

OTHER AUSTRALIAN SAINTS?

ARCHPRIEST LAWRENCE CROSS

AUSTRALIA HAS SEEN saints other than Blessed Mary of the Cross. There would be little argument that Caroline Chisholm and Eileen O'Connor are saints, which is to say, powerful evangelical signs in the 'whirl of secularity', but Australia has another hitherto unknown saint who died far away from the land of his birth, hidden and unknown because he was a monk in the strictest monastic order in the Western Church, the Carthusian hermits. Dom Hugh Weld lived most of his life in the Charterhouse at Parkminster, England, while his latter years were spent in a Carthusian monastery in Italy. It was here that he died, at Maggiano, near Lucca in 1952, a lifetime and a world away from Government House, Hobart, where he was born to Governor Frederick Weld and his wife, Filumena Weld, on 3 May 1876.

As a Carthusian hermit he lived entirely alone, usually leaving his cell only to celebrate the liturgy with his fellow monks, and to eat in common with them on Sundays. Otherwise the Carthusian monk works, prays, studies and eats alone. The only time spent relaxing with others is the weekly walk during which they can speak of whatever they wish. Theirs is a life hidden in God, yet so many Christians do not understand or appreciate the real nature or value of such a life of apparent withdrawal. The vocation of the solitary is barely understood even by Christians, not even in the age when so many modern men and women long for the refreshment of solitude, silence and communion in the midst of their stressed lives. When even the outlines of the life of contemplative monks and nuns are suggested to them they protest that such a life is a waste or that it is selfish. Such a stance reveals that many modern Christians do not seem to understand that prayer, as communion with God, is a pro-

found communion with all.

The traditional Christian view, and particularly in the Christian East, is that the life of solitude, while involving an external separation from society, is at the same time a life lived in deep communion with the whole Church and with all. Dwelling 'on the frontier', separated from all, the solitary is at the same time united to all. Living in conditions of the utmost simplicity and poverty, he or she is identified with all in their need and poverty before God.¹ In fact, 'the solitary is called to experience with an especial directness the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, into which all Christians are called to enter.'²

In the case of our unknown Australasian saint, his solitary life should perhaps be seen as the fruit of a deeply Catholic upbringing and of a committed and public witness to Catholic faith by his parents and his ancestors. It is complementary to the life of Mary of the Cross. Geoffrey Hull has written that Mary of the Cross's passion for justice 'was inimical to the spirit of her grasping age which filled the poor with envy of their social betters and fired them with the ambition to clamber up the ladder of social success in a manner that implied contempt of themselves.'³ But the gift of the solitary life can also help our present age to recover a more balanced relationship to the material and spiritual world,⁴ because the life of the solitary is the same life of grace opened to all Christians, but lived more intensely. It is closer to us than we imagine. The life in Christ, sought in the silence of the cloister and in solitude, by pure prayer, by the purification of the passions, the forsaking of the world and its preoccupations,

...this very same life is communicated to all Christians. Through the Eucharist 'they live now this life in Christ', are endowed with a royal

dignity, are assimilated to Christ by the Bread of life, are 'transformed by his Blood into a sanctuary more beautiful than the temple of Solomon.'⁵

Such was our saint, as we shall explain.

His father was Frederick Weld (or Wylde, 1823-1891) of Chideock, Dorset, the son of one of the leading Catholic families of England. Frederick Weld's grandfather founded Stonyhurst. His uncle, Thomas Weld, was England's first post-Reformation Cardinal and his second cousin, Roger Bede Vaughan, was the second Archbishop of Sydney. The circle in which our unknown saint grew up was very different to that of the MacKillop family so afflicted with poverty and illness.

His father, Frederick, was a good and honourable man, devoted to promoting democratic principles. It is said of him that he was nevertheless inclined to be autocratic in his personal style and lacking in the common touch. He spent some eleven years in New Zealand, for a time as head of government, before returning to England in 1854. Some five years later he married his distant cousin Filumena Phillips (her Leicestershire family was later known as Phillips de Lisle) in England on 10 March 1859.⁶ Appointed Governor of Western Australia in 1868, Frederick and Filumena (always affectionately known as Mena) arrived there in September 1869 along with the six children of the first ten years of their marriage. There were another six children yet to come, our unknown saint amongst them. It is almost certain that on her 1869 voyage to Western Australia, Filumena Weld, the mother of a saint yet to be, met Blessed Mary of the Cross in Adelaide during a visit to the new Josephite foundation.

