

Becoming a priest - a part of the story

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In 1953 my mother Rose brought me to live at 10 Napier Street here in Fitzroy, where she rented a small room. Rose worked as a cleaner at Foy & Gibson woolen mills and at a second cleaning job in the evening. I attended Cambridge St Primary School in Collingwood. Rose was a lapsed Catholic, who had a falling out with the Catholic Church when she was ten - she asked too many questions. (Aquinas wept!) Rose had no time for the Church but had a sense of God, especially connected to her sense of justice. I remember my mother saying that I needed some religion, and this was shown in two ways. One was a small card set on the 'dresser', inscribed with the Ten Commandments, which I had to say each morning before I left for school. Rose had already left for work. The other was that she took me to St Mark's to attend Sunday School. Rose was willing to do this because this parish had been very good to her family during the Depression. So, Rose trusted St Mark's. It also turned out that the Vicar, the Rev Norman Hill, was someone she could take seriously. It is worth saying that the church building was wonderful for me to be in. I feel sure I was drawn to the spaciousness and beauty in contrast to the one room in which Rose and I lived.

One day, while still at primary school, I was walking home from school when I suddenly came to a halt, hearing myself speaking, above me; my 'grown up' voice, saying 'If there is no God there is no meaning and I will not have no meaning.' The strange experience lasted only for a moment. I felt very pleased and continued home. I have thought a lot about this 'word' and know that it had not been taught me in Sunday School nor did I hear it from the Vicar. I think of it as an insight mediated by the ordinary life of the church in the Spirit, engaging my own life, intimated, so I now see, in the 'no meaning' I would not accept. I was once assured this is a cognitive impossibility for a child my age. I knew that was incorrect.

I had a sporadic involvement with the parish during primary school because my mother's friends, mainly working wives of wharfies, all lived in Port Melbourne; often weekends were parties, especially with the 'Barrel' on a Sunday. A turning point came with my being invited (and trained) by the Vicar to read the lessons at Evensong (my first experience of supervision of ministry). Another was my being Baptised and Confirmed. By this stage I was attending Northcote High School with the aim of becoming a pilot in the air force. I had long been besotted with aeroplanes and flying, consuming books, comics, films, model planes. A detail: Rose was called up to meet with the headmaster at Northcote, in my year 9. The school was very worried

about me because I was "agin the government and showed definite communistic leanings." Rose was not worried!

I gradually came to attend Holy Communion, more or less weekly, and enjoyed being with other kids on a Sunday morning, especially my friend Ernie Lewin. One Sunday morning I was sitting in St Mark's attending to the Communion service, when I heard a voice close by to my right, saying, "why don't you become a priest?" I knew immediately whose voice it was and recall shuddering. I mentioned this to the Vicar, who listened to me carefully, and took me seriously, but made no big thing of it. This happened in my fourth year at High School, in 1959. I then found myself wrestling with the two possibilities - becoming a pilot in the airforce or becoming a priest. The wrestling went on until the end of 1960 when I felt resolved in myself that I wanted to be a priest. I then told Norman Hill that I wanted to go ahead with being a priest. We had not spoken of it during the preceding 18 months. I am deeply appreciative of this courteous pastoral care of me. He then set-in train the process of engaging the Diocese of Melbourne. I was interviewed and in due course Norman received a letter saying I was accepted as a Postulant and noting that "Stephen is so clean and so well spoken". At the time I took this as a compliment of someone from the slums. Rose was entirely supportive of what I wanted to do, not a pilot, but a priest. Her support of my vocational choices was a great gift to me. I completed year 12 and at the end of 1961 I was accepted by Melbourne University for a science degree, was accepted as an ordinand of the Diocese of Melbourne and given a place at Trinity College as a theological student under the direction of the Rev Dr Barry Marshall, all beginning in 1962.

I remained involved at Trinity from 1962 to 1970. This has shaped my life ever since. It was a scene I had never encountered or even imagined. People were wealthy far beyond what I could comprehend, and socially I was completely out of my depth. By comparison I was entirely at home in my continuing involvement at St Mark's and my involvement in the Melbourne University Regiment which I joined following my good experience in the Cadets at Northcote High. Here is what I see has remained with me from my time at Trinity, about being a priest. In those days theological students first completed a secular degree and then studied theology. They were all involved in a 'rule of life' required by Barry and centered on daily worship - Matins and Mass in the morning, Evensong and Compline in the evening. All this set within a sacramental universe, with theology engaging a secular milieu, then made palpable by living in the College and going to university. This is still deeply part of my being a Christian and a priest. A 'rule of life' still marks my daily life.

