

Bishop Geoff Robinson

My friends whenever somebody we love dies, I believe, we too die a little bit ourselves. We know that we can never be exactly the same again. An area of life – a familiar voice, footstep, a shared memory – has suddenly disappeared and cannot ever be recreated. It is a heart-rending experience because Geoff, whom we loved and still love, has a place in our hearts, but we can no longer find a place in his. A violence has been done to us, because we have lost a place where we loved to rest.

So, mixed with our sadness and grief there may well be even some anger, that the balance of our lives has been so roughly upset. And there's nothing wrong if our prayer is telling God we feel angry – God is big enough to take that.

Yet woven into all this mixed emotion, there is also a deep gratitude to God for all that Geoff has been to us.

In our different ways we came to know, to love and to appreciate Bishop Geoff Robinson. Geoff played a part in our lives and has left his influence upon us – that's the power of goodness and love, generosity, justice and truth.

Our love and appreciation for Geoff and his love and appreciation for us have, even if only in a small way, affected all of us. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here today or be tuning in to this Mass.

Geoff has chosen the scripture for today's Mass and, if he is measuring himself up against the ideal God asks of us, namely to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with God, we would say Geoff has passed the test admirably.

The Canon Law Society Journal has described Geoff as a man of truth and integrity, a dedicated priest, a pastoral Bishop, a renowned Canon lawyer and a humble servant of the people of God.

People have spoken to me about Geoff's courage, that he has been a prophetic voice for the Church, that he has been someone who really made a difference, made a great contribution to humanity, that he has been a light in the darkness. Others have spoken about Geoff's superb intellect, his clear mind, his ability to focus, his determination. Whatever he undertook, there were no halfmeasures with Geoff. Everything he did, he did well with all his heart. He had an open attitude that was inclusive particularly of marginalised people. Anyone who knew Geoff realised they were in the presence of a thoroughly good man.

To mark Bishop Geoff's 60th anniversary of priesthood, a plaque on the wall of Saint Joseph's Church, Enfield, expresses that the parishioners are grateful and blessed to have had Bishop Geoff in residence since October 1988. The parishioners are honoured to call him 'our Bishop'. It says he is our preacher, our counsellor, our teacher, our listener, our friend and faith-journey companion. This community is blessed to have been brought closer to Christ by his ministry. He has shown us that he is a true disciple of our loving God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

On everyone's behalf, I offer our deepest sympathy and the comfort of our presence and prayers to Geoff's brother, Denis, his sisters Patricia, Frances and Helen and to their families, to the Archdiocese of Sydney which he served so wholeheartedly, to the parishioners of St Joseph's, to his many collaborators and colleagues, and to his many friends and admirers among the people of God, laypeople, religious, bishops, priests and deacons.

Geoff had a coronary bypass on Christmas Eve in 1992, which he said became a deeply spiritual experience that caused him to go back to the foundations of his own beliefs and to look at everything in his life again in the light of his near encounter with death.

Bishop Geoff's love of Holy Scripture still flourished and sustained him right to the end. As a young priest in Rome, he had obediently accepted Cardinal Gilroy's wish that he study Canon Law. His own preference would have been to study Sacred Scripture.

Scripture has nourished Geoff's spirituality and prayer and this has always flowed through to his commitment to his moral sense of truth, of justice, and of charity.

When Geoff successfully organised a series of Scripture seminars throughout Sydney in the 90s, teachers and parishioners flocked to them showing a thirst for the Word of God. Geoff wanted to improve the biblical literacy of teachers and of the wider community.

In 1994, Geoff was granted a 10-week study leave. It was a field study during which he spent a week in the Sinai desert, three weeks in Turkey (Asia Minor of first century Christianity) and six weeks in Israel. His study leave led to a book he published in 1997 called "Travels in Sacred Places". Geoff dedicated the book to all people who struggle with their ideas of God, people who seek to hand on to others a knowledge and love that will sustain them.