Governor Weld's six year term in Western Australia was a full one developing the colony both physically and institutionally, but there is one matter that can give something of the measure of the man in these years. Under pressure in 1872, he refused to commute the five year sentence of the son of a leading colonist who had been convicted of the manslaughter



Archpriest Lawrence Cross is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Theology of ACU and Chaplain to the Russian Catholics. He is married to Diane and has two sons.

of an aborigine. The authorities in London overruled him and the Colonial Office reduced it to one year. Governor Weld's correspondence shows how distressed he was by this humiliation. As the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* put it, 'It was small consolation when Secretary of State Kimberley commended him privately on his solicitude for the welfare of the natives.'⁷ It would seem that the Governor was always his own man. Protestants in the Legislative Council suspected dark Catholic purposes in every clause of his Education Bill of 1870, and the Roman Catholic clergy reported him to Rome when at an official dinner party he asked the Anglican bishop to say the grace. The Governor stuck to his guns and the Education Bill was passed and the Pope made him a papal knight when he heard the Governor's side of things.

As the mother of twelve children, all of whom grew to adulthood (a sharp contrast to the MacKillops where death and sickness were always at hand), Filumena Weld proved herself a woman of energy, intelligence and deep Catholic faith.⁸ The spirit of the mother of this saint is evident in the story of her voyage from Western Australia to Tasmania in 1875, a blue water journey in oceans never safe, not even today. Frederick had sailed to Tasmania in early 1875 to take up his post as Governor. Filumena was to follow on a suitable ship with the children. The vessel chosen was sold before the family was ready, so Filumena chartered her own boat to take her to Hobart. The weather was appalling, the passage very rough, and the deck cabin flooded constantly. The

Governor wrote of this journey: ‘The captain turned out to be an ex-convict who drank like a fish and knew so little about his work that Mena had to give directions to the crew when to reef the sails.’⁹ What the public record does not mention is the fact that the future saint received his baptismal name during this perilous voyage to Tasmania. Mena promised St Raymond of Pennafort, to whom she had a strong devotion, that if the family survived the voyage and she was blessed with another child, she would honour St Raymond in the naming of that child. She later kept this promise. The story gives a glimpse of the spirit of this lady, mother of a saint, who after raising twelve children, a busy public life and Sir Frederick’s death, spent her last years from 1891 to 1903 as a nun in the convent of which her daughter, Edith Mary, was Prioress.

Sir Frederick, almost in the spirit of the Christian knight at the end of his days, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land after his health broke down in 1887 and died at Chideock in July 1891. He was survived by all twelve children, many of whom had already become monks or nuns, and their mother was to follow them. The culture, time and place are widely separated, but the Welds evoke the memory of the Cappadocian family of saints who gave the Church Macrina, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and their blessed parents and siblings. Raymond John Lisle Weld was born in Hobart and completed his education with the Benedictines at Fort Augustus Abbey in Scotland. Thereafter he joined the Carthusian hermits in what is still the largest Charterhouse in the world, St Hugh’s or Parkminster at Cowfold in Sussex. His monastic name was Hugh and he was ordained priest in 1902. He died at the Charterhouse at Maggiano in 1952.

What was he like? There are few first-hand descriptions of him, but those that do come down to us are consistent in depicting a man who is simple, joyful and filled with light, whose very presence had a healing and consoling effect upon anyone who met him. A particularly well-written description of Dom

Hugh appears in *Asking for Trouble* by Bruno Scott James, an author of wide experience both of the world and of the Church, ranging from monastic solitude to Fr Borelli’s street kids in Naples. Here is Scott James’ description:

He is one of the very few men whom I would, without the slightest hesitation or reserve, call holy. He had all the simplicity and joy which are the characteristics of a man living in close union with God. He also had a delightful boyish streak in him that made him one of the most enchanting companions without any vestige of the smugness that is only too evident in many monks and professional men of God ... during all the twenty years that I knew Dom Hugh he was always his tranquil and serene self. I never saw him disturbed, I never knew him other than kind and patient, and I never left his presence without feeling a better man.

He was no scholar, but he had the direct vision of one whose eye, in the words of Scripture, was simple and filled his person with light. His advice in all the trouble that I brought to him was always prudent, practical and to the point. When he spoke of prayer and the spiritual life he did so with the utmost simplicity, but in a way that only a man can who speaks not merely from books but from experience. His friendship was one of the greatest privileges I have ever enjoyed, and I believe that it has not ceased with his death.¹⁰

Why have so few ever heard of him spoken of as a saint? The answer to this is to be sought in the attitude of the Carthusians to the whole business of saints. This can be best illustrated by events that occurred at the Carthusian monastery at Burgos, in Spain, earlier this century. It happened that a brother died and two fellow monks were delegated by the Prior to dig and prepare the grave. The brothers miscalculated and were digging close to one of the oldest parts of the monastic cemetery. Suddenly one of the diggers was startled to find fresh blood on his shovel. They then dug and uncovered the body of a monk who seemed like a young man sleeping. They hurried to the Prior to tell of their discovery. Surely this was a saint! The Prior agreed but

instructed them to fill in the grave. The Carthusians had sufficient saints and no need to seek more.