I recall Barry giving me the following advice in my first year. 'Bro always begin your theology with creation not the fall. Always remember that the incarnation is the

inner meaning of creation.' While I knew each of the words in this advice, I could not explain what it meant. Yet, I felt exhilaration, as if standing at the opening of a large space before me.

Barry offered a model of priesthood that was very attractive, for its spiritual depth and vitality, shown in his leading worship, especially the Eucharist, his preaching with its many, often witty connections between the Gospel and daily life, his appropriation of the mystical tradition of the Church, which for him included Teilhard De Chardin, his many references to the Anglican social teaching, and his spiritual counsel in one-to-one conversations. I was very attracted to the singing that was so much part of the daily office and on saints' days part of the Eucharist. I still continue to sing Evensong. It awakened a sensibility to intimations of transcendence. All this provoked but for me did not answer the question of how to understand priesthood. A standard work of the time, *Ministerial Priesthood* by R. C. Moberly, helped but more was needed, though I didn't know what exactly.

In those days Barry taught that the rise of pentecostal movements showed up and was partly due to the lack of attention to the Holy Spirit in the mainstream churches. I linked this to his teaching on Christian initiation and found myself thinking of the Spirit leading the whole church, of all the people of the church being inspired and gifted by the Holy Spirit and of how important it was to listen to the people for insight into what the Spirit was saying to the church. This has remained with me ever since as an idea and as a critical practice. Among the many charisms of the Spirit, so-called 'top down' leadership is but one, so that the life and mission of the community is ordered radically in favour of all the 'bottom up' processes initiated by the Spirit. Against premature closure or 'anything goes', the liberating and testing word here is, 'by their fruits you will know them.' It was not applied by the then senior lay canon of the Cathedral who told me I would never be allowed to hold another demonstration on the steps of the Cathedral. I had organized a lunch time protest for land rights with Aboriginal speakers under the (admittedly cryptic) banner, 'Arnhem Land is not far from Naboth's Vineyard.' I was young.

Everyone was surprised, including me, about my being offered a place for a Masters in the Physics School and then a PhD focused on cosmic rays. I loved this research. The thesis was submitted in 1970 just before I left for the US to formally study theology, which I had been doing informally for nine years. The research unsurprisingly included the experience of insight, but this awakened my philosophical interests, explorations and writing. It was only much later that I met up with the writings of Bernard Lonergan, especially his magisterial work, *Insight*.

Among other things the PhD had meant delaying my formal study of theology. There was also a question of where to study theology. India, the US, and the UK

were contenders. I was encouraged to think of making a submission to compete for the prize of a Sir George Turner Fellowship offered by Trinity College. It required two essays, one from a university discipline and another on theology. As time went by many people were applying and I was encouraged not to expect to win the prize. As it turned out I did. The essay on my physics research was very favourably assessed by Professor Hopper, as was the theological essay on authority, which was examined by Professor Norman Young. I was surprised; indeed, everyone was surprised, especially Barry, but alas I wasn't able to explore that with him.

It was 1969 and I had been married to Penny for a year and we had a beautiful son Mark. During that year I was accepted for the following year at the Episcopal Theological School (ETS) in Boston. The diocesan bishops thought it best I be ordained before going to the US to study. I had been an ordinand for years and was known to informally study theology and winning the Turner Fellowship helped. I could be employed and so help cover costs and relieve them of such a burden. I was ordained Deacon in 1969 and was curate for Fr Max Hazel in the parish of West Coburg, a priest I loved for his warm, wisdom and earthy spirituality. It was a turbulent time, with our second child Anna born just before I was ordained priest on St James' Day at St Paul's Cathedral in 1970. I submitted my PhD, and we flew to the US.

I soaked up my studies, especially New Testament and Systematic theology, along with Field Education and Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). When I thought about returning to Melbourne it was CPE that informed my thinking about what I might contribute to diocesan life. Archbishop Woods agreed with this direction. Here was a way of integrating the practice of ministry, significant personal growth, spirituality, and theological reflection. My experience of ministry expanded to include a black parish in Roxbury, which had a higher murder rate than New York, to the Massachusetts General Hospital, to the parish of Rutland Vermont and to a very conservative parish in a wealthy part of Boston. CPE was also criticized by students who had lived through the student riots across the US in 1969. Such criticism appeared as graffiti in the male toilets at ETS: 'If Bonhoeffer had done CPE, he would have dealt with his feelings about Hitler rather than acting them out.' I took that criticism to heart.

