

Review Article

*Ted Kennedy: Priest of Redfern*¹

John Honner

THIS SIMPLE BUT WELL-INFORMED BIOGRAPHY, whether consciously or unconsciously, tells a great deal more than the story of an enigmatic man who spent thirty years of his life in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern, doing the best he could as parish priest among the displaced Aboriginal people who gathered there from near and far. The title is the key to the book: it is not about a priest, or the priest, but about "priest". It tells a story about the fragility of clericalism and church authority, a story about the impact of dispossession, a story about Catholic hopes and griefs after the Second Vatican Council, a story about finding the place of the Church in the modern world, and it tells a story about theology as mystical action. Edmund Campion concludes his book by declaring his hope that his book might contribute to a "discussion of the meaning of Ted Kennedy" (p. 201). This review is written in response to that invitation.

Ted Kennedy's ministry at St Vincent's Church in Redfern has quite properly become the stuff of legend. He went there at the age of 40 in 1971 with two other like-minded priests "to challenge Catholic parish structures that had been in place for centuries" (p. 7). Their focus may have been much more on developing a new model of priesthood than on discovering and responding to the needs of the marginalised local Aboriginal community, but they certainly wanted to get rid of an earlier clerical culture and live in a spirit of hospitality and openness. Be careful what you pray for. Their first visitor was an Aboriginal woman, asking for food and a bed.

Soon enough the presbytery and the schoolyard and the church hall and the church were opened up to the homeless and helpless. The Mercy Convent and School would not long after become a base for the

1. Edmund Campion, *Ted Kennedy: Priest of Redfern* (Melbourne: David Lovell, 2009). ISBN: 9781863551298. Pp. 201. Rrp. AUD\$24.95.

Aboriginal Medical Service. Ted later wrote, "I decided very strongly that I had to open my home to the homeless and that I'd have to fight for social justice" (p. 170). But this would be no commune of peace and love. Dispossession can lead to anger, and anger can lead to destruction. Many of those who sought shelter were drunk. At times some were violent. Property was damaged and the place was run down. His main ministry seemed to be the rite of funerals: "Hundreds of them are now dead and I have buried them all" (p. 161). Anybody who was in Redfern in the 1970s and who was not frightened could not have been there for very long – but there were many friends, and there was great hope. Ted stayed on, though sometimes forced to the sanctuary of the church sacristy, and often needing to go away for a while to his bush retreat at Burrawang.

So Out of Accord...

Not surprisingly, given that the biographer is a priest and the subject of the biography is a priest, the precarious position of a priest in the institutions of the Catholic Church runs through this book as a constant theme. Thus the first sentence in the first chapter reads: "The three priests sat round the table, brimming with hope" (p. 7). So also, the final chapter notes that there were more than seventy priests, three bishops and one cardinal present at Ted's requiem: "*Ted was one of us...and we were proud of him*" (p. 189, my emphasis). Subsequent chapters tell the story of Ted's seminary days, his induction into priestly ministry, the significance of his appointment to the university chaplaincy from 1960 to 1966, Ted's keen interest in liturgy and art, and the divisions in the Church caused by Vatican II. Ted also got caught up in the political activism of the late 1960s, though perhaps more through his friends than through his own immediate interests.

A life that begins as a Boys Own adventure – being inveigled by "a chieftain of the Sydney Irish clergy" into a solemn promise to break every rule in the seminary (p. 16) – ends with an environmental activist's testimonial that "Ted was not a saint but a good bloke who did his best" (p. 201). The transition was a steady one. In the wake of Vatican II and in particular after the extraordinary public spat between Bishop Muldoon and Mother Gorman,² Ted found himself more at

2. Those unacquainted with this conflict about authority and doctrine, among other things, could consult John Carmody's essay in Chris McGillion (ed.), *A Long Way from Rome: Why the Australian Catholic Church is in Crisis* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003) 95-96, which is available at http://books.google.com.au/books?id=VicUjINT-tOC&pg=PA95&lpg=PA95&dq=muldoon+gorman&source=bl&ots=9S8pP83gRN&sig=V15ArOygWUR6fU0XwCW8ZxA5ozk&hl=en&ei=KWzqStXPFpjO6gPrs9TuCw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CAoO6AEwAO#v=onepage&q=muldoon%20gorman&f=false

home with the young lay people of the university's Newman Society than with the clergy. As he put it in a letter to Cardinal Gilroy in 1969, he felt "so out of accord with the stated policies and the unstated but heavy expectations for the style of life of Sydney priests" (p. 13). He wanted to develop a liturgical centre for "the artists and the intellectuals and countless other people in this city who, to the last person, feel alienated from the ethos of this Archdiocese" (p. 70).

In this biography there are many references to the supportive actions of some bishops and the concerns of other bishops. There are stories of episcopal support and of episcopal caution. Letters to a succession of cardinal archbishops of Sydney reveal Ted's continuing respect for, as well as his frequent frustration with, their authority and their Church. Ted would not have been an easy man to deal with. But he stayed on.

Campion is in a privileged position to talk about the influences on Ted's development as a priest. As a student of theology, Ted was wary of "Manly scholasticism" (p. 22) and he gained more from talking to his fellow seminarians about the books that they had been reading rather than from reading the books for himself. The inspiring models of priesthood in Ted's seminary years were the French chaplains to the Young Christian Workers movement, the worker-priests and their Cardinal Suhard, both "a career bishop" and "a *listening* bishop" (p. 21, author's emphasis). Campion notes that Georges Michonneau's *Revolution in a City Parish* was published in English just as Ted began his studies. Vatican II may have been ten years away, but the theology that shaped the Council and a new role for priests was already being disseminated.

Many years later, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his coming to Redfern, Ted made a point of naming four groups of people who were excluded from the institutional Church: the poor – especially the Kooris; women – especially religious sisters; homosexual men and women – whose baptism wasn't seen to take; and, last of all, "the clerical and religious dropouts...who had the imagination to suggest ways of coping with the coming storm..." (p. 172). His Church, as we shall see, had become the Church of the Poor.

The closing chapter of the book is about Ted's funeral, a social event and Requiem Mass that lasted for three hours, celebrated not in the Cathedral but, at Ted's request, in Redfern. Not in the parish church, but in a marquee in the Block, the heartland of the Koori community. And yet on the penultimate page of this biography, as much as Ted might have tried to transcend the culture and pre-occupations of a clerical church, it is noted that "The whole requiem had taken longer than the pope's funeral a few weeks earlier" (p. 200).

After Ted's fifty years of priesthood, of trying to shape a new ministry, of trying to share the gospel with the poor, of trying to let

some fresh air into ecclesiastical structures, it is sobering to reflect that his funeral is seen as an ecclesiastical event rather than also as the civil event that Ted perhaps had imagined. But *Campion* is probably justified in doing this, because Ted did see himself primarily as a priest, for all its difficulties, right to the end – as he put it, he was “a sample of an endangered species: an Australian catholic priest” (p. 158).

The Greatest Theologian he had Ever Known

An important theme in the book is the acknowledgement of Ted’s many collaborators. These include his early involvement in the Living Parish project and the auspicing of the now establishment McAuley-Connolly hymns, his sometimes irritable acceptance of the extraordinary contributions of religious women like Ignatius Jenkins, Maureen Flood, and Nora McManus, and his recruitment of lay Catholic professionals – many of them being friends from his days at the university chaplaincy – to assist in the Aboriginal Medical Service and Aboriginal Legal Service established in Redfern.

By far the most important of Ted’s collaborators, however, was Shirley Smith, known to one and all as Mum Shirl. Her picture hangs in the Church alongside Ted’s, a testament to her extraordinary contribution and their work together (there was so much protest when a new administration in the parish later removed her picture, that it was soon restored to its original place). Mum Shirl was a Wiradjuri woman born on the Erambie mission at Cowra, epileptic, almost illiterate, once denied communion when she approached the altar rails, “too much of a Catholic to consider divorcing her husband”, and a caring “Mum” to over 6,000 Aboriginal people, particularly to prisoners, to the hungry and homeless, and to the sick. She organised a vegetable run for children, she helped set up the Legal Service and the Medical Service, and she taught Ted and his white colleagues the importance of listening. She had been away from the Church for a few years, but one day in a prison chapel she realised she “had come home after being away a long, long time” (p. 93). She was devoted to St Martin de Porres and carried a small statue of the saint wherever she went. She would show the statue to young Aboriginal men in prison – “a black man like you...you pray to him and he’ll look after you”. Having kissed the statue so many times, the black paint on the saint’s face had been washed away, revealing a pink complexion. The paradox amused her. She was used to suffering. She was at home with mystery.

