

John Carey the priest

John Carey's family roots lie deep in Catholic Armidale. His great-grandfather, a convict with a colonial pardon, arrived in the 1830s. His grandfather had his five sons baptised in the 'old' cathedral. His father, Jack, married Eileen O'Connor in the 'new' cathedral, and they faithfully raised their three children, John, David and Barbara, in the Catholic tradition.

Young John, a student at De La Salle, obviously caught the eye of the new bishop, E. J. Doody, who sent the 14 year old to the seminary at Springwood to continue his secondary schooling. He completed the Intermediate Certificate, but before sitting for the Leaving, was sent to Rome. It was 1951, and he was 17 years old.

The Bishop sent many men to Rome, to gain not just a degree in theology but a vision of what it means to be Catholic. Seedlings sown beside the Tiber are fertilised by the blood and bone of two millennia of martyrs and scholars, and Bishop Doody longed to fill his diocese with such stock.

John entered the Collegio 'De Propaganda Fide' which, since 1627, has trained priests for service in mission countries. He lived and studied with students from all over the world, sinking his scholarly roots into the rich Roman soil, and broadening his vision of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. On his lips, every day, was the prayer of Pius IX: "*Vergine Immacolata, aiutateci – Immaculate Virgin, help us!*" Having gained his Licentiate in Theology, he focused his Doctoral Thesis on the cutting edge research into biblical scholarship arising from the recent discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran.

In the last year of John's studies, Pope Pius XII died. It would be the end of an era. Within three months, the newly elected Pope John XXIII informed his curial cardinals that he planned to call a general council. This announcement amazed all and horrified many. John completed his doctorate as the implications of this news swirled around the world, and he returned to Australia imbued with the vision and values Papa Giovanni.

John came home after an absence of eight years, and was welcomed as the first Armidalian to have been ordained a priest in Rome. At the welcome home celebrations in the Cathedral hall, he emphasised two fundamental values: that the Church must be truly Catholic, always open to every race and nation, and that all Christians should pray the prayer of Jesus: "*That they may be one*". John's speech was prescient, for these would become two of the fundamental themes of the coming Second Vatican Council.

It was 1959, and the Church and the World stood on the brink of the upheavals of the 1960s. No one could have forecast the coming cyclones. It was in this turbulent and exciting context that John's pastoral ministry as a priest began to unfold.

Many of his contemporaries, bewildered by the times, tried to alter the Church to fit the world, or left the priesthood altogether. John followed the Great Tradition of organic continuity, holding fast to essentials while fulfilling St Paul's advice to be all things to all to win all for Christ.

His Roman training allowed him to transcend nationalism and narrow sectarianism as he worked to expand the Church to be faithful to Christ rather than conform to the times. His shy self-effacement belied his tenacious loyalty and his deep respect for the diocese and the presbyterate. John remembers with gratitude the support and encouragement of Bishop Doody as he settled back into Australia, and deeply appreciates the lessons he learned from his parish priest mentors: Dr C. Harry Leis, Mons. James Healy and Mons. David Hiscox.

In the parishes of Tamworth, Inverell, Tenterfield and Moree, he honed the skills of pastoral ministry, worked with youth and with aboriginal people, and was introduced to the complexities of parish finances. This early tutoring paid dividends in John's future work as parish priest in Tamworth, Uralla and Glen Innes, pastoring his people, overseeing major building works and educational projects, and being entrusted increasingly with various diocesan responsibilities. John was the first priest in the diocese to acquire a computer and explore the new technology for the benefit of his parish. His openness to the world and involvement in the wider community was evidenced by his 30 year membership of Rotary for which he was awarded the prestigious Paul Harris Fellowship. Being thoughtful, kind and empathetic, he was occasionally entrusted with appointments requiring deep sensitivity, diplomacy and public relational skills.

John's ministerial focus has always been twofold: the pastoral care of his parishioners, and the support of the Bishop in his episcopal care of the diocese. He has been an outstanding example of loyal, humble priestly service over 60 years through good times and bad. He has fulfilled the appeal made by St Peter in his first letter: "Agree among yourselves and be sympathetic. Love the brothers, have compassion and be self-effacing."

He stands like a great river-gum, planted deep in the Irish Roman Catholicism of his forebears, his branches, drawing life from the trunk of the Great Tradition, opening and spreading to engage whatever the seasons may bring, winter or summer, spring or fall.

Such fidelity and commitment is rare, and provides a precious example for younger priests.

John turned 80 on 18th April 2014, and, at the request of Bishop Michael Kennedy, Pope Francis bestowed on him the award "Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice" on 26th June 2015.

Franciscus Pont. Maximus augustae crucis insigne Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice egregia opera studioque conspicuis praecipue constitutum Rev. D.no Joanni Patricio Carey discernere et largiri dignatus est, eidem pariter facultatem faciens sese hoc ornamento decorandi. Ex aedibus vaticanis die XXVI mensis Junii, anno MMXV.

Ad multos annos!