

HOMILY

MONSIGNOR KEVIN BARRY-COTTER

14 June 1934 – 28 February 2021

ST CHRISTOPHER'S CATHEDRAL, FORREST ACT

Wednesday, 10 March 2021

In our First Reading the prophet Isaiah claims that the Lord will prepare a banquet for us on a mountain. The ancients would have been shocked. Hospitality was only shared with one's social equals and God was other, as the mountain symbolized. Yet Isaiah insists that God desires to share hospitality with us, all of us. Monsignor Kevin Barry-Cotter desired to share God's hospitality.

Kevin first encountered the hospitality of God in his family. As I understand it, the double-barrel 'Barry-Cotter' surname was created when Kevin's grandfather desired to enhance the family favoured first name 'Barry', hence 'Barry (hyphen) Cotter' thereafter.

The oldest of five children of Keith and Mary (known as 'May'), Kevin was born as Australia was coming out of the Great Depression. He was formed in the love and faith that sees us gather. For his first ten years, Kevin was an only child, before being joined in quick succession by four siblings, Chris, Cathy, Philip and Moira. I presume to extend each of you and your extended families my prayerful condolences.

After primary schooling at St Columba's, North Leichardt, in the area where Kevin had the support of extended family – and I here note that he was a Tigers supporter - Kevin completed his schooling with the Christian Brothers at Lewisham. In January 1950 Kevin's dad set a world water-speed record on Kogarah Bay in his small boat. Kevin filmed the triumph and it is on display at Sydney's Maritime Museum. Soon after Kevin's family moved to Gilmore near Tumut where his father started a lime quarry. The family would later move to Mona Vale in Sydney.

Hardened by manual labour in the quarry, Kev fitted in well when called up for National Service in 1953. Kev's sister Moira recently reflected that perhaps away from family his thoughts about the possibility of being called to ministerial

priesthood coalesced. His committed Catholic mother and not religious father were surprised but supportive of his decision to enter St Columba's College, Springwood in 1954.

Kevin was sent to complete his studies at Propaganda Fidei College, Rome, being ordained to the priesthood in the presence of his proud parents on 21 December 1960. Kevin returned to Australia in 1964 having completed doctoral studies in canon law. In recent times Kevin's memorable time in Rome has been serialised on *Daily Voice*. His recall without reference to notes in this regard and of history more broadly has amazed not a few.

Kevin was in Rome with another esteemed priest of our archdiocese, Fr Hilton Roberts. A classmate, the recently deceased Bishop Geoff Robinson of Sydney had a good yarn with Kevin on the anniversary of their ordination in December. In Rome Kevin began an ongoing friendship with Wagga Wagga student and later Archbishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Francis Carroll. These men and others were imbued with the spirit and the potential of the Second Vatican Council for pastoral renewal and we all benefited. They were distinguished by their loyalty to the Church universal yet sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit in the local church. Both Frank and Kevin were foundation members of the Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand. They applied church law with pastoral sensitivity as did their younger friend and colleague Bishop Pat Power. Indeed, years later when resident in West Wyalong, Kevin would tongue-in-cheek remark that he was the law way out west!

Kevin's pastoral appointments and reflections are noted in our booklet. Many here today and many watching online will have their special memories. My reflections hopefully will evoke some of your own.

I met Kevin as an altar boy when he was appointed to St Christopher's in 1965. I did not know that Kevin had been heavily involved as a boy scout in Leichardt when after 6.30am Mass one cold morning, he asked if I would be interested in being a part of the founding group of the 2nd Manuka St Christopher's Scout Troop. I said ok and over the ensuing very formative years with a number of good mates, including my brother Mel, we had some great experiences under the leadership of Kevin. We had our Friday night meetings and we went on bush walks around Canberra and camped out, often on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River. A highlight was the 1967-1968 8th Australian Scout Jamboree at Jindalee, now a suburb of Brisbane. A good mate from those days later spoke of Kevin as '*a legend*'. And for us, he was. Recently in the

archdiocese committed Catholic Robert Falzon shared about the importance of fathers. For many Kevin was a father figure who helped navigate teenage years and so enter adulthood the better for the experience. How fortuitous then that we commend Kevin in the Year of St Joseph, the father-figure who spoke loudest by his actions.

Kevin introduced me to the rugged beauty of the Australian bush. He was ahead of the game with respect to the call of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* for an 'integral ecology'. As Pope Francis urges, Kevin lived out of an awareness of being created in the image and likeness of God, affording the same dignity to others and in being at one with the beauty of God's creation, attentive to the subtle movement of God's Spirit in and through it all. Then again the word 'religion' means to literally 're-ligament' or to reconnect; it all belongs.