What then is Dom Hugh's claim to sainthood? First, we must make no mistake. Dom Hugh's simplicity and joy were won at a price. That price is always conformity to the Cross of Christ. An ascetic struggle always lies behind the joy and the spiritual beauty. This is a pattern amongst all the saints, and particularly the monastics. St Anthony of Egypt spent upwards of twenty years in solitary struggle with the demons of his original disordered nature. It was more than twenty years before he kicked down the door of his cell to emerge as the light-filled teacher, friend and guide for other Christians. St Seraphim of Sarov followed the same pattern. I mention him because the joy and simplicity of Dom Hugh, the transforming and consoling power of the Holy Spirit that was clearly experienced in his presence, recalls St Seraphim. Clearly the ascetic struggle had made his soul 'into a sanctuary more beautiful than the temple of Solomon' and his physical presence released into the world something of the power and grace of that one great sacrifice of Christ. Nothing illustrates this better than what happened immediately upon Dom Hugh's death. These events also remind us of the theme of local Church and its authority in the matter of saints.

To make sense of the events that followed Dom Hugh's death, we must remember that

the Carthusians live entirely apart from the world. The only occasion on which the locals of Maggiano would ever have seen Dom Hugh, and then from afar, would have been when the monks took their weekly walk through the countryside. However, the villagers and country people seemed to perceive the very moment of Dom Hugh's death. Crying 'Il Santo e morto', all the village and country people came flocking to the monastery. These people of the Church living in the villages and countryside knew that Dom Hugh Weld was a saint. How they knew is still beyond any explanation, but they were so sure that they demanded relics of Dom Hugh and in one account removed things from his cell.

Why is it that the holiness of Dom Hugh did not come to the attention of other Churches when it is clear that his life and the people of Maggiano both proclaim him to be a saint? It may be that those who exercise authority in the Church take little or no account of the authority of the people of the Church, particularly in the matter of saints.

This story of Hugh Weld is presented as a parallel to that of Blessed Mary of the Cross who would agree that while 'it is right to keep the secret of a king, it is yet right to reveal in worthy fashion the works of God' (Tobias 12: 11). The life of Dom Hugh Weld was clearly such a divine work and an important though hidden part of our Australian Christian heritage.

NOTES

1. *A Statement on the Solitary Life*, (Wales: St Davids, Sept-Oct 1975) Sobomost Series 7: No.2 (1975) 141.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Geoffrey Hull, *Building the Kingdom: Mary MacKillop and Social Justice*, Occasional Paper 22.
4. *A Statement on the Solitary Life*.
5. B. Bobrinskoy, *Nicholas Cabasilas*, Sobornost Series 5: No.7 (1968) 483-505.
6. Frederick Weld's journal tells that he met Filumena or 'Mena' de Lisle at Wardour, the home

of Frederick's relatives, the Arundells, on the last day of 1858. She was introduced to him as Mena and he did not realise that her name was really Filumena until he asked her about the meaning of her name as they were walking together after Mass on New Year's Day, 1859. The reason that this is of interest is that Frederick Weld had stopped in Rome on his way back to England from New Zealand and particularly sought out the shrine of the Roman martyr, Philomena. He made a pilgrimage to her shrine to ask for her intercession in finding such a wife who would 'walk with

him to heaven', to use his own phrase. He met such a one on the very first day of his return to England. When she told him the meaning of her name on the second day of their acquaintance he responded with 'How curious'. She asked him why that should be so. He replied, 'Perhaps I shall tell you some day.' They were married in early March after a very swift courtship, given the times and their situation.

7. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 6: 1851-1890, (Melbourne University Press, 1976) 378.

8. Lady Weld's biographer was Dr Heather Vose.

Her husband, Noel Vose, assisted with information for this article and has continued his wife's work after her untimely death. I am indebted to them for their help and most particularly for the information on the connection between Julian Tennyson Woods and the Weld family and for the almost certain fact that Filumena and Blessed Mary of the Cross met each other in 1869 in South Australia.

9. Cited in *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 379.

10. Bruno Scott James, *Asking For Trouble* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962) 66f.

On writing about the Saints:

It has always been a valuable work to write about the noble lives of the saints so that they may be a mirror and example and, as it were, a seasoning for human life on earth. In this way it is as if they continued to live after their death, challenging many who were in a state of living death, and summoning them to true life.

—Bernard of Clairvaux, *Life of Saint Malachy*.⁹⁰

In the first instance the lives of the saints manifest the inherent values of the gospel tradition. In every age the saints demonstrate existentially that in times that are decadent, ridden with confusion or ennui, or in periods of doubt, it is not only possible to live out the gospel, but that the gospel can be enfleshed in an extraordinary manner. In that lived tradition the saint witnesses to the truth of Christ (and hence, is a martyr in the most profound and widest sense of the term) and, at the same time, renders prophetic judgment on the age. The saint transforms the abstract claims of preaching, teaching, and theology into lived realities.

—Joseph A. Komonchak, et al., *The New Dictionary of Theology, 'Saints'*.