On returning from the US, in 1973, I became priest-in-charge at St Martin's Deepdene, half time, and the other half of my time was engaging in CPE at the Austin Hospital under the supervision of the Rev Roy Bradley. The aim was for me to be accredited as a supervisor to set up a CPE programme for parish and community-based ministries. Holding the two together required very clear negotiations with the

parish and with Roy. I relished both my parish and hospital ministries, with the added energizing provided by CPE. Both contributed to my being a priest, still in process then, as it is today.

Roy taught that pastoral care is 'the art of helping people stay open to the mystery of God through the power of redemptive relationships.' Learning what redemptive relationships involve was through my engaging with patients and staff in the Spinal, Renal and Intensive Care Units, as well as the other Wards of the Austin, and being on call. Learning how such relationships helped people and helped people be open to the mystery of God called for sustained pastoral and theological reflection. The learning also called me to be open to the mystery of my own person, and the shaking of the mystifications about myself that had become habitual. I thought of this ministry as absolutely necessary but still not sufficient for defining my work as a priest. In that context, the 'more' was brought home to me especially from my work on the Renal Unit and the weekly gathering of all those from different disciplines for a review of patients. It was a Dr Dawborn who led the unit, and I was struck by the way he could draw people out as to the situation of each patient and how the unit was or was not operating to work well for all patients and staff. I could see that he too was enacting and promoting redemptive relationships. I recognised this corporate leadership as resonating with my own experience in the parish.

There were a lot of obvious crossovers from my hospital ministry to the parish. I was particularly struck by listening to what people were saying about the parish. One was 'our marriages have gone to sleep and so has the parish'. Another, repeated by many people was, 'this is a half time little church'. Listening and drawing people out I discovered that this came from 1954 when St Martin's was founded by Rev Bill Malloy from St Hilary's Kew, who said to the people of Deepdene, that they were 'a half time little church and would always be a half time little church'. I eventually realized this was the birth myth of this congregation. With the energies of young families, they had built a small flourishing church, which had slowly declined as their children became teenagers in the 60s. By its taken for granted repetition, I could tell that the parish was deeply attached to its birth myth. My task as a priest was to help them let go of this old identity. I realized that this would only be possible if they trusted me as a priest and if there was a credible and attractive alternative coming into view.

There is much that could be said here, but just a couple of points. Trust was built by me telling and retelling them their story as I heard more of it and refined the telling until most heads were nodding. I also noticed that the interior of the

church was rather uncared for compared to their homes which also revealed that many of them were into arts and crafts and at least one oil painter. So the church building became decorated with their work, for example a new ceramic font, needle work, and paintings on the walls. The Sunday School was down to two children, so I closed it and began an after school programme on Tuesdays, which attracted forty children and the ready help of women parishioners to make it work. Today I think their energies would be absorbed by ensuring a two-income family. Many other initiatives came to light, partly first aired in quiet days where the morning was about listening for what God is saying to me about my life and the afternoon, each listening for what God is saying to us about parish life.

I was accredited as a training supervisor at the end of 1975 and began INSTEP in 1976 based at St Martin's. I should like to acknowledge the support of Bishop James Grant and Archdeacon Philip Newman in commending this initiative to Archbishop Frank Woods. INSTEP was a small not-for-profit business for training people in ministry in parishes and in the community. It paid for half the costs of the parish having me as their priest.

In the midst of all these things my mother asked me a question as a priest, not as her son. It was the only time it happened, and it happened in this way. Rose's sister, Pearl, died when her bed caught fire after she fell asleep while smoking in bed. It was my task to bring Rose the news. We sat in her Housing Commission Flat in Port Melbourne as Rose poured out the story of her family, which I had never heard before. It was several hours of listening. It included shocking stories of her father, who went to France in WWI when he was fifteen and came back a violent man. His physical abuse of Myrtle, Rose's mother led to her death. Rose was also on the receiving end of his physical violence, especially on one occasion when she stood up to him for his treatment of Pearl. I sat and listened, saying almost nothing to her emotional speaking, until she unexpectedly said to me, 'I want to know, will Pearl be alright?' I knew immediately Rose was asking about Pearl's fate. I spoke without thinking, as if I had authority, and said, 'Mother you have told me a terrible dark story with only a couple of pin-points of light. I believe the truth is in the light and so I can tell you Pearl will be alright. Then occurred a heart wrenching thing. My mother's face caved inward revealing a dreadful, deep pain long hidden, now become visible, with Rose weeping. Eventually, I put the kettle on.

In 1983 an expanding INSTEP moved to St Oswald's Glen Iris, thanks to the welcome of Fr Ian Brown. I also became part time Director of Theological Field Education for the Diocese of Melbourne overseeing the supervised ministry formation

of diocesan ordinands at both Ridley College and Trinity College. Later this included curates and training in supervision for vicars with curates. I also introduced Field Committees, of lay people, who would meet monthly with their student or a curate to support and give feedback. All told, this was a large endeavour involving several hundred people. I would like to acknowledge the work of the Mrs Marion Hale, my secretary and the collegial relationship with the Rev Dr Ian Williams and Rev Dr Doug Fullerton, two leaders responsible for the supervised ministry formation programme in the Uniting Church.

That all was not well, came to light in two ways. One was that Penny and I were divorced in 1987. I will not say more except that it greatly grieved us both and galled me. My father had left Rose and me when I was a baby to find work in Tasmania but never returned. It also mocked my being a priest. One CPE student at INSTEP, on learning I was divorced, said, in a group setting, 'so you are a failed priest.' I publicly accepted this judgement and thought it one of several failures, not least a non-redemptive relationship with my ex-wife. I said to the student he may wish not to continue with me as his supervisor. He stayed.

The other indication was when Archbishop Penman asked me to give a theological justification for CPE. I was happy to do so because this is what I had provided in a paper to a meeting of the Board of Ministry and Training for the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia. The Board met in Melbourne in 1985, chaired by Archbishop Peter Carnley. The audience included the theologically stern men from the Diocese of Sydney. It went down very well with all the Board, and I think the reason was that it was an 'old fashioned' form of argument, starting from stated theological presuppositions concerning the ministry of God in and for the world, and proceeding to a rigorous theological account of ministry, the connection between ministry and self-supervision, and the practice of developing self-supervision through the supervision received from others. CPE and Field Education being distinguishable forms of the latter. By contrast, Archbishop Penman would not accept this as an answer to his request for a theological justification of CPE. Oddly, it took considerable effort from others at the meeting to bring him to accept my answer.

Nevertheless, in 1987 Archbishop Penman asked me to take up a five-year full-time position as the Director of Supervised Theological Field Education (STFE). I delayed responding until I consulted widely and prayed because, among other things, it would mean me giving up INSTEP. Towards the end of 1987 I agree to make this move at the start of 1988. I discovered three months later that there was no money

for the position. This was an outcome of the conflict between the archbishop and a group of archdeacons within the diocese and supported by the gratuitous comment on my Field Education programme as a second-rate copy of a programme from Boston. There was no official review. Doug Fullerton and I knew we had gone well past Boston long before. I was offered 'any parish' available. I declined because, I would not trust the one who had misled me. Archbishop Penman then advised me to find a job. We agreed to meet after he returned from the 1988 Lambeth Conference.

I felt extremely angry and extremely vulnerable, feeling publicly shamed. I was also deeply disoriented spiritually as I had spent a good six months attempting to discern where God was leading me. Clearly something had gone wrong. Rose's comment to me was, 'We are used to this in the union movement, but the Church!' I was advised to take the archbishop to court, which I refused to do. I prayed and consulted others and was invited to meet with the leaders of company offering business consultancy services. The interview had a couple of ironies. The interview was twice halted while I was asked to explain (again) just how I came to be in this position. The interviewers shook their heads. Secondly, it turned out that my experience in supervision in CPE and Field Education was very relevant as was my running a small not for profit business. A week later I was offered a part time position. Naturally, I was extremely thankful and pleased. A couple of days later it dawned on me, in a powerful figure-ground reversal, that I could now go back to university part-time to pursue many questions coming from my PhD and theological studies. For some time, I had seen that people were producing a synthesis of cosmology, life-sciences and spirituality and I felt that was what was needed in the church and I wanted to produce my own version. I felt filled with light, an ecstatic state, seeing a path ahead where God was leading me. Nevertheless, I still felt deeply bruised and vulnerable. I talked with David Richardson about the discernment process that had turned out so badly. He asked me if my discernment had included the question, 'what do I want to do?' I acknowledged that it had not. It was a blind spot for me in this process, though ironically, very familiar in my supervision of people in ministry. I had put aside my interest in the synthesis mentioned above as an impossible dream. I also realized that I had been wanting and needing the recognition that the full-time diocesan position would offer. I was closed off to what was then brutally opened for me, which I took to be God leading me. It is worth noting that the INSTEP had the symbol of the Burning Bush, beneath which was the sentence '*God is not a Gentleman*'.

I met with Archbishop Penman after his return from Lambeth in 1988 and again for the last time in 1989 after I had wound up my involvement in Field

Education. I explained about my consultancy job, my enrolment at university, and my new direction of ministry guided by the aim of holding together cosmology, life sciences and spirituality. David said he would like to be identified with that ministry. He also added, 'I am like you. I don't need the institution (he gestured to the office at Bishop's Court) to show me my ministry.' He prayed for me as always, but this time waited. So, I prayed for David. We shook hands and I left. A few days later David declined and not long after died.

I wound up my diocesan position, went to work as a business consultant part time, and enrolled part time at the University of Melbourne in History and Philosophy of Science. Nicely, that choice came from a discussion with my son Mark about what course to enroll in. Mark said 'Daddy, it seems like HPS is what would be best for you.' I sought to be licensed with a Permission to Officiate (PTO) as associate priest to Fr Roger Shar at St Luke's North Fitzroy and St Andrew's Clifton Hill. I wanted to be involved on Sundays and at other times to the extent that my involvement in consultancy and university allowed. I then discovered that the diocesan bishops were unwilling to provide me with a PTO. It was something about me not really doing priestly work. I had to make a case in writing for being licensed as a priest.

In brief, my case was that a priest is a steward of the mysteries of God and therefore of the household of God. The 'mysteries of God' refers to the divine economy for the whole creation, long hidden in God the creator, lately revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, on the way to fulfilling God's eternal purpose to finally unite in Christ all things in heaven and earth. In the ancient world the steward of a household would order the household under the direction of the master of the household to the benefit of all the members of the household. The Spirit empowered church as the household of God has a crucial role to play in the working out of the divine economy. Human beings establish surrogate economies whether globally or in a multitude of smaller contexts, in which they largely find their meaning, identity and worth. There are many resonances and many more dissonances between the divine and human economies. The work of a priest is to communicate the divine economy to all, within and without the church. A priest is to ensure a Christian community is well ordered for the benefit of all its members, especially enabling all the gifts and fruits of the Spirit to be manifest. The sacraments of Baptism, of the Eucharist, of Reconciliation, are where the divine economy is celebrated in the Spirit, a taste of the powers of the age to come. As a steward of the divine economy, it is the priest's role to lead this celebration. Pastoral care is also part of the priest's work in helping people, in weakness or in strength, in sickness or in health, to find their identity, meaning and worth from the divine economy rather than surrogate

human economies. It was my claim that all this is entirely aligned with scripture and tradition, especially the ordinal, and that I would be embracing all this in assisting in the parish, in engaging with experience of many lay people in their workplaces, and with my university work, looking for ways to hold together cosmology, life sciences and spirituality. Thankfully, I was licensed as assistant to Fr Roger Shar.

One of the many benefits of the consultancy work with a colleague, Mr Peter Lawry, was that I had saved enough money to start buying a house in Fitzroy and so in 1993 Cecilia Francis and I were married. In 1995, after many years of substantial lay ministry in Chaplaincy and CPE, Cecilia was ordained priest in the Church of God. I completed an honours degree in HPS and in 1995 I was offered a scholarship for a PhD in Philosophy of Science at the University of Melbourne. I took this as a 'sign' and finished up my consultancy work. In 1996 my beloved daughter Anna died.

