



MY LIFE AS A YOUNG MARIST BROTHER AT MARCELLIN, 1954

At the gate I stood at Marcellin College, Camberwell, in mid-January, 1954, a callow youth, three days after my 19th birthday, with the usual teenager anticipation of adventure ... the novelty of a new school, new places, new faces.

It was this teenage adventure that had me here at all, because, ten days after my 14th birthday, I left home to join a monastic religious order, the Marist Brothers, at Macedon. I'd forsaken my natural family name of Brian Greaves, and was given the name of Brother Vincent in this adopted family of artificial brothers.

To the consternation and bewilderment of my children and grandchildren at my foolishness at leaving home at such a young age and the laxity of my parents for allowing it, I have to constantly explain to them that it was to the chagrin of my parents that they succumbed to my persisting and let me have my, as they saw it, deluded, will, solacing themselves that the novelty would soon wear off and I be back home shortly. Little did any of us know that I would indeed return home, but it would be eleven years before I'd spend another night at home. I also have to explain to my offspring that 14 was regarded then as mature. My father left school to be a farm worker the day he turned 14, and many of my friends at both Primary and High School left at 14 to work on the family farm, or to become apprentices with tradesmen, or office boys in banks or commercial firms. It was a 14y. youth that delivered telegrams and serviced your car with petrol, oil and water, and ran messages. Money in the pocket was the big attraction as jobs were plentiful as the economy expanded rapidly after the war.

Staying at school was a burden for poorer families, but luckily I'd managed to get a scholarship so my parents didn't require me to get a job to help with their family finances.

Venturing through the gate at Marcellin for my new adventure I saw before me a mansion of yesteryear which was the monastery. Beyond that were the old stables now converted into the secondary classrooms, and beyond that was the previous horse training arena now sealed for the students' playground. On my right was a new yellow brick complex for the primary classrooms.

On meeting my new staff I found I already knew three Brothers ... Br Nilus the Principal and Br Ludovic, the Deputy Principal. Both had taught me at the Juniorate at Macedon where I'd entered at 14 after leaving home, and completed Years 10, 11 and 12. The third member was Br Roger who was Principal at St Pat's College in Sale where I'd gone for Year 9 in 1948, after Years 7 and 8 at Warragul High and previously all my Primary school at Neerim South Public School.

Enthusiastic for teaching in my new school with my teaching qualifications of Matriculation of six subjects ... the two Maths ... Pure and Applied, the two sciences ... Physics and Chemistry, and two languages ... English and Latin, I was ready for any subject. My teaching experience was half a year teaching Grade 4 at Alberton, near Port Adelaide, which was my first school. So I'd survived my initial terror of 50 pairs of eyes staring at me, and was used to the classroom dynamics and was eager to get teaching at this new school. My teacher training was three days at the end of my 18 months of monastic training at Mittagong in NSW. Deemed insufficient to gain teacher registration which every teacher had to have to be allowed to teach in Victoria, Br Nilus had me apply for the certificate "Permission to Teach" from the State Education Board with the undertaking I'd study their text, Elijah & Cole, for two years by correspondence and take the yearly exam. A senior brother, Br Eustace, was appointed my mentor and supervisor. I was then assigned to Grade 4 in the new classrooms in the first three periods in the morning, and Year 7 and 8 for Maths in the 'stables' complex in the two periods after recess. As soon as Lunch time came, I had to get myself by public transport to the Marist school in East Brunswick. So it was hurriedly off with my monastic long black dress and into my black street suit and Roman clerical collar, being the only dress allowed by public order to be worn in public by clerics, to get to East Brunswick before afternoon classes began ... where, incidentally, in the Matric class was a friendly student ... Bert Newton. At the end of school it was back to Camberwell to go about my assigned tasks of tidying the playground picking up papers and clearing rubbish bins, and then work in the veggie garden.

The purpose of Catholic education was to raise the typical family from in general the working class to the professions and the public service and the path to do this was ... a serious and quality education. But it had to be affordable and this was achieved by the religious orders of nuns and brothers and priests, who by the very nature of a very spartan monastic lifestyle kept fees to a bare minimum.

