

HOMILY
FATHER HENRY BYRNE
ST VINCENT'S ARANDA
THURSDAY, 24 MARCH 2022

Bega, where Fr Henry was raised, to Canberra, where we gather this morning, is not far. However, if we consider the life of Henry we cover a lot of territory. The journey began and was nourished in Henry's family. I add my personal condolences and prayerful support to Henry's surviving family members and extended family, and I acknowledge those predeceased and with us in the Communion of Saints.

Like the prophet Jeremiah in our First Reading, Henry was seduced by the Lord's call from a young age. Born at the outset of the Great Depression, the blow of losing his sister Gwendoline when she was only months old and as a young boy his father, also known as Henry, was countered by the loving support of his mother Bertha and siblings Kevin, Laura and Marie and the nurturing school and parish environment in Bega. So it was that after time at St Pat's Goulburn, Henry entered St Columba's Springwood at the end of the Second World War before proceeding to St Patrick's Manly from where he was ordained in 1953. Through his priestly ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care Henry called others to new life in Christ in various parishes and more especially as Parish Priest in Jindabyne, Our Lady of Fatima, North Goulburn and St Bernard's, Batemans Bay from where he retired in 2003. Countless graced encounters in both the liturgy and pastoral outreach are recorded in parishioners' fond memories and in the heart of God.

Henry was called to priestly ministry in a time of unforeseen, vibrant and tremendous change in both the Church and wider society. The prosperous Church of the 1950's existentially operated as the 'perfect society' and this was antithetical to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and politically divisive. The pace of change in the ensuing years has brought us to what Pope Francis describes as a change of era. Old certainties are no more, Christendom has gradually died in the West at least, and under the movement of the Holy Spirit the Church is called to be a 'sign and instrument' or servant of the reign of God. The emergence of these challenges saw Henry's inquisitive nature and

commitment to matters current in Church and society try new ways for the sake of the Gospel. Henry was a 'doer'. He would have resonated with the recent claim of Pope Francis that one thwarts the movement of the Holy Spirit by narcissism, discouragement and pessimism. Henry was always optimistic and enthusiastic.

In the early 1980s, when Henry was Parish Priest of North Goulburn, I was Assistant Priest to Fr Laurie Blake at the old Goulburn Cathedral. Last week we gathered for Laurie's Funeral Mass. I was impressed by Henry's initiating a Goulburn-wide programme of outreach to 'inactive Catholics' involving a letter-box drop to every home and sessions in both parish churches. As Pope Francis and Archbishop Christopher insist, evangelization is by way of invitation not imposition. As always, Henry spoke with feeling and conviction as he sought to evoke a commitment to the truth and beauty of our Catholic faith. The family of Fr Tom Thornton, who will lead us in the Prayers of Commendation and Farewell at the end of Mass, were well known parishioners in North Goulburn.

Years later while Henry was Parish Priest of Batemans Bay, and where Fr Tom was later Parish Priest, I was responsible for the ongoing education of clergy. Henry hosted a bbq for a gathering of archdiocesan clergy the night before an in-service on liturgy. This initiative was but a reflection of Henry's commitment to his brother priests, as was his regular attendance at our May Clergy Assembly or in-service, where he was not backward in making comment, and our November Retreat. He also served on the Council of Priests and had a number of Archdiocesan appointments.

A more prosaic example of Henry's appetite for evangelization was related to me recently. Quite some years ago, a parishioner, whose two boys Henry had baptized invited him to a round of golf. Henry agreed on the condition that the fellow would come to Sunday Mass beforehand. He did. Afterwards Henry commended him and said he noticed him putting money on the collection plate. The fellow said he did but instead of the dollar note he had intended to part with he reduced it to fifty cents after hearing Henry's homily! One can but try.

While at North Goulburn Henry deepened his abiding relationship with the Josephite Sisters. I presume to here mention Srs Kerrie Cusack, Mary Murphy, Nolene Quinnane and Colleen Howe amongst many others. Similarly, Henry treasured his relationships with the Sisters at Jamberoo Abbey, especially Sr Antonia whom he assisted in discerning her vocation while a boarder at North Goulburn. Henry was an Oblate of the Benedictines of Jamberoo.

Henry had a simple lifestyle. He was an avid reader. He enjoyed a hit of golf and when time permitted, he enjoyed watching football, tennis or cricket on TV. A good whiskey or wine was appreciated. Indeed, Henry prided himself on the bargain purchase of half a dozen bottles of Grange Hermitage before the price went north big time. For many years he smoked, a lot. I never saw Henry without a beard, or a goatee as at the back of our Mass booklet. Henry spoke of pride in the longevity he got from his successive Toyotas. Oh, what a feeling!

Henry would lose himself in classical music and was a regular patron of concerts. Perhaps, as Pope Francis has suggested, Henry experienced the interplay of the seven musical notes and their sharps and flats as offering some insight into the potential unity in diversity of the Church under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Such an understanding underpinned our two Archdiocesan Synods of 1989 and 2004 with which Henry was very much involved. The same aspirations underpin Australia's Plenary Council and the international Synod on 'Synodality'.

Responsive to the movement of the Spirit, Henry had a year away from priestly ministry in 1969. With Lent approaching, it is apt to suggest that this was probably a desert experience initially. No doubt Henry felt conflicted as had Jeremiah the reluctant prophet. Henry was reassured by the Good Shepherd's gentle call anew and he returned to ministry both wiser and more compassionate.

Henry was a life-long learner. His pursuit of eclectic ecclesial interests reflect again the thoughts of Pope Francis who has remarked: *"Tradition is not a museum, true religion is not a freezer, and doctrine is not static but grows and develops, like a tree that remains the same yet gets bigger and bears ever more fruit."* Henry's interests were enhanced by overseas sabbatical leave on no less than four occasions, the last being in 2012 at age 82 to prepare for his retirement. The fruits of these endeavours were evident in his pastoral ministry, especially in the Parish of Batemans Bay.

The Bay was a green fields project. In conjunction with the faithful and never apart from them, Henry oversaw the move of the parish plant out to Batehaven. There the beautiful St Bernard's Church and parish school were built, with the Josephite convent alongside and the Maranatha Aged Care Home up behind. Henry's later impetus saw to the development of the regional Carroll College at Broulee. Those buildings reflect the Good Shepherd's womb-to-tomb accompaniment. Henry's efforts in the Bay were civilly recognized in 2004 when he was awarded an Order of Australia medal.

Henry was a member of the renown F-Troop, a priest support group. Its strength was the variety of fellows, including Henry's cousin Fr Brian Maher whose funeral was celebrated in this church last year. F-Troop got away regularly for different activities, to relax, to pray and to share on whatever the topic of conversation. Apologies again Henry for organizing the F-troop bike ride around the Lake when you fell and broke your leg, prompting your retirement. Henry, no one is without shortcomings. We trust that God who is full of gentleness and compassion will understand and forgive you for your sharing with F-Troop an unstinting negativity about anything from the US of A, especially their politics! On the other hand, I share with you that my last conversation with Henry was about arranging to bring another F-Trooper, Fr Brian Ebert to visit him at Calvary Retirement Village where residents appreciated Henry offering Mass and reflecting on the Scriptures. Henry said he would very much enjoy a visit from Brian and would get back to me when feeling better. Hopefully, we will catch up at the heavenly banquet.

Early in his retirement, I asked Henry what he was up to. He told me that he was enjoying his music, praying the Divine Office more assiduously, reading the Fathers of the early Church and preparing to die. The last comment threw me as Henry was then in good health. On reflection, I understood him to mean that he was not so much doing as simply being with the One whose Spirit had enlivened his journey and with whom beyond death he hoped for fulness of life.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells us that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. However, the response of Thomas that they could not follow Jesus as they did not know where he was going is reflected in the contemporary saying '*You cannot be what you cannot see*'. As disciple and faithful priest, Henry showed us that by relationship with the Lord in community we can reflect to others something of the Way, the Truth and the Life of Jesus. Henry said 'yes' to the dancing Trinity within us all. Or as Thomas Keating would have it, "*The spiritual journey does not require going anywhere because God is already with us and in us*". For any wrong steps we ask the mercy of our loving God, mindful that God loved Henry for no other reason than God loved Henry. Henry allowed that graced awareness to transform his life and we commend him with founded confidence. I am sure Henry would salute Ronan Keating when he sings:

Promise me that you will give faith a fighting chance;

And when you get the chance to sit it out or dance,

- *I hope you dance.*

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him. May his soul and all the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen