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# FIFTY YEARS *a servant*

INTERVIEW BY DANIEL HOPPER

**W**hen celebrating the life of one of our clergy – whether it be a significant anniversary or at their passing to eternal life – we often repeat the beautiful words from the Parable of the Talents, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). Now, I am not suggesting that this passage is inappropriately applied or overused. However, every now and then, we are blessed to celebrate the life of a person who encapsulates the words to such a degree, that you would be forgiven for thinking that they were written specifically about them.

Fr John Pickering OFM is one such a person in our Diocese. Over the past 50 years, Fr Pickering has lived a life of humble service to those that others often forget in our community – the deaf, those living with a disability, the Aboriginal Community, and the many migrants that have landed on our shores.

His story serves as a demonstration of St James’ exhortation, “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). Yet, as you will see, when I sat down with Fr Pickering to discuss his life as a priest over the past 50 years, his passion for service has not dissipated, and he truly believes that it is he who has been ministered to.

**How did you know you wanted to be a priest and why the Franciscan Friars?**

An uncle of mine was a Christian Brother, and an aunty a Josephite sister, and all of us eight children looked up to them. During my first year of teaching with the Department of Education, I was on the Brisbane Archdiocesan Executive of the Young Christian Workers (YCW). I think it was a combination of the chaplain’s theological teaching as well as the founder of YCW, Cardinal Joseph Cardijn’s plan of “see, judge, act” that helped me see meaning in a life dedicated to the gospel. I also lived a lot of my social and sporting life as a youth in the Franciscan parish of Kedron, QLD. As the eldest of eight, life in community appealed to me as did St Francis’ ideal of the human family in which all human beings are brothers and sisters.

**You began working with the Deaf Community 44 years ago in Brisbane, and then continued working as Chaplain to the Deaf Community in the Diocese of Wollongong for 33 years. How did this come about?**

In 1973, I was teaching at Padua College, Kedron. About 9pm one Saturday night, some catechists from the Buranda Parish – where the School for Deaf Children was located – rang the Franciscan Friary asking for a priest to celebrate Mass for about 60 children on Bribie Island, as the priest who had agreed to help was sick. I volunteered. The Mass was a disaster! The children could not hear nor understand me, so they communicated with each other in Sign Language across the room throughout the whole Mass. After Mass, I apologised to the catechist who replied, “Don’t worry Father, it is always like that.”

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So, I decided to do an eight-week course at the Queensland Deaf Society in Sign Language. Some time later, the catechists contacted me and invited me to celebrate Mass again at Bribie Island. I worked out how to make some sense of the Mass with my very poor and inadequate Signing. To my surprise, the children gave rapt attention to the whole Mass! I then became involved with two other priests in a monthly Mass at the Deaf Society. Following this, Archbishop Rush invited me to become their full-time chaplain. Realising that I knew nothing about the Deaf Community, I

insisted on studying a Graduate Diploma of Special Education before beginning.

**What are some of the misconceptions people have about the Deaf Community?**

There are many. I will mention two:

Firstly, that the same Sign Language is used by all deaf people throughout the world. That is not true. Sign Languages are real languages with their own rules of grammar and syntax just like all other languages. In essence, they have nothing to do with the local spoken language. In Australia, we sign AUSLAN (**Australian Sign Language**).

Secondly, people think that it just means you cannot hear. The effects of not being able to hear are a much greater disability, as many people born deaf only learn rudimentary English. We learn our mother tongue, English, through hearing – beginning when our ears develop at three months in the womb. Two and a half years later, the structures of our mother tongue are set down in the brain. Those early years are critical for language learning. For many of the deaf people that I know who were born deaf, their mothers contracted viruses such as rubella when they were three months pregnant, which damaged the developing ears of their child, resulting in the loss of critical language foundations

for learning English. Consequently, deafness is a very isolating disability. Most deaf children are born to hearing parents which means that many children are even isolated from their parents unless the parents learn to Sign English to their children. Requiring deaf people to attend Mass in their parish can further isolate them. Imagine what it would be like to be at Mass and not understand what the priest is saying, not being able to hear the readings, nor sing the hymns, or converse with anybody after Mass? Unable to communicate with the parish priest, the deaf person has no access to what is going on in the parish and cannot experience the richness of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Ideally, it would be great if there was one Sunday Mass in AUSLAN in each deanery in the Diocese where the deaf can truly be members of the Church – as readers, leading the intercessions, participating in the Signing, and socialising together with a “cuppa” afterwards. As adult members of the Church, they should have a full and active participation in the life of the Church through ministry, eg, as catechists to the deaf units in public schools.

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Deaf people have the same range of intelligence as hearing people, with the same intellectual abilities and gifts as hearing members of the Church. They have jobs, get married, buy their own cars and homes, socialise and live independently like the rest of us, and some become priests. They are more like migrants living in a dominant culture that is not theirs, but with the added disadvantage of not being able to learn to hear.