The eighteen months at Mittagong in NSW in 1952 was to study this spartan life to see if you had the fortitude to do it, which meant

I had to pledge a vow of poverty to keep me from becoming attached to 'things'. So I'd agree not to be paid a wage, not even pocket money. I'd own nothing ... there was nothing I could call 'mine'. The Order would cater for my basic needs in food and clothing, etc.. My vow of chastity was to keep me from becoming attached to 'people', so that I was to engage with everyone with equal reserve and never become particular friends with anyone. My vow of obedience was to keep me from becoming attached to my own 'will', and promise to follow the legitimate directions of my superiors. The object of the three vows was to allow the staffing of schools with minimum cost, with minimum objections and controversies, so that I could be sent to any school, any time, and teach any class and be comfortable in doing so, because I'd formed no attachment to my own wants or people or things which would be a problem for me immediately doing as directed. No outside distraction was allowed except family mail. No radio, which had been allowed at Macedon ... so we were well acquainted with the current hit-parade. No newspapers ... which were not allowed at Macedon ... so this was nothing new. One day a group of us were sent to a nearby convent to supply them with a truck load of wood for the coming winter. The nuns sent us sandwiches for our lunch, wrapped in old newspapers. The Sydney boys grabbed the back pages to see about their rugby teams' fortunes. A more studious lad perusing the front pages suddenly yelled out that the king was dead, and we now had a queen as monarch. The paper was a month old ... but our superiors hadn't bothered us with such worldly news. Because of this unusual lunch, the year of the queen's accession to the throne is indelibly etched in my memory.

The Order moved young members around a lot to give lots of experience of the various schools they could be sent to, thereby getting an overall picture of how the Order functioned. So I got to teach in schools in SA, Vic., and NSW.

The monastic life at Camberwell under the disciplinarians of Brs Nilus and Ludovic was fairly tight, but my teenager attraction for things novel was able to operate within a fairly enjoyable lifestyle. Credit goes to Br Stan for alerting me to various adventures. Often he would tell me to come with him and off we'd go to interesting events. With me in tow he took me to see the Queen in her motorcade down Swanston Street and also to my first Grand Final to see Footscray's first premiership and to play tennis at a friend's house near the monastery. Brs Evangelist and Eustace as well ensured the staff room had a very happy and jocular atmosphere. There was plenty of fun within the rules of the place, even though sailing was very close sometimes.

Here at Marcellin was a great educational challenge ... starting a school from scratch ... from Grade 3 to Matric right in the middle of an upper class residential area where very few actual students came from. To succeed the College had to show it was serious about education, to which end it was serious about discipline. Dress uniform was strictly enforced even to the wearing of caps from little third graders to the big senior students, and lugging the standard Gladstone bag for students homework books, etc.. The staff too, took their duty to the parents very seriously to make sure students reached their full potential ... the highest goal being the Matriculation Certificate, the key to entry to the

University and the professions or to clerical careers in both public and private service offices. So serious was the staff's obligation to the parents who'd payed the substantial fees that discipline was enacted in both classroom and playground even to the extent of corporal punishment. Here were Catholic children advancing from the general working class to higher classes of society through "education", undertaking the principle of "delayed gratification", whereby the parents and students endure the necessary time and energy of constant hard study in classwork and homework ... the six years of secondary study, to achieve a distant goal.

The staff's part was enduring a rather spartan monastic life-style to reduce the cost of this education.

At 5.30 every morning a bell was sounded in the corridor of our bedrooms. By dint of 5 years of training, I slipped out of my blankets and on my knees bedside before fully awake. With a good night's sleep my prayer was then cheerfully "Good morning, God" ... or otherwise ... "Good God ... morning!!!".

6 am ... into the chapel for community morning prayers... with singing the lovely hymn, "Salve Regina", to welcome the day, then our 'matins' and then silent meditation to end the session. Then back to my room, called a 'cell', to complete making bed, shaving, etc that hadn't been completed beforehand.

7am ... Mass in the chapel,

8am ... Breakfast in our Dining Room where silence was continued as part of the Great Silence that had been in effect since Evening prayers the previous night. So no conversation was allowed till after breakfast. Any instructions from Br Director for the day were issued and sorted out over the meal. Always two courses for breakfast being cereals and then a meat dish ... sausages/rissoles ... with eggs, and we junior Brothers made toast for the whole table from the electric toaster at our end of the table.

8.30am ... Preparation for classes ... then to classrooms to open up for the students, and prepare blackboard etc.. The first three periods, from 9 till 11, I had my Grade 4 class till Recess. Then it was Maths in Form 2 and then Maths in Form 3 ... two periods teaching taking us to Lunch. The students had theirs seated in the large open shed near the house, and only allowed out to play when directed by the Brother in charge. The Form 3 classroom looked directly at the large white wall of the Hospital next door, and one morning it sported the graffiti that "TROG WAS HERE" in big red paint letters with accompanying cartoon sketch of the aforesaid interloper... to the great amusement of the students, which grew when rumour spread that one of our students was responsible for this prank ... who, if I remember correctly, was subsequently expelled from the college .

For me, though, as soon as my class was allowed out for lunch, I had to get to our school in East Brunswick. If these transport connections were satisfactory I'd arrive in time to have some lunch at this school before classes in the afternoon. As we had no personal money of our own because of the vow of poverty, I'd take my fare from a general cash basket ... resisting any temptation to the extravagance of an ice-cream or pie or chocolate. So for the eleven years I was in the Order, I never had an ice-cream. It was never part of our meal as sweets, nor

outside the monastery as a delicacy, which I blame for my lack of self control over ice-cream now.

We celebrated our Church festivals with special roast meals which might include beer and wine at other Marist houses, but never at Camberwell. With Brs Nilus and Ludovic even big feast days were always, like our suburb, 'dry'.

Although religious routines structured the daily timetable, and even the months of the year, in retrospect I feel that much of it was superficial, focussing on pedantic compliance with various devotional and liturgical customs, rather than more intellectual discussion with the fundamentals of our religion.

Topics about our religious practices could be talked about, but never things about the basis of faith ... all belief was taken 'on faith' ... but I hold the conviction that reason must be the basis of faith. There must be an absolute rationality for my belief in the reality of God, and thereby the Church and monastery, that could have been enlightened by in depth discussion with these intelligent people of the community. I wanted real fundamental 'proofs' that I was on the right path? I sought a rational intellectual basis for our lives in this unnatural lifestyle. I now have that ... a rational 'credo', that gives me the reasoned motivation to go to Mass daily if possible, rather than simply be 'pious', which seemed the motivating spirit of the monastery.

We never celebrated individual birthdays, even as kids in the Juniorate, where ice-cream could have been a big item ... a sorry mistake I think since we were trying to join ourselves into a family of 'brothers'. So our own birthdays, even one's 21st., went by without anyone knowing and caring and giving well-wishes, or cake or ice-cream ... sadly a missed opportunity to consolidate into a more caring brotherhood.

After class on Friday I swept my classroom then applied polish on the floor, and then a couple of hours later ... after the evening meal, I worked a large electric polishing machine to complete the job. All part of the effort to maintain a high standard of respectability in this very respectable suburb.

Saturday morning breakfast was a slice of dry toast and a cup of tea in silence ... a Marist tradition of a penitential rite to get control of the appetite for food, and thereby control all appetites under discipline. Then we each had our assigned duties of house-keeping chores such as sweeping rooms and corridors and stairways, or cleaning washrooms and toilet facilities. General laundry such as sheets and pillow slips were put in a sheet and one of us gathered them into a laundry basket. But individual washing, name tagged, was put in a smaller bag, about the size of a pillow-case and put in a laundry basket for collecting by a commercial laundry business ... usually a convent where the nuns would wash and iron our shirts and so on and delivered back at the monastery by the end of the week. Personals like socks, etc. were washed individually and hung out to dry on the end of the bed or on the clothes-line outside the kitchen area.