In October 1994, Geoff published his book on Saint Mark's Gospel (almost 600 pages) entitled, "A Change of Mind and Heart". This began as a series of talks to teachers in Catholic schools. Geoff's writings through his many books and through his homilies easily reached and enlightened his readers and listeners. Geoff sought to promote conversation within and beyond the Catholic Church exemplified by his organisation of the Ecumenical Halifax-Portal Lectures and his involvement in Catalyst for Renewal and Spirituality in the Pub. As someone said, "*Geoff always saw beyond what he saw.*"

In 1967, Geoff became Lecturer in Canon Law at Saint Patrick's Seminary, Manly, during those challenging years of the revision and renewal of the Code of Canon Law, to accommodate the teachings of the II Vatican Council.

Geoff not only was part of the unanimous vote of Canon Lawyers to form the Canon Law Society of Australia and later of New Zealand, but he also served on its Executive for 14 consecutive years, serving as Secretary for six years and as President for eight years.

Our Bishops' Conference enlisted the Canon Law Society to comment on the draft texts of the Church's new Code of Canon Law by way of amendments and the drafting of new canons. Geoff was the convener, the organiser and was inspirational in his ability to bring others with him.

On the international level, Geoff was part of a core group of canonical advisors who made a positive contribution to the shape of the Church's new code of law promulgated in 1983.

Geoff was the architect of an Institute of Tribunal Practice in 1978 to train people who work in Church Tribunals. Geoff devised its structure and content and organised the lecturers. It is still ongoing, now under the Canon Law Society and reaches out beyond Australia, to Papua New Guinea, to the south west Pacific, and to south east Asia. Geoff's 1984 book "Marriage, Divorce, Nullity – a Guide to the Annulment Process in the Catholic Church" was revised to accommodate changes in Vatican jurisprudence and re-printed in 2000. It has since been translated into other languages.

When, in 2008, Geoff received the Owen Oxenham Award for Outstanding Service, the President of the Canon Law Society, Rev. Professor Ian Waters said, "Bishop Geoff's superb intellect, his generosity and his availability have resulted in significant contributions in the areas of Sacred Scripture, of Catholic Education, of Ecumenism, of Spirituality and Professional Standards.

Any of us who were at Geoff's ordination as Auxiliary Bishop in 1984 would have heard him say that, as important it was to be ordained the Bishop, the most important day of his life was the day he was baptised. In respect of that, Geoff simply wanted to be buried 'as a Christian'.

Bishop Geoff's appointment as Vicar for Education in the Archdiocese of Sydney, as Chair of the Catholic Schools Board and Chair of the Education Commission NSW opened up a new field for his conscientious pastoral engagement. People who worked with Geoff in this capacity speak of how he was always fully informed and alert to the wide-ranging agenda impacting on Catholic Education and able to respond in a clear and highly intelligent manner. Geoff could balance sometimes competing demands of the State political agenda impacting on Catholic schools and the rightful position of the Church on such matters.

He maintained and prioritised an excellent relationship with the Catholic Education Office and the Executive Director of Schools. He promoted strong relationships between School and Parish, particularly between the Principal and the Parish Priest. Geoff would always insist on considered, balanced and evidence-based decision-making in relation to major restructuring, such as with school closures, amalgamation of schools, or the founding of new schools.

Geoff was always available as a source of wise counsel on sensitive issues, giving his time to discuss options, implications while respecting the role of the person seeking his advice. In general, he always acted with integrity and a strong sense of justice, particularly for those for whom life was challenging. Geoff was always the pastor with the mission of the Church uppermost in his mind.

Bishop Geoff always seemed ahead of the game. Another good example of that was his perception which led to his intuition about the impact of what the sexual abuse crisis would bring.

Geoff stood for a truth we didn't like and did not want to own, because so many, at all levels of the Church, were in denial of what was coming to light. Geoff's commitment to truth and justice made him suffer for his beliefs.

I joined the Bishops' Conference in 1993 when Geoff was chair of the Bishops' Committee now designated Professional Standards. By 1996 it was largely Geoff's leadership that gave us Towards Healing – pastoral protocols on how to receive complaints of abuse by church personnel.

Next step was Integrity in Ministry, a code of conduct setting standards of behaