to the Navy, where he spent seven years as a chaplain. On leaving the Navy he used his accumulated pay to spend a year in the United States at a Jesuit centre for spiritual reflection. In 1980 he was appointed prison chaplain for South East Queensland. At that time the principal jail was close to the parish of South Brisbane, then a not very salubrious inner city suburb, and which had recently lost its parish priest.

Peter became the administrator of the Church of St Mary, South Brisbane. It had about 50 regular attenders and was no longer considered to be a parish. The church was also close to Musgrave Park, a significant site for the local Jagara aboriginals. In 1986 Peter was joined by Terry Fitzpatrick. Terry, some 20 years younger than Peter, had had some difficulties with the Catholic Church when as a young priest he became a father. The Church was prepared to retain his services and move him to a remote parish but required him to forgo any contact with his son Jordan. Terry declined, insisting that he must accept responsibility for his son, and has thus, for some 20 years, been on 'leave of absence' from his diocese. Terry and Jordan's mother have shared the task of bringing up Jordan.

Terry has a background in nursing and social work and he enthusiastically joined Peter in his task of making the St Mary's community into one which is open to all comers (their mantra is 'no one is turned away'). The running of St Mary's Church was democratised and there has always been a strong emphasis on social justice. Women, priests who had left the Church to marry, and homosexuals were welcomed and invited to participate at Masses. As the social justice aspects expanded, a partner organisation was established, the Micah Projects. This is now a highly regarded social service, sometimes given the task of dealing with extremely difficult problems like finding accommodation for people on their release after long periods of imprisonment for paedophilia. It

is still supported in part by St Mary's but is now able to attract substantial government funding.

The Archbishop of Brisbane, John Bathersby, who had been a long time associate of Peter, chose to not make a fuss about the St Mary's unorthodoxy but it seems that within the Catholic Church there are groups for whom rigid doctrinal orthodoxy is supreme. Members of these groups complained first to the Archbishop and then to Rome. There were a number of exchanges between the Archbishop and Peter; some, according to Peter, were amicable, others less so. Peter was eventually told that he was guilty of failing to wear the correct garments at Mass and of using unauthorised words in the baptismal service (creator, redeemer and sustainer instead of father, son and holy ghost). Peter does not wear formal Catholic attire because several of his congregation are unsettled by the sight of people in vestments, a result of having been abused by Catholic priests when they were children. The Archbishop never visited St Mary's. No formal enquiry was set up. Peter was dismissed as the administrator of St Mary's without any process, which would have been a credible imitation of natural justice.

The congregation at St Mary's was by now about 800 and Micah Projects used the parish house as its offices. Fortunately, Micah Projects had been established as an entity separate from the Catholic Church and thus its work could continue but it had to find alternative office accommodation. The St Mary's community has continued to have their services in premises loaned to them each weekend by the Trades and Labour Council (TLC). The majority of the congregation moved with Peter and Terry to the TLC building with only about 50 continuing to attend St Mary's Catholic church. The St Mary's Community in Exile is now a not-for-profit business depending for its modest operating expenses on donations and the weekly collection. It is looking for alternative premises, which would be available on weekdays as well as weekends. To be realistic, its future is uncertain, particularly when one remembers that Peter is now in his seventies. However the community continues to talk about social justice and this theme is prominent in the liturgy it uses at its services. Here is a fragment from the St Mary's Eucharistic Liturgy (L= Leader, R = Response):

- L: What do we bring to Christ's table?
R: We bring bread, made by many people's work, from an unjust world where some have plenty and most go hungry At this table all are fed and no one is turned away.
- L: What do we bring to Christ's table?
R: We bring wine, made by many people's work, from an unjust world where some have leisure and most struggle to survive. At this table, all share the cup of pain and celebration and no one is denied. These



Peter Kennedy with parishioners

gifts shall be for us the body and blood of Christ, our witness against hunger, our cry against injustice, and our hope for a world where God is fully known and every child is fed.

At the start of every service, St Mary's acknowledges the traditional aboriginal owners of the land and it continues to support the aboriginal community. It still makes contributions to Micah Projects. It is gradually expanding its interactions with other progressive groups such as the Progressive Spirituality Network and Sea of Faith in Australia. The Community is theologically diverse but the overarching philosophy of acceptance of the other means that this causes few problems. Terry and Peter are comfortable with the view that religion is a human creation but one whose mythology has provided models, guidelines and food for thought that has been useful to humanity.

Peter and Terry are, without doubt, gentle, thoughtful and sincere individuals who have quietly gone about the business of living out a Christian ethos to an extent which few could match. Their activities have meant a great deal to the dispossessed and marginalised and it could not be credibly claimed that they present a threat to anyone. They are self-effacing people, who are always willing to let others step into the limelight. Peter describes his separation from the Catholic Church not as an expulsion but as a liberation, though it is evident in this quiet, somewhat shy, man that his freedom carries with it much incidental sadness. Whilst some would describe him as a martyr, he would be more at home with the description 'He's just a naughty boy.'

It is a sad comment on the hierarchy of the Catholic Church that even such a civilised and gentle expression of 'liberation theology' cannot be tolerated and the practical living out of the Christian ethos is regarded as less important than liturgical words and vestments. I wonder what Jesus would make of an organisation which seems to regard the control of others as its highest priority. Dostoyevsky's ruthless

Grand Inquisitor did have the honesty to acknowledge his real motives and showed, at the end, a glimmer of humility and compassion. I find it hard to find in the grand inquisitors of today (the Prefects of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) any remnant of that humility and compassion.

Sea of Faith has always had problems in deciding what it can support in any practical way. The St Mary's Community is an example of something which we can unequivocally support. Our decision to offer support to what is still in large part a Christian Church did not generate any opposition from our members, which of course include a few fundamentalist atheists from the Dawkins mould.

When Don Cupitt was in Australia he was asked: 'Is Sea of Faith a church?' His reply was along the lines of: 'No, it is not, but – who knows? – sometime in the future it may become a church.' If Sea of Faith was to become a church, St Mary's is the kind of church it might do well to emulate.

Retired surgeon and academic Peter Bore began life in Yorkshire, now lives in Australia and is the current chair of SoFiA (Sea of Faith in Australia).

The St Mary's Community in Exile and Micah Projects have websites with contact details.

[www. http://stmaryssouthbrisbane.com/](http://stmaryssouthbrisbane.com/)

[www. http://www.micahprojects.org.au/](http://www.micahprojects.org.au/)

Stateless

The brown-faced boy in the garden
is shooting down cherry-blossoms;
like tiny perfections of marble
they fall to the ground and shatter.

The bare-foot boy in the garden
has walked here on a path of splinters,
the bones and homes of his parents;
a splinter has lodged in his heart.

The bare-faced boy in the garden
is too young to remember before
when olive and almond trees
flowered and then bore fruit.

Kathleen McPhilemy

Kathleen McPhilemy teaches English in Oxford FE College. Her latest poetry collection is *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis 2004).

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