Later, in the afternoon I'd cycle to local grounds to watch cricket, where I could watch even Test cricketers playing for their suburban team. In the winter I'd go to the footy. My older sister, Pat, bought me an Essendon season ticket which then allowed entry to all games both at 'home and away', and thereby not needing to trouble the Br Director for entrance money, just allow myself the fare to and from the ground. If to be on the safe side more

money was taken than needed, I'd put back the remaining change in the money box in the staff room and entry made in the account book as to what was spent and returned. So it was off to see John Coleman ... every match ... till his last game through injury. John had a fan large club of 'groupies', a bevy of admirers who would get themselves right behind the Essendon goals to thrill at his high-flying miracles, and wave their flags and 'floggers' at each goal. This presented a logistical problem at the start of the match ... for when the coin was tossed and the team direction indicated, there was a scramble by those who'd guessed the wrong direction to move through the crowd to get to the other end. Then at each change of ends the members of the whole group would work their way to the other end of the ground and take up their admiring positions again. As there were no seats at this part of the ground, only tiered standing levels, there was no great antipathy by the other spectators as this group moved through and mingled with the crowd until they'd got the position they wanted.

But a strict rule had me hastening homewards for our community Office prayers at 5.30 o'clock. Then came our night dinner after which we junior Brothers did the washing and drying at the scullery in the kitchen. We then had recreation time of walking up and down the playground which was a favourite past-time and exercise for the older Brothers, whilst we junior ones preferred billiards in the upstairs room or listening to the hit-parade on the radio in the general study.

The four primary grades had Brs Brian, Ian Robert, Evan and myself in charge, and for the six secondary grades there were ... Brs Stan, Evangelist, Eustace, Bernard, Ludovic and Nilus. Brother Roger, who suffered from arthritis, must have filled the gap when I went to East Brunswick each afternoon.

Sunday morning it was the same bell at 5.30 ... never a sleep-in ... for all those eleven years there was no sleep in whatsoever ... not even for big feast days like Christmas or Easter ... so there was never the luxury of leisurely rising. Then after Morning prayers, we walked in pairs to Mass at the Deepdene church. We wore our black dresses, called 'habits', through the back streets, which I think was illegal, but of no real consequence, because in those halcyon days people were very tolerant and no such thing as "dobbers" to the authorities.

At Sunday breakfast talking was allowed, in contrast to silence during the rest of the week. Sunday afternoon gave us some leisure. Sometimes I'd go and visit my sister and her family at Middle Park, or sometimes go for a ride on the community bike and explore the surrounding suburbs. On fine sunny days, sometimes Br Ludovic would let me know he'd like me to accompany him at high jumping in that small space near the shelter shed. It was long black pants and white shirts and bare feet, but we did our best in such 'sporting' attire. We could both comfortably manage five feet with our 'scissors' method, and it then depended on each's ability on that day as to just how further each could manage. Another Brother, not on staff at that time, told me at Br Ludovic's funeral that Br Ludovic had told him that we had jumped six feet. Without questioning Br Ludovic's veracity, I don't remember that we managed to jump that high,.

Sometimes I'd hear a burst of clapping, and looking in that direction of the sound, I'd see nurses leaning out their second storey windows of the hospital next door, overlooking our little

sportsfield giving us encouragement. Br Ludovic never glanced around to see our audience, and with that stony look he could get on his face, would signal the end of our jumping for that day. His character wouldn't allow giving the girls, and ourselves, a bit of amusement at our successes and failures, for high jumping is a terrible sport because you always end in defeat ... you finish when you miss several attempts ... you admit defeat. It could have been a bit of light-hearted fun if he'd not taken himself so seriously, because the girls were generous at our failures with a collective loud sigh ... a friendly bit of fun. Many years later, because of my somewhat hero worshipping when I was a boarder at St Pat's in Sale and instrumental in my joining the Marist Brothers Order, I'd go the Bulleen monastery to visit Br Romulus. There I met up with Br Ludovic again in his retirement. Br Romulus would tell me that when Br Ludovic knew I was coming he'd go to some lengths to make sure the radiator was on in the parlour and any other such comfort was ready, and he'd make sure we'd at least get to say 'hello' to each other and maybe a word or two, without trying to take away from my time with 'Rom'. So here was another side to Br Ludovic that I never saw either during my three years at Macedon nor Camberwell. So it was with a lot of gratitude that the Lord's grace had worked it's way to humanise a needy soul before facing Him. I think the students never saw this side to Br Ludovic either, for they had a very insulting soubriquet for him because of his stern personality facade.