Around a camp-fire or as circumstances suggested, Kevin would share about faith and life. One day a few of us scouts asked if we could go for a swim in the Murrumbidgee. Father Kevin replied, *"You can, but you may not"*. We eventually got it. With comments such as these and others about faith and the church and more so in his actions, Kevin lived the hospitality of God and you were drawn in. He embodied the comment of Pope Paul VI: the best teachers are witnesses. Kevin was a great witness. It was his witness that first caused me to consider the diocesan priesthood.

Kevin was long acknowledged as a very good mentor for seminarians. I thought of him back in January when our Sunday First Reading was about Eli helping the young Samuel to discern God's call (1Sam 3:3-10, 19). Kevin had the capacity to both support and challenge seminarians. Once Kevin asked whether I knew what was the hardest thing about being a priest. As a young twenty-something-year-old, I replied, *"I have a pretty good idea!"* He replied, *"No, it's not that. It's to be yourself and to be a good priest."* So very true. How appropriate then that during our annual Clergy Retreat last November Kevin was able to have a photo with clergy who had been assigned to him as seminarians and whom he had encouraged to be themselves. I was quietly moved when he also asked me to join the photo.

Kevin said he only ever aspired to be a simple country priest. However succeeding Archbishops appreciated the capacities and the wisdom of this humble servant of God and variously appointed him to significant archdiocesan positions: the Matrimonial Tribunal, Archbishop's Secretary, Chancellor, Dean of the Monaro and later of the West, member of the Council of Priests, the

Trustees, the Consultors and Vicar for Education. In 2007 he was honoured as a Prelate of Honour of His Holiness. He was rather chuffed at this honour though he wore it lightly.

The first ten years of Kevin's priestly ministry was Canberra-focused. His time as Administrator of the Cathedral Parish in the early '70s coincided with the tumult surrounding the national debate on abortion and the vibrant ministry of a recently ordained Fr Mick Burke. During this time, Kevin recalled attending a rather formal gathering where a lady inquired if he was a Jesuit, a Dominican or perhaps a Redemptorist? He replied, *"No, I am a priest of the Order of Ss. Peter and Paul."* The lady said that she had not heard of them. Kevin said, *"No, most people haven't. We do all the work!"*

After overseeing the extension of this then Pro Cathedral and its consecration as the Archdiocesan Cathedral on 5 February 1973, Kevin very much enjoyed being appointed to Michelago in 1974. He commuted into Canberra for Marriage Tribunal work in his Holden ute, a change from his earlier VWs and later Subarus, though the 'lastic sided black boots remained a constant. As a seminarian I spent a few days with Kevin at Michelago and he got me to paint his lounge room.

From Michelago Kevin continued down the Monaro Highway to take up his next appointment as Parish Priest of Cooma in 1979. Here Kevin began a formative and continuing influence on Tony Percy, our Vicar General. So too in Cooma, Kevin began a lasting friendship with Denis Alexander, who is present with his family today. My seminary classmate Chris Kirwin, who is no longer in ministry, was appointed to Cooma as Kevin's Assistant Priest. Kevin and Chris hosted our first class reunion in Cooma.

While in Cooma, Kevin purchased an on-site van at Tathra and he got away there regularly knowing the need for R&R. Committed to life-long learning, he valued the opportunity to attend the three months in-service for priests at the former St Peter's Centre, as well as undertaking a thirty days Spiritual Exercises Retreat with the Jesuits. Kevin was conscious of having a rounded life and ministry so that he might draw from the well of his experience in sharing the hospitality of God. That well was, as Kevin has noted, enriched by the married couple spirituality of Marriage Encounter, Alpha, small group discussions, and of course RCIA and the ubiquitous sacramental programmes. He was a thoughtful contributor at our May Clergy Assembly and a reflective presence on our November Clergy Retreat at St. Clement's, Galong. In retirement Kevin sought

to remain in touch. Weekly phone chats with Fr Warrick Tonkin, a fellow retiree and our MC today, would keep him up to speed with 'what was what'.

From Cooma Kevin took up residence in West Queanbeyan in 1988, working as Promoter of the 1989 Archdiocesan Synod, *'Coming Home in Christ'*. He was especially proud of his role with the Synod, the second in the Archdiocese and the first in Australia since the Second Vatican Council. On the organizing committee with Kevin, I saw first-hand his passion for the implementation of the vision of the Second Vatican Council in accordance with a discernment model dear to Frank Carroll that stressed *'the church of the baptised'*.

Kevin then had a most fruitful ministry as Vicar for Education. Archbishop Francis was especially grateful to Kevin, Peter Annett and Ray Storrier for their leading the response to the financial troubles that befell the Catholic Education Office in 1989. Geoff Joy and Philomena Billington have remained good friends from those days. Kevin so identified with his position as Vicar for Education that he qualified to teach classes in RE. The current Vicar has no intention to follow his commendable example.

In the hope perhaps of avoiding further engagement with ecclesial bureaucracy, with which at times Kevin could have considered differences, he accepted appointment in 1995 as Parish Priest of West Wyalong. His twenty years between there and then Cootamundra were perhaps the most stable of his priesthood. There as elsewhere he was vigilant in parish maintenance. He also had an eye for emerging needs of the parish and school in a considered but never extravagant manner. In Coota he had a very productive relationship with Sr Cathy Hodge, RSM reflective of his many encounters over the years with both male and female religious. Again, as in every parish, people of all ages and backgrounds loved his simple, sincere and self-effacing manner. He was always a man of the people. Whether in parish churches or in churches *'farther out'*, Kevin was welcome. He knew the impact of the seasons on animal husbandry and crop cycles. This sensitivity was also manifest in his beautiful relationships with his extended family who revered him as priest, brother, uncle and de-facto grandfather. He was keen to hear of their interests, and he could converse about Minecraft and Harry Potter.

Kevin loved a hearty meal with a glass or two of red and engaging conversation. These were times when his relationship with God founded in daily prayer, especially the Mass, was manifest in shared wisdom, good humour and affirmation. As I reflected recently, Kevin had both blood and holy water in his

veins. He was rightly concerned for those who appeared to have too much of one or the other!

Kevin was a gentleman, self-disciplined, punctual, a man of routine, early-riser and of simple habits and lifestyle. He enjoyed British comedies and dramas. He was insightful, thoughtful, shrewd and, as Archbishop Christopher noted at last week's Council of Priests meeting, revered in the Archdiocese to which he showed great loyalty. When Kevin was asked what he might change about the course of his life, he replied "*Nothing!*" Here was a man at peace with the world and the world with him. Like all of us, he was not perfect but he was never cowed.

Nonetheless, Kevin found pretentious people taxing. Whatever other shortcomings of Kevin there were, we have a founded confidence that our compassionate and merciful God will welcome him home.

On the front of today's booklet Kevin has drawn on Hebrews 5:1: '*Ordained for the people in the things that pertain to God*'. Of course, it all pertains to God whether it be on the sanctuary, in the kitchen, at the shops, in the paddock, in the office, in the classroom, wherever. In sharing the hospitality of God, Kevin invited folk to encounter Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life. Jesus did not spell out an ideology or KPI's or a grand Vision Statement. No, he made it personal, invitational. He sought relationship. Appreciating his call in baptism and living out the gift of priesthood, Kevin, like his Master, invited people to '*come and see*'.

I would ask your indulgence as I share a brief extract from a book entitled '*Fr Ted*' by Tony Hendra. It tells of the English author's successful but troubled life and his finding solace and direction through visits with Father Ted, a Benedictine monk of Quarr Abbey. After Father Ted's funeral, Hendra reflected, and I presume to appropriate his words to Kevin:

"To some he was a father, to some a mother. He always did what was appropriate and practical for the person he was with. There weren't two kinds of people in the world for Kevin, nor three, nor ten. Just people. He was a prophet of the possible. He soothed the damaged, nurtured the tortured, and reassured the imperfect" (270).

It was therefore with sadness but in sincere gratitude that parishioners farewelled Kevin when he retired to Adelong after some health issues in 2014. The young man from Gilmore via Tumut had come full circle. He was home. He

smiled at the role reversal of sorts as he submitted his letter of resignation to me, the then Archdiocesan Administrator and his former altar boy. He was to enjoy a productive retirement of over 6 years, again much loved by those around him, before dying peacefully in his humble residence as he had hoped. I am sure that the words of poet Dame Mary Gilmore would have found a resonance with Kevin at Adelong:

*I ask nor wealth, nor length of days,
Nor pride, nor power, nor worldly praise:
But just a little quiet place
Where a friend may come,
Laying his hand on the door
As though it were home.*

When you left his company, Kevin would often say, “Go gently my friend”. He said that to me as I departed after lunch with him the Thursday before he died. Today we presume to say “Go gently Kevin, our friend”. For 60 years as faithful shepherd, you fought the good fight. May you rest in peace, in the founded hope of being called to the heavenly banquet, which we now anticipate in the celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

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