I completed the PhD in 2005. The lengthy process was due to my changing supervisors and when the scholarship wound up, the need to work part time at the university and in the diocese. I became a part time assistant to Bishop Andrew Curnow in the Northern Region of Melbourne. Within agreed time limits I would do whatever the bishop asked me to do - in 'all things lawful and honest' as the ordinal requires. I was asked to undertake transitional locum ministry with a number of small parishes, in the north of Melbourne, that were without a priest and were likely to be closed. These were months long appointments. I was to be involved on Sundays and monthly parish council meetings. Some parishes were pitifully vulnerable, and others were easily able to close ranks against the diocese. An understandable attitude was, 'leave us alone until we die off and then you can do what you like with the buildings.' People had been hanging in while declining and seeing no hope, with so many matters to be faced. Trust between priest and people was again the basic issue, to be addressed by compassion and rigour. This was true whether a parish chose to close or seek renewal with a new direction. The basic problem was that this choice had been avoided more than once in the life of these parishes. Just two examples. In one parish people felt in such a bad way they would only get a priest that no one else wanted and that wouldn't help them. I twice arranged for priest colleagues to meet with the incumbency committee of the parish as if interviewing for the position of parish priest. Each time, after the meeting, the people received excellent feedback about the parish and their self-presentation, gently given but with no-holds barred. They eventually engaged in the real thing much better prepared and with a much better outcome. In another parish the church wardens were in control and resented my involvement regarding the future. They limited a parish consultation to one hour to consider two questions I proposed. What kind of church do you want to be? What

kind of priest are you seeking? Framed in terms of seeking the leading of the Spirit and a high degree of unanimity, I recorded their answers on (of course) butchers' paper and then tested the agreement in the room. The people said they wanted 75% agreement. So, we simply counted hands for each of their recorded answers, weeding out what didn't meet that benchmark. The people worked brilliantly! It all took place in the hour! Then, as I was gathering the butcher's paper, I heard muttering! It was the church wardens and some friends complaining loudly about the result. The expectations of the people turned out to be higher than those of the church wardens, who said the priest would have to be the Archangel Gabriell! So began a parish conversation about the way forward and who was leading us.

I continued as Regional Officer until 2004 when the position of all regional officers was wound up with the arrival of Archbishop Peter Watson. I then began to be part of the Social Responsibilities Committee of the Synod, at the invitation of its chair, Bishop Philip Huggins. In 2000, I was elected by the Synod to be a member of the Chapter of the Cathedral and began to be involved as an associate priest there with Dean David Richardson and later, Dean Mark Burton, Acting Dean Ray Cleary and Dean Andreas Loewe. This included honorary pastoral leadership in the 8am congregation, preaching and presiding, leading study groups, and the pastoral care of those involved. It also involved leading Science Week at The Cathedral which has a Q/A for senior secondary school students before an eminent panel of scientists, philosophers, and theologians to engage in a science-faith conversation on the theme for the National Science Week. We have also initiated Science Week in Parishes, preparing modules for parishes to use in the national Science Week.

In 2003, as a canon of the Cathedral, I was also the convener of a group of Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims in opposing the war in Iraq. We raised a banner (funded by the Hotham Mission) with huge letters, 'Peace Not War' covering a large part of the wall of the Cathedral facing Swanston Street. Dean David Richardson was asked about it at a public meeting. Before David could answer, a voice down the back shouted out, 'If the Church can't advocate for peace, who can?' Informed by this experience, I later suggested that the Cathedral carry a banner with words about welcoming refugees. A group including Leigh MacKay worked on the wording and the Brotherhood of St Laurence funded the banner, 'Let's Fully Welcome Refugees'.

For the centenary of the end of the first world war, with the support of Dean Andreas, and with Pax Christi Australia, I convened a group of Christians who have prepared and led a service at 11am on ANZAC Day in the Cathedral. It is an ecumenical service of lament, repentance, and hope, which

has continued beyond the centenary. It offers another voice about Australia's involvement in war, lamenting that the 'War to End all Wars' was not enough, nor any of the wars that followed, nor are the arsenals of nuclear arms enough to lead us to find a better way of living together. While acknowledging the sacrifice of combatants and non-combatants alike, we repent of this horror and waste. We hear the stories of those who said no to war and the stories of the forgotten wars fought by Australia's First Nations for their land and way of life. We invite the preachers to speak of what all this means for the different narratives by which to understand our nation and of what gives us hope to be peace makers.

The ten years to complete the PhD was also due to working with two atheist lecturers in HPS, Dr Neil Thomason, and Dr Keith Hutchison, to design a subject, *God and the Natural Sciences*, that would promote an intelligent public conversation about science and religion. With the support of Professor Rod Holmes, the subject was first offered in 2001 and from 2012 continued with my atheist colleague Dr Kristian Camilleri to 2020 when I stopped lecturing. The subject will continue to be offered in 2022 and beyond with Dr Camilleri and the Rev Dr Chris Mulherin, the executive director of ISCAST. The subject is open to students across the university and about 40% are atheists, 20% agnostics and 40% religious - mainly Christian, with some Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists.

