



Blessed Sacrament mission with oases of peace in the heart of the city

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

By MICHAEL COSTIGAN

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THE ROAD TO EMMAUS:

A History of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation in Australia.

By Damien Cash

Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament in Australia, PO Box 229, Kew East, Vic 3102. Tel: (03) 9810 2440. In association with David Lovell Publishing. Hb,648pp; \$70.

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Mid-town churches surrounded by department stores, shopping centres, markets, high-rise office buildings and busy streets have a distinctive place in modern cities. They function as oases of peace, refuges from consumerism and powerhouses of prayer.

For many years that has been the role of St Francis', the famous old church in the heart of Melbourne, and of St Peter Julian's in Sydney's Haymarket district.

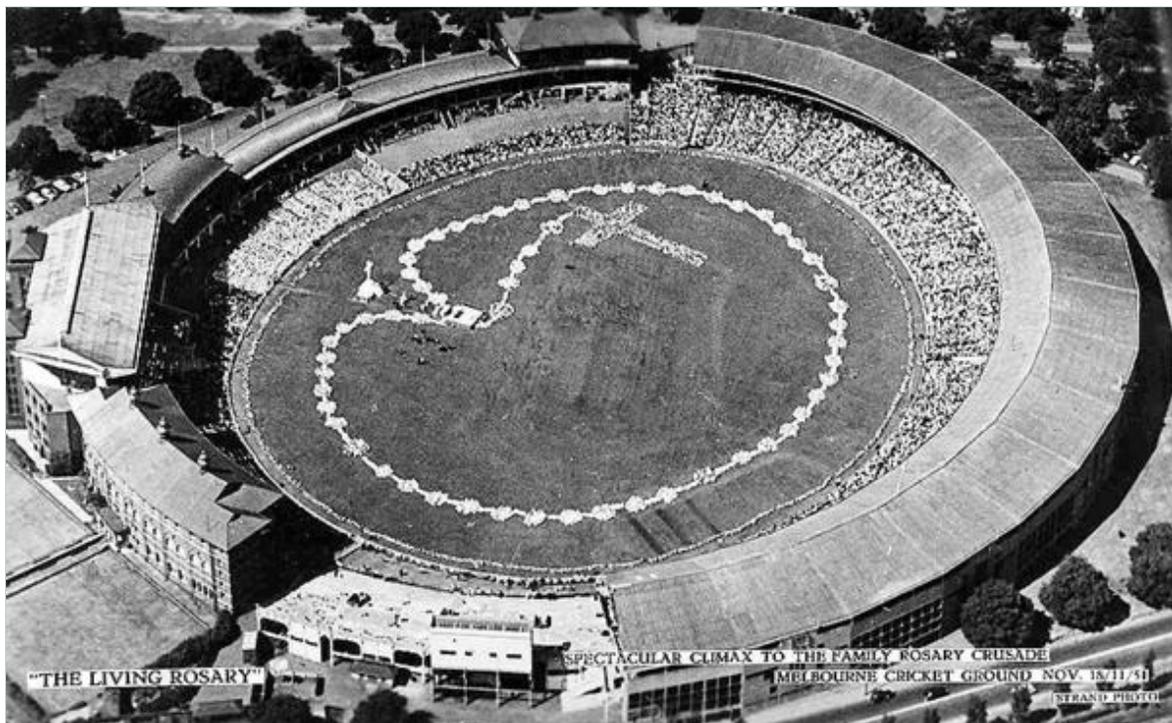
The priests and lay brothers of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation have been in charge of these two much loved churches through tumultuous times – for nearly 80 years in the case of St Francis' and in that of St Peter Julian's (originally called the Church of the Blessed Sacrament) for well over half a century.

Founded in mid-19th century France by a Marist priest, Peter Julian Eymard, to practise and promote the adoration of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, the congregation came to Australia in 1929, in the wake of the 1928 International Eucharistic Congress in Sydney and at the urging of the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Bartolomeo Cattaneo.

At that time, Archbishop Michael Kelly was unable to find a site for them to create a Eucharistic shrine in the heart of Sydney. Instead, they accepted Archbishop Daniel Mannix's eager invitation to take over Melbourne's oldest and most revered church, St Francis', on the corner of Elizabeth and Lonsdale Sts.

In *The Road to Emmaus*, historian Damien Cash, well known among other things for his research into the histories of BHP, the ANZ Bank and Australian Rules football, traces in great detail the Australian chapter of the congregation's story from All Saints Day 1929, when seven of its American and French-Canadian members arrived in Melbourne.

This book, a 648-page blockbuster, is one of the most comprehensive accounts ever published of the life and times of a religious institute in this country. Apart from the 483 pages of text, its 31-page bibliography, 32-page index and 105 pages of notes bear witness to the diligence with which the writer carried out the congregation's commission to record its history in Australia. The task was performed when declining vocations and other developments were raising questions about what lies ahead for its work here.



THE LIVING ROSARY: A human chain at the MCG on November 18, 1951. ABOVE: Inside St Peter Julian's Church in the Haymarket (formerly the Church of the Blessed Sacrament) in the 1960s.

The handsome volume is enhanced by the addition of 64 unnumbered pages displaying 211 excellent photographs, many in colour. They complement the text and tell their own story of remarkable achievements over eight decades.

It is a fascinating, even enthralling story. From the beginning, members of Eymard's organisation were regarded as contemplatives who would spend much time every day in silent adoration before the Eucharistic Host, exposed in a monstrance. At the same time, they were expected to undertake various ministries, including liturgical celebrations (above all, the Mass), hearing confessions, visiting the sick, producing publications and acting as chaplains to groups of different kinds.

The fact that many of them performed pastoral work in busy downtown churches in Australia meant that they became better known to urban Catholics than most other contemplative priests and religious. (An exception could be those Marist Fathers who have staffed Sydney's other often crowded and much older city church, St Patrick's on Church Hill.)

While their membership in Australia has been comparatively small – it exceeded 100 in the mid-1960s but has shrunk to less than half that number since then – they and their work became very well known to thousands of churchgoers in Melbourne and Sydney, and also in other centres like Toowoomba, Bunbury and Perth, where they ran Eucharistic shrines for a number of years in the second half of the 20th Century.

Sometimes their response to difficulties was to expand their activities in a way that could have appeared foolish to those of little faith. Thus, having been elevated to the rank of Province in 1955, they took on the missionary task of establishing foundations in Sri Lanka (Colombo) and India (Bombay) during the following decade. Both were to become flourishing enterprises and sources of new vocations.

The seven foreign pioneers and those who followed them, including a growing number of Australians, achieved great success in Melbourne, especially during the 30 to 40 years from the date of the seven founders' momentous arrival, which had coincided with the victory of a young horse named Phar Lap in the 1929 Victoria Derby.

In their care, St Francis' quickly became renowned as Australia's busiest church, with capacity congregations attending its many Masses and other services, and hundreds of believers lining up every day at the confessionals. Until his dying day, the Fathers and Brothers enjoyed the support of Archbishop Mannix, who made it his practice for many years to visit the monastery for his weekly confession.

Similar widespread support from the Catholic community occurred in Sydney after the congregation arrived in 1953, with Cardinal Gilroy's blessing.

At the same time, the early decades in Australia were not without the kind of problems that could be expected for such an undertaking by a previously little known Religious Institute. Some of those difficulties, recounted frankly by Damien Cash, arose because of the individual personality traits of the congregation's members. Others were related to the need in the early days to improve the accommodation offered to the newcomers and eventually to the need to make provision for the training of the gradually increasing number of aspirants.

Cash gives meticulously researched accounts of the ways in which housing was sought and financed for postulants, novices, scholastics, seminarians and retreatants. As the years went by there was also a growing need for accommodation for holidays and for ageing or ailing members.

This all led to the purchase or, in a few cases, renting of numerous properties in Victoria, NSW, Queensland and Western Australia, the majority of which have by now passed out of the congregation's hands.

Some of the purchases were true bargains, often facilitated by generous benefactors or by the kind of good luck that could well be attributed to Divine intervention. Two outstanding properties were at Lower Plenty, an outer Melbourne suburb by the Yarra River, where the fine Christ the King Seminary was erected, and at Bowral, where the newly named Mt Eymard became the home of the novitiate and later a retreat house.

One of the features of this very readable book is that it is anything but a public relations exercise for the Blessed Sacrament Congregation. Unlike the writers of some other commissioned institutional histories, Damien Cash obviously set out to produce a factual "warts and all" account of what in the end is an inspirational saga.

The pages are crowded with information and anecdotes about the ups and downs, departures and returns, triumphs and disappointments of individual members of the congregation. Some of the stories are amusing, a few are tinged with sadness and many are truly edifying.

A few randomly chosen examples of people whose services to the Church in this congregation as revealed in these pages deserve special recognition and admiration are Frs Joseph Thibault (the last of the pioneers to die), Len McKenna (the first Australian-born Provincial), Tom McNevin (a former Sydney diocesan priest whose strictness as a Blessed Sacrament Father and Superior became legendary), Donald Cave, Ed Wood, Ernie "Chappy" Rayson, Alf Rivett, Patrick Negri, Tony McSweeney (the only Australian so far to be elected Superior General), Tom Knowles, Joe Geran, Tony Lawless and Graeme Duro (the present Provincial). One could also name many of the lay brothers, but much of their work is less well known, having been hidden from public view.

It would not be inaccurate to call some of the other members mavericks or even stirrers, while recognising the fine work they

all did in different ways. They could include the likes of Frs (or in some cases ex-Fathers) Ken Sinclair, Brian Morrison, David Brown, Jim Tough and Colin Goodwin.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s led to a still continuing period of crisis for the Blessed Sacrament Congregation, as it did for other religious institutes, for the diocesan clergy and indeed for Catholics in general.

Some of the council's liturgical and theological emphases raised issues about certain of the congregation's priorities and practices, with members broadly divided between those who sought new directions and those who preferred the traditional ways. Meanwhile, the decline in the number of vocations and the departures or ageing of members have increased the pressure on the survivors who have hoped to continue serving the Catholic community.

Whatever the future may hold, Damien Cash's book has surely made a most useful contribution to those in the Congregation engaged in the task of discerning the best way forward.

The future cannot be well negotiated without a proper understanding of the past. The book also offers abundant material for both gratitude and reflection to all Catholics who love their Church and are concerned about its future.

MICHAEL COSTIGAN had many associations with the Blessed Sacrament Fathers in his days as a student and priest. At school he was a classmate of Ted Bartels, a future Jesuit whose mother's recovery from a severe heart condition after prayer to Peter Julian Eymard was accepted as one of the miracles required for Eymard's 1962 canonisation. He was also a friend of a number of Australian Blessed Sacrament seminarians and priests in Rome in the 1950s. One of the first of his many contributions to the Catholic press in Australia was an article on St Francis' church, which appeared in the May 1951 issue of 'The Monstrance'. Dr Costigan was a guest of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation several times in Australia and also during the 1963 session of Vatican II in Rome, when the Superior-General, Fr Roland Huot, opened the way for him to attend the council's daily meetings as a correspondent for four Australian Catholic papers. For a number of years in Melbourne he also shared chaplaincy duties for the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament, the Armadale-based community of the women's congregation founded in 1858 by St Peter Julian and Marguerite Guillot.

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