

# Two priests and a vocation

04-Aug-2010

Two priests played a central role in nourishing my vocation to the Society of Jesus: the first was the parish priest in Frankston, then hardly more than a village on the bayside, and the second was my teacher of Latin and Greek at Xavier College.

In the small country church at Frankston I learned to share the parish priest's intense devotion for the Eucharistic presence. With his back to the congregation, Fr Fitzpatrick stooped over the altar and whispered the words of consecration so softly that only the small boys serving Mass could hear them. With slow reverence he then lifted the host high above his head, and for some seconds held it there framed by his fingers.



Ordination would initiate me into that sacred function of standing at the altar to say: 'This is my body,' and 'This is the chalice of my blood.' The awesome holiness of the Mass has never left me, but it now touches me in other ways. It seems mysterious to address God the Father on behalf of all the faithful gathered in worship. Who am I to raise my voice in praise to the ultimate Source of all reality, and pray that the Holy Spirit descend on the elements and on the people assembled for the Eucharist?

Fr Bill ('Gerry') Owens, an elegant and elusive Irish Jesuit who had spent one year at school with James Joyce, infected me with a love of classical and later literature-and, in particular, with a love of poetry. Some lines from 'The Hound of Heaven' by Francis Thompson haunted me:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;*

*I fled Him, down the arches of the years.*

The sense grew that I had to become a priest; I would be running away from God and myself if I failed to do so. If I were to become a priest, that simply meant for me joining the Jesuits. After five years at a high school and one year at a university college (Newman College) run by them, I had come to admire deeply what these dedicated priests achieved through their educational institutions.

To be sure, other people played a part in encouraging my vocation to the Society. But I remember with deep gratitude how Fr Fitzpatrick and Fr Owens helped me to bite the bullet and accept a call to enter the Jesuits.

*By Fr Gerry O'Collins SJ, celebrating 60 years in the Society.*