**You also worked for a number of years in the Diocese as Chaplain to People with a Disability.**

As with the Deaf Community, the first requirement is to understand the people you are working with and their family. When I began this work, it was providential that I had studied a Graduate Diploma of Special Education. This did not mean that I knew everything, but I did have some insight. Our understanding of disability is growing and the Church needs suitably qualified and experienced lay people, religious, and priests in this pastoral area to appreciate that no two people with a disability – even with the same disability – are the same. We also need to be educating our Church

communities in the value and needs of people with a disability, a necessary task which we would expect to find in a Church based on the gospel. People with a disability and their families need support throughout the life of the disabled person. Baptism and other sacraments should be celebrated in such a way that the parents know that the child is valued and welcomed as a member of the Church community as much as any other child. As is the case with the Deaf Community, there needs to be an understanding of, and practical approach to, the communication needs and abilities of those with disabilities other than hearing loss. Children and adults with intellectual, sensory, and multiple disabilities may communicate expressively in different ways – verbally, by vocalisation, signing, gestures, eye pointing, or whole body movement.

**You are known to many in the Diocese for your current role as Chaplain to the Spanish-speaking Community which you have now held for over 30 years. How did you get involved in this ministry?**

The parish at Campbelltown asked the Friars at Maryfields to visit an unconscious, dying grandmother in Campbelltown Hospital. The family was from Colombia and spoke almost no English. I anointed the dying grandmother with her ten year-old grandson acting as translator to his mother. Afterwards, the mother and I said the Rosary together – half-English, half-Spanish. After the grandmother’s death, I visited their home where the ten year-old was on the phone trying to organise the funeral. I took over with him as my translator.



Unwittingly, I had stumbled across an influx of Spanish-speaking migrants who had moved into the Macarthur area. I alerted the Scalabrinians and a chaplain began working in the area. As people kept coming to me, I began to learn Spanish for fun in order to mix with them. When the chaplain left the Diocese, I took over as their chaplain.

Like other non-English speaking communities, the Spanish language is of utmost importance to migrants from the Spanish-speaking world. Through it, they express their mentality, thought, culture, and the characteristics of their spiritual life and the traditions of their Church of origin. Language does not just have meaning which we understand with the intellect. It also carries associations and with their attendant emotions which touch the whole person. In multilingual South Africa, Nelson Mandela said,

“When I speak to someone in English, I speak to their intellect. When I speak to someone in their own language, I speak to their heart.”



After my first three years with the Spanish-speaking Community, I realised that learning on the job was not enough. I needed to spend time in Latin America and Spain, away from English and immersed in their cultures. I put in for a sabbatical year and was granted 15 months – nine in Chile and six in Spain – and for my penance, a month in Assisi! The experience gave me some insights into what it is like to live outside one's own culture and language as I lived with the native-born Franciscans wherever I was. Everywhere I went, the Franciscans and the people made me so welcome and were very helpful.

Back in Australia, the Spanish-speaking Community was the same. I have learnt so much from them about living the gospel. One outstanding example was after I fell down the steps at Windang Church and completely ruptured the quadriceps tendon in my right leg, resulting in an operation and six months recuperation. The Spanish-speaking Community organised themselves to ensure I was fed, the house cleaned, washing done etc. One man drove me on my many visits to the physiotherapist over the whole time.

**You also celebrated Mass for the Aboriginal Community in Campbelltown for eight years? In 1986, Pope John Paul II said to the aboriginal people, “The Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.” Have you see this become a reality in your time?**

I think that the Pope could have said these words to each and every one of the communities with whom I have worked with over the past 50 years. Very often, not only their contribution, but also their very presence is not joyfully

received by others. Rather, they experience indifference, prejudice and hostility. I do not think it has become a reality for any of these communities, much less the Aboriginal Community.

I grew up in “White Australia” and was educated in all the prejudices and misunderstandings that justify that concept. From primary school, I can still remember William Dampier's evaluation of the aboriginal people in 1699, “The most miserable people on earth.” Much of the literature used the word “savages”.



Fortunately for me, we always had a get-together after Mass where I could talk to people, many of whom shared the story of their lives. When I began working with the Aboriginal Community, I asked myself, “How should I celebrate Mass adequately and appropriately for this community of aboriginal people?” While in Townsville to visit one of my brothers, I asked the Chaplain to the Aboriginal Community, Fr Mick Peters.

He suggested I spend a week as a guest of one of the aboriginal families on Palm Island. I stayed with Bill and Edna Coolburra. That was a week of intense education, a sort of condensed postgraduate course, building on what I was learning in Campbelltown.

It also intensified my reading. The renowned anthropologist, W E H Stanner says that underlying the great aboriginal stories is a profound philosophy. These were no “savages” nor “the most miserable people on earth”, but sophisticated human beings. I believe it would be great to see these stories preserved, studied, and revered alongside the foundational stories of western civilisation such as “The Iliad” or “The Odyssey”.

**When looking back at 50 years of service, how have the communities you have worked with actually ministered to you and enriched your life, including your life with God?**

They have enriched me and changed my life tremendously. We have walked a journey together and I often think that I have received much more from them than I could possibly have given to them, both in understanding our human condition and in my life with God. God is a mystery – more mysterious than we can even imagine. They have led me into this great mystery. That does not mean that I understand more of the mystery, but more that it is an impenetrable mystery and I am happy to be at home with that.

Beyond that, I could mention friendship, company, support, challenge, inspiration, and understanding of what it means to be human, as some aspects of the gifts they have given me. The Holy Spirit has been active in my life through them. ■

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