

*Homily by Fr Michael O'Toole
for the Mass to celebrate
2024 Clergy Jubilees of Ordination
on Thursday, November 14
at St Patrick's Cathedral, Ballarat at 5.00pm*

Yes Patrick (in absentia) and Eric – it is hard to believe that almost 52 years ago we, along with Dan Murphy and Bill Keating, were lying on the cold marble floor about to be ordained deacons, wearing bright red dalmatics that came from deep within the archives of the diocese – all of which made a lovely black and white photo in the “Light” magazine a few weeks later.

We had begun our training for the priesthood in March 1968 – a total of 48 of us - the largest group ever to begin their training for the states of Victoria and Tasmania. The total number of students at Werribee, the College for the first four years at that time, was 128, with another 108 in the final four years at Glen Waverley. There were seven of us from Ballarat including dear friends with us here Vin Dillon, Leo Ryan and Pat Cashin. Each of them have ministered in the Church of Ballarat wonderfully over the years as fine married men.

My most haunting memory of those days was PLDS: Philosophers, Literary and Debating Society. The Chairperson would introduce the first-year student to the student body and the eight Jesuit priests with the words, “For his first appearance before the house – Mr O’Toole”. Then for a student in their fourth and final year the Chair would say, “And for his final appearance before the house - Mr Carmody or Mr O’Brien”. I would dream of the occasion when I would hear, “For his last appearance before the house - Mr O’Toole.” I say all that because tonight I am making my first appearance before the house - in this place – and I am also making my last appearance before the house – in this spot. A bit like the Paschal Candle - Jesus, the first and the last; the beginning and the end!

Our Gospel this evening from John, the beloved disciple, has Jesus turning around, seeing John, staring hard at John and asking, “What do you want?” John replied, “Teacher, where do you live?” Jesus replies to John then and Jesus replies to us tonight, “Come and See”. They went and saw where he lived. They stayed with him the rest of the day.

We also are staying with him. We are spending the rest of our lives with him. Eric, Patrick and myself, and other students in the early 1970's – some senior to us and some junior to us – were guided in the final four years of our studies by outstanding teachers - the Jesuit priests - men of great learning and spirituality. They had been overseas for further studies after the Vatican II Council and came home to Australia with the spirit of enthusiasm, joy and freedom. So it was that we sat at the feet of masters, guiding us in Scripture, Christology, Ecclesiology, Foundations of Theology, Mariology and Liturgy. There were occasions after their lectures that the lecture theatre erupted in applause – so thrilling, so enlightening, so challenging, so spiritually uplifting were the words spoken to us.

One such lecturer who guided us was Fr Gerry O'Collins, nephew of the late Bishop James Patrick O'Collins who would have confirmed so many of us here tonight. About three months ago Fr Gerry O'Collins died. Word of his death brought back memories to me of his lectures on Christology. Gerry opened our minds – Gerry opened the eyes of our hearts – and drew us with him into a closer and more personal relationship with Jesus. This relationship St Paul shares with us, "I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus. For him we have accepted the loss of everything and we look on everything as so much rubbish if only we can have Christ and be given a place in him. We only want perfection that comes from faith in Christ." This is the relationship which Fr Gerry O'Collins called to share with him in Christ – and then with him to minister in our priesthood – by listening, by serving, by receiving, by living in love.

Fr Brendan Byrne, another Jesuit priest, shared the homily at Fr O'Collins' funeral recently, "It seems Gerry O'Collins died as he lived and taught." Fr. Byrne said the very last words Gerry spoke were the night prayers of the Church, "Now lord, you can let your servant go in peace just as you promised – for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared for all the nations to see – a light to enlighten the gentiles and the glory of your people, Israel". Fr Byrne concluded, "Then there was quiet; then there was silence; then there was space - a space which only the love of Jesus can fill." Let there be space in each of our hearts tonight – gathered as we are around this Eucharistic table – a space which only the love of Jesus can fill, for he calls us all in love to be sisters and brothers!