One of the things I have learned (yet again) about being a priest from these twenty years of lecturing is to take seriously the setting in which we live. Among other descriptions, Charles Taylor describes it as the 'immanent age' - the age in which people envisage a good life and get on and live it without any reference to anything transcendent. This is true for a vast number of people. If my faith is correct then God is hidden; present, but incognito. My task is to see how this immanent age can be unstitched to disclose the hidden God. This would be to help people recognize the intimations of God in daily life. I proceed by choosing 'sites' in ordinary experience to attempt this 'unstitching' as a form of public theology that is intelligible, plausible, and hopefully on the way to being persuasive.

I have pursued this unstitching at several challenging sites: human inquiry in commonsense and science; the value of human beings affirmed or denied especially in the history of the care of people with dementia, the response to human violence, the quest for well-being; and the laws of physics. I would like to see the number and diversity of unstitched sites expand, especially human musicality, so as to help people recognize with heart and mind that we presently live in but not of the immanent frame. I have also worked on the problem of natural evil, (the tsunamis, genetic

disorders and the vast suffering and death in the evolution of life), which for many people shows the actual universe contradicts what they expect of a world supposedly created by the all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God. I derive that expectation from this idea of God and show how it positively relates to the actual world.

I have entirely enjoyed working with my atheist colleagues and with all the students. I marvel at students coming up to me in public, even at a supermarket checkout, saying they had done GNS, and how much it meant to them. Bishop Philip Huggins was speaking to people he was about to Confirm at St Jude's Carlton. One young woman explained she was there because she had been converted by doing God and the Natural Sciences. I believe there was one other such person. For the most part students, especially atheist students, have positively said they have had to think seriously about God. I see that as positive, given how widely taken for granted is the dismissal of God. I conclude with two stories.

The first concerns a bright young man deeply committed to the physical sciences and to mathematics who was an atheist and not interested in theology and not open to anything beyond the maths and sciences which he pursued with vigour. All this was consistently displayed for a number of weeks until the following occasion.

My colleague Kristian and I were saying to students, "The question 'why is there anything at all?' is not a question that the sciences can answer." The student commented, 'you mean science hasn't yet got an answer.' I commended him for this point because that would be what's called a 'gaps argument'. At the point where there is a gap in our scientific knowledge many people pop God into the gap as a 'stop gap' answer. Of course, as scientific knowledge expands the gap closes and there is no need to refer to that stop-gap God anymore. Newton did this when he said that only by God intervening to stabilise the planets orbiting the sun could the solar system remain stable. At the end of the 18c Pierre Laplace using the well-known laws of physics showed mathematically how the universe was a stable system.

We repeated our point to the student. The question 'why is there anything at all?' is not a question that the sciences can answer. The reason is that scientific answers all assume the existence of whatever it is that does the explaining. But *if* we are asking why there is anything at all, a scientific answer won't help because it assumes the existence of things, yet we are asking why anything exists. We could see that this caught his attention. He repeated it several times. Not because it is a hard thought but because he never had the thought before. (And in all his years up to second year at university no one had made this clear, because the prevailing idea was

that science will eventually answer all questions.) You could see from his nodding and smiling that he grasped both the question and if there was an answer, he would not have to give up any of his science and maths to pursue it wherever it might lead. So here was this student standing before a door that had opened in his understanding of the world.

The second story concerns an atheist student who said to me, 'Looking around the world, both the natural world and the human world, and remembering that people say this world was created by a perfectly good God, I think it would have to be a very strange goodness.' I commended the student for allowing this possibility even though he did not embrace it. My friend and colleague Kristian said, 'If it is too strange, we might not want to call it 'good'.' More questions follow. Firstly, what is it, compared to which, the claimed goodness of God would be so strange? Suppose an answer is identified. Is the claimed goodness of God found to be a strange *goodness*, or is it so strange we would not want to call it good? If the latter, on what basis? I take up these questions at the start and the conclusion of a book, *On God, beginning with the problem of natural evil*, which I hope to have published.

I count my being a priest to include the graced task of opening a connection to God incognito, to transcendence hidden in plain sight, both by the power of redemptive relationships and by the unstitching of presuppositions and narratives that render the connection invisible; and to show the goodness of the created universe by virtue of that strange goodness fundamentally revealed in the crucified God.