

Homily at the Funeral Mass for Fr Paul V Mercovich

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Church of the Immaculate Conception, St Arnaud

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Paul has been a conundrum from time immemorial.

Recently I read these words in the forward of a book called *Paul, a Cultural Reading of his Letters*. The book was one that Paul Mercovich was reading – and his likeness to St Paul, the Apostle and Missionary wasn’t lost on me – a complicated apostle, servant of the risen Christ, man of passionate faith, stubborn and argumentative, minister to multiple Christian communities, reformer of the tradition, ardent traveller, man of deep conviction, a willingness to work long and hard and a man of prayer.

For us as Diocesan priests who claim St Paul as something of a model for ministry, it’s Paul’s driving conviction regarding the centrality of the resurrection that’s the inspiration for all pastoral ministry.

The other books alongside Paul’s armchair also reveal much about him and the diversity of his interests – one by Australian author Peter Carey, a book of poetry, books on politics including a biography of Malcom Fraser, Jerome Murphy O’Connor’s book on the Holy Land, Raymond Brown’s Community of the Beloved Disciple, the Sunday Lectionary, a Breviary and the latest edition of the Swag, the magazine of the National Council of Priests.

Knowing what to say in the homily at the funeral Mass of a brother priest is not always easy, especially today when I know that many of my brother priests here have known Paul for so many more years than I. One even knew him as his school teacher, others as the senior member their first year group of seminarians at Corpus Christi College, Werribee, in February 1962, another as his Parish Priest when Paul was his assistant priest, and others knew him in the days when they were fellow curates. Many others have known Paul as their neighbour – perhaps when he was in Birregurra, or Inglewood, a member of the team at the Cathedral, in his Mallee years at Ouyen or at Ballarat East. Some of us here were appointed to Ballarat East to be an assistant to Paul. One of our priests, wrote in his email with regret that he isn’t here today, and said that in his time as an assistant to Paul, that Merco, as many of us knew him, could infuriate you at times! But that he was a good bloke and that he held no grudges after a disagreement. Another former assistant priest emailed that he enjoyed Paul’s company and wisdom.

For the past 20 years or so, Paul has been the pastor of these two parishes of Charlton and St Arnaud. Paul is only the third Parish Priest of St Arnaud in the past 45 years, following Frank Harney and Paddy Bohan, and the people of Charlton, who have known Paul since he first became their PP in the mid 1980’s, also know from their history of the priests buried in their cemetery, that Frs Con Kelly and Charlie Mulcahy, who were there for 32 years and 18 years respectively, that Paul, like the other priests of this Diocese who went before him, loved being amongst you, he was at home with you, ministering as your priest just as St Paul wrote to the Philippians, you had place in his heart, and while we know how good he has been to you, you have also been exceptionally good to him. Like all good ministry, it’s been a mutually enriching relationship.

While both communities that were once such vibrant hubs of Catholicism, like many other places in our diocese where Paul ministered – Koroit, Camperdown, and Colac - our world is now a different place, and finding ourselves in a different context, we’re required to go about our way of being Church in different ways.

Paul knew this when he was a younger man in Ararat in the late 1950's and was part of the YCW, part of that great Cardigan movement. Even for those of you who were there then, it was a different era, and for those of us who weren't there, it's now another world and yet it profoundly influenced Paul's way of being a man of faith and a Diocesan priest of Ballarat. From those Ararat YCW days, Paul sought to See, Judge and Act – or as Vatican II would later come to say during Paul's seminary year's about the responsibility of all who seek to follow Christ, that we need to scrutinise the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel – that the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the People of God. So formative were those YCW years for Paul, that when speaking at the funeral Mass of Fr Leo McCormick, Paul said that he encouraged them, as the YCW in Ararat, *to become effectively engaged in making their working and leisure environments, places where respect and justice was more easily encountered. And that in the leader's gathering he encouraged the more active YCW members to inform themselves through knowledge and active involvement flowing from the Gospel discussion."*

The scrutinising of the signs of the time and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel led Paul to a lifelong engagement with the Word of God that we encounter in the Scriptures. Karl Barth said that we who preach should hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other! Paul loved to break open the Word of God, and in this aspect of ministry his vocations as priest and teacher came together. This love led him to the Holy Land and to a commitment to ongoing study, especially at the Chicago Theological Union where he returned time and again.

As a teacher he remained committed to education. His support of and commitment to Catholic education in this Diocese saw him chair our Diocesan Education Board for many years. But beyond our Diocese, Paul's sense of mission went to Bouganville where Sr Kathleen ministered and to Tanzania and Fr Albert, where Paul was supporting the education of seminarians for the priesthood and high school age orphaned teenagers. He believed in what Pope Francis calls the missionary impulse at the heart of the Church, capable of transforming everything.

But ultimately it was as St Paul writes, knowing Christ, that mattered for Paul, which outweighed everything else. It is to Paul's prayer contained in his letter to the Ephesians that we turn and pray for Paul:

May he strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, according to the riches of his glory, may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, may you be rooted in and founded on love. May you have the power to understand with all the holy ones what is the breadth, the length, the height and the depth and may you know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God.