Camberwell was a very happy time for me, since the staff was in general very friendly and helpful in advancing my teaching method and advising how to avoid all the pitfalls of the written and unwritten mores of monastic life. At the same time, it was strict, but not oppressively so. I also enjoyed the happy spirit in the student body that overcame the difficulties of large classes and strict discipline that made teaching pleasant without the need to be offensive, which allowed a staff and student interaction that was harmonious for mutual co-operation. There was a happy atmosphere in both classrooms and playground that encouraged a fruitful teaching and, I hope, learning, environment.

At the end of each year the Order would decide whether to ask me to commit to another year, and I would sign on to stay and vow for another year or leave. These were the Annual Vows for the probationary period. At the end of 1959 came the time for the big decision. The Order had had time to have a good look at me and whether to ask me to fully commit my life to the Order and thereby take final vows. Likewise I had to choose to stay or to leave. No more annual vows ... only final vows or part company. The motivation to join the Order when I was 14 was quite different at 24. The adventure I'd looked for had been satisfied in the lots of places and people I'd been with, but now I was looking for something more, and I'd met the person that I reckoned I'd like to get to know better. So I left in December 1959 and went home for Christmas. I said farewell to the staff at the Marist monastery in Bendigo at 7am, just as they were going off to Mass, and with a hundred pounds in my pocket to get me home and tide me over till I got a job, I was out the gate and off to the railway station. It was a lovely sunny morning and I had a bit of a spring in my step ... another adventure was in the offing ... a new day was dawning.

When I'd left home in 1949 there were six of us siblings, but now we made nine. My first night at home for eleven years ... and a leisurely sleep in ... and luxuriating, staying in bed without a bell demanding I get up ... only to hear my youngest sister outside in the kitchen say to Mum ... "Who's that strange man calling you 'mum'". There was a lot of catching up to do.

The Christian Brothers employed me in 1960 at Victoria Parade, East Melbourne, for Maths, English and French in Year 9. They were the first Order in Catholic Education on that very year to recognise and adopt a serious social obligation to pay their lay staff a respectable wage. Luckily for me, since I still only had the meagre qualifications that I had at Marcellin, but now six years experience, the salary was based on experience rather than qualifications. They also included holiday pay and superannuation. This gave me a secure financial basis for Jan and myself to marry in 1961 and start our family with our son in 1962 and a daughter in 1966, from which we now have 10 grandchildren. Then in 1968 I was employed at their school in St Kilda in Year 11 for Maths, Physics and English, then in 1971 at Parade College, Bundoora for Maths in Year 9 and Physics in Years 11 and 12. In 1975 I joined the staff at Mercy Teachers' College in Ascot Vale, which became a State Teachers' College and then an Australian Catholic University campus. I retired from there in 1995, now aged 60. By then I'd gained respectable qualifications with a Diploma of Physics from RMIT, a Masters Degree in Mathematics Education from York University, UK, and a Masters in Education from LaTrobe. I'd begun my teaching career with three days teacher training at Mittagong and finished my teaching career with three respectable degrees. It had turned out alright in the end.

My interest in sport was given full rein after leaving the constrictive rules of the Brothers. I played footy for East Camberwell and tennis for East St Kilda and basketball for Prahran and Diamond Creek. It amazed me further, and still does, that after I'd turned 50, the more I played to keep fit, and the older I aged, the luckier I got. At 80 I held the Victorian and Australian titles in 60m and 100m sprints as well as 80m hurdles and the long(3.82m), high(1.11m), triple(7.86m) jumps and pole vault(1.60m). Now 86, I got even luckier this year breaking the Australian record at Doncaster in the Vic championships for the 85+ division in the 80m hurdles which secured me the world title for that event, also with world titles in the High and Triple Jumps. Then at Cairns in March I broke the Vic record for Long Jump, which gave me the world title as well. This luck continues in tennis where I hold both the Australian and Australasian titles for the 85+ division.

Those eleven years in the monastery, ... from the start of 1949 to the end of 1959, from ages 14 to 24 inclusive, where I entered a boy and came out an adult, that controlled my formative path from youth to maturity and gave me a very good grounding in my personal life and faith, ... set me on a straight path with valuable experiences with the many and varied people I met and those I lived amongst and places I was sent to. I'm very grateful to the Marist Brothers for those experiences and in particular to the time I spent at Marcellin College in Camberwell.

Brian Greaves ... formerly Brother Vincent.

November 2021, Diamond Creek.