

Eulogy for RJM

Frank O'Connor, former Mayor and current member of the Fr Bob Maguire Foundation Board.

It's a difficult task to try to encapsulate the impact Fr Bob has had on my life over 43 years of being an active participant, a supporter and an advisor for his work over all those years including the decades that he spent at his beloved South Melbourne Parish.

But it's even more difficult to adequately assess the effect he had on so many people, local, statewide and indeed Australia wide. We do know however that he has left a wonderful legacy, not just in what he did through his personal efforts but what he did to inspire others to do similar things.

Fr Bob was a man who was universally loved and admired.

He believed in the ethos of the Church into which he was ordained 63 years ago, which was then under the influence of the Second Vatican Council.

That was when the Church wanted to move away from the clerically dominated view of the world, "flattening the model" as Fr Bob was want to say, reaching out and embedding itself in local communities. He didn't want Liturgy to be a spectator sport.

Fr Bob's Sunday sermons were usually a translation of that week's Gospel but with a current affairs or local overlay. They were in effect a set of messages about how we should live our lives, as a local community and more broadly, consistent with the Gospel message.

Fr Bob was fond of snappy phrases and he had memorable turns of phrase that ensured he was a popular media figure. He intuitively knew that media coverage was a great way to get his message out there. But it wasn't just his comfort in front of the camera or behind a microphone, it was his demonstrably genuine manner.

So Fr Bob taught us, and so many others in communities and organisations far and wide. It's about us being inclusive, us insiders being there for the outsiders, seeing the good in others especially the marginalised and the disenfranchised, and creating a sense of belonging for everyone and anyone.

His years in South Melbourne especially through the 1980s saw numerous initiatives such as a Half-Way House, staffed by volunteers from the Parish, to look after young people who were at risk because of poor housing options or substance abuse.

This morphed into the Open Family Foundation.

Fr Bob encouraged a roster of Parishioners to provide a presence in the Presbytery, answering the door and phone, and giving out food and vouchers. The Parish became a place, not just for the believers, but for anyone in need, and for anyone who wanted to help.

This work became the Emerald Hill Mission and the Parish Open House, which still to this day provide meals and companionship at the back of the Presbytery and via its mobile van for anybody, no questions asked and no judgements made.

But it's not just about the food, it's about the connection with and acceptance of people and making them feel part of something, no matter their circumstances. Fr Bob himself was a regular presence at many of these occasions providing that genuine social connectedness for these people.

But Fr Bob didn't stop at those first few successes, he wanted more, so the Father Bob Maguire Foundation was formed in 2003. The fact that those predecessor organisations continue to deliver is testament to a priest who not only understood the Vatican 2 message but who went out and did something about it and inspired others to do likewise. Thanks to Fr Bob's inspiration, his Foundation continues to provide a significant Pantry and Meals service and other programs in the local area as well as supporting other organisations doing similar things.

He was often described as a “revolutionary” and a “ratbag” but his self description as “orthodox” but “unconventional” was just as accurate.

It's sometimes hard to comprehend how a young lad from an impoverished upbringing in Prahran, with a drunken father, orphaned at 15, has ended up having a State Funeral here in this magnificent Cathedral.

He might have argued that he wanted as few interactions as possible with Head Office, as he called it. But this celebration is what he deserves after 63 years as a priest, preacher, raconteur, rebel, but mostly as a doer and an inspiration to so many people.

It was possibly his struggle as a child that taught him the need for empathy for those less well off and those who were otherwise considered outsiders.

But he was also loved and admired by the rich and famous, the powerful and the influential.

That love and admiration says something important about the Australian character and our famed sense of fairness. It says that the 'haves' will respond to the call to assist the 'have nots' where that call is made by someone like Fr Bob - someone who could put a spark to the innate kindling within those who believe in a fair go.

He intuitively knew how to tap into skills and resources but never for himself – only ever to improve the lot of those who needed help and support.

He had empathy in spades for the unloved and the unlovely, and for those who were doing it tough. He once said in relation to one young person, but I know he meant it more generally, that if that person reached the stage of dying alone in the gutter, with nothing, they wouldn't be able to say that nobody had cared for them.

His passion was to make the world a fairer place. The late Fr Ted Kennedy once used an expression in relation to somebody else which I think fits Fr Bob perfectly: “He has swallowed the Gospel whole”. What made him special and so loved was that he lived it.

The base metal of the Gospels may have been the source of the tools hewn by Fr Bob, but he dipped them in humour and irreverence to make them more effective as weapons of mass instruction.

We know he has done so much and he has inspired so many others to follow that path. The world is a better place because of his work. But as Fr Bob would say, there is still much to be done and we have such little time to achieve it.

That's why he would have wanted the on-going support and commitment of governments, philanthropists, businesses and the general public so that the work he commenced and inspired can continue.

There have been some suggestions that there ought to be a memorial to Fr Bob. Lovely idea, and some thought will be put into this in due course. But for those of us who have worked closely with him for decades, and for those who volunteer to continue his work, the best memorial we can have will be the continuation of his essential work with those in society who are doing it tough. As he said on many occasions “Nobody should be left behind”.

Time for you Fr Bob to rest in eternal peace and may your messages and inspiration over the years continue to drive us and the broader community to get on with the work.

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