Ted called Mum Shirl “the greatest theologian he had ever known”³ and said that “like a child she had welcomed the Gospel whole, not

3. I was struck by the resonance of this phrase with John L’Heureux’s description of “the true theologian” at the Jesuit theologate at Woodstock during the tumultuous years

spitting out the bits that were unsavoury or uncomfortable, as whites did" (p. 95).

Ted was as much interested in religious poetry and local church history as in theology as such. At one point, for example, he was engaged in writing an account of the various efforts of Catholic leaders in the early years of settlement in Sydney to seek reconciliation with displaced Aboriginal peoples. At other times he would quote from Bruce Dawe or James K. Baxter. He also had a strong appreciation of Cardinal Newman's incisive theology. But, where most theologians spent their time on words – whether reading, writing or speaking – Ted gave himself more to theology as action. If his tribute to Mum Shirl is anything to go by, poetic action and inspired action most animated him.

What is theology? What is it meant to do? What makes for true theology? Bernard Lonergan, for one, insisted that theology must bear fruit (*Method in Theology*, p. 355). Theology, he argued, "mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of religion in that matrix" (*Method in Theology*, p. xi). This is what Mum Shirl did. Of course, according to Lonergan, theology should properly go through all the earlier functional specialities of research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines and systematics. But in the end, the action is what counts.

In the philosophy of science there has long been an argument between those who think that science is best described according to some foundational theoretical principle (like falsificationism) and those who think that science is best described by describing what scientists do. It seems to me that Ted Kennedy's regard for Mum Shirl as a theologian was based on what she did: her attention to the heart of the gospel and her ability to turn that vision into apostolic action – proclaiming good news, setting prisoners free, welcoming the stranger, inspired by love. She also did this as a person for whom the love of Jesus was profoundly present and all-important – in other words, as a mystic.

In one of his final essays, on "The Present Situation of Catholic Theology", Karl Rahner observed in 1979, "All things taken into consideration I really do feel that Catholic theology today by and large does not rate a higher mark than Grade C." He then went on to observe:

Theology must serve as a science of proclamation of the gospel and must serve the people of our time. It must resolutely and open-mindedly face the mentality of modern men and women.... The

of Vatican II. Both phrases describe someone who, in the midst of chaos and uncertainty, is able to see clearly and live with integrity and conviction. See John L'Heureux, *Picnic in Babylon: A Jesuit Priest's Journal, 1963-66* (New York: MacMillan, 1967).

proclamation of the Church, including high official statements from Rome, all too often has the tone of a decree from on high which scarcely conceals an inner insecurity.... This proclamation takes place all too often in a language which...speaks only to the devout faithful...but does not dare to offer the holy mysteries of Christianity to this secular world.⁴

Campion's history of the work of Ted Kennedy and Mum Shirl can be read as giving an account of a theology that actually did "offer the holy mysteries of Christianity to this secular world". In the end, Ted did offer something for "the artists and the intellectuals and countless other people in this city who, to the last person, feel alienated from the ethos of this Archdiocese". It was not a liturgical centre, however, so much as a community of faith and action. He may have failed in bringing more people to attend Sunday Mass (though he did have considerable effect on that score), but he did succeed in sharing the joys and hopes and griefs and anxieties of the people of his place and time. Mum Shirl helped him, and sometimes drove him, to do that.

Success and Failure: Legacies of Vatican II

Campion notes the significance of the Second Vatican Council during Ted's years as a chaplain at Sydney University, but the extent of the Council's influence on Ted's later work is not specifically discussed. Campion remarks of Ted that "All his life he went on reading serious books... (p. 158), and he notes that "As the Vatican II seminarians achieved ordination, they continued their quest for a better church." (p. 51). But Ted had been ordained in 1953, a decade before the Council, and was aware of the efforts being made to train seminarians in the pre-Vatican II model of Sydney's Irish clergy: formed by "the anti-Modernist oath that had strait-jacketed seminary teachers and produced party-line preachers who bored congregations every Sunday" (p. 156).

I suspect that, with Mum Shirl's help, Ted transcended the middle-class divisions between so-called restorationists and so-called liberals that remain today as an unintended legacy of Vatican II. Instead, he had got caught up working in what Aloysius Pieris (and John Paul II and many others) have identified as the core of the Church, "the Church of the Poor".

While it is both risky and often inaccurate to propose oppositional distinctions about the Church, it is certainly arguable that Vatican II left Catholics with two quite different ecclesiologies. First, there is the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the

⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Present Situation of Catholic Theology", *Theological Investigations* 21 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 75, 76-7.

Church. Secondly, there is the ecclesiology of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. These ecclesiologies appear to many, in Thomas Kuhn's terms, to be incommensurate paradigms: transformation will only finally come when one party dies away. One paradigm is about the "traditional" Church, a Church with the authority of revelation shining its light into the darkness of the world. The other is the "new" Church which embraces the world and acknowledges that the Spirit moves outside as well as inside the Church. One is taken to be a more hierarchical priestly Church, the other is taken to be a more democratic lay Church. One is more concerned with authority and worship, the other with reading the signs of the times and social justice. What counts as success in one church is good order and attendance at Mass. What counts as success in the other church is dialogue with the world and the opening up of the Church to the world, especially to the poor.

For the record, let me say that I do not entirely agree with these oppositional distinctions. It is impossible to describe the mysteries of salvation comprehensively without using complementary descriptions. These may appear mutually exclusive, but they are essential if we are to capture all sides of the truth. Nonetheless, these oppositional distinctions do persist in the churches, and they can be insidious.

For example, George Weigel, in an extraordinary commentary on Pope Benedict's latest encyclical, observes that "those with advanced degrees in Vaticanology could easily go through the text of *Caritas in Veritate*, highlighting those passages that are obviously Benedictine with a gold marker and those that reflect current Justice and Peace default positions with a red marker. The net result is, with respect, an encyclical that resembles a duck-billed platypus." (*National Review Online*, 7 July 2009). Ted, and the rest of us Australians, might well ask, "And what is wrong with a duck-billed platypus?"

WHO IS WORTHY?

In the year 2000, and coming to the end of his ministry, Ted Kennedy published a small book called *Who is Worthy: the Role of Conscience in Restoring Hope to the Church*. He had got to the age where he could speak without fear, where he could speak exactly as he thought. The book was occasioned by the refusal of Holy Communion to gay activists in Melbourne. Campion describes it as being in the great tradition of pamphleteering, "angry, hectoring, even some would say unfair" (p.157). Campion also points out of Ted, on the other hand, that "Nowhere does he make a display of his erudition but you notice how well-read he is.... The theologians he cites here are both demanding and magisterial" (p. 158). While he was entering into disputed questions concerning the validity of teachings about the primacy of

conscience and about the role of the laity in forming the collective conscience of the Church, Ted's essential point was not about ideas but about practice: that Holy Communion should not be seen as a parade of virtue, and that nothing should come between God's love and those who turn to it.

AFTERMATH

Campion does not venture into the difficult and distressing matter of the aftermath of Ted's work at Redfern. He notes Ted's gratitude to Cardinal Pell, expressed in his letter of resignation in 2002, for the Cardinal's support for the processes of reconciliation between Aboriginal and later Australians and his assurances that Ted's replacement would be someone acceptable to both Ted and the community (p. 184). Cardinal Pell has reported elsewhere that he did indeed appoint a priest that Ted had nominated. This appointment did not take, however, and in 2003 the parish was placed in the care of priests of the Spanish Neocatechuminal Way. In 2006, without the knowledge of the new parish priest, a group from the Redfern community found their way into a supposedly locked church and painted a dignified mural on one of its walls, spending six hours to complete a tree of hands and animals and to record key words of Pope John Paul II's message to the Aboriginal people of Australia given at Alice Springs twenty years before.

St Vincent's Church in Redfern is reported to be once again a model of decorum and it seems the doors are generally closed. Parish ownership is measured in the number of people who attend Mass, and not many Aboriginal faces were seen there at a recent count. The new priests have felt under siege, and at the same time many of the community feel excluded.

Though the Aboriginal community is stronger, and though Ted has left a great legacy of persevering service, it is almost as though his ministry had been wasted. There's an echo of the original ending to Mark's Gospel. A great life has come to an end, but we are afraid. What can we do? Judge Christopher Geraghty, formerly a priest and professor of liturgical studies in the seminary at Manly, led the prayers of the faithful at Ted's requiem: "Raise up an army of Kennedys in our midst, to bandage the wounded, to bury the dead, to share the fruits of your earth, protect the weak and welcome the stranger."

Ted Kennedy's discipleship may have exhibited contradictions, but it also had its integrity. He clearly never anticipated how dramatically his option to go to Redfern would turn out thirty years later. In the end, one "meaning of Ted Kennedy" may be not to doubt God's power to make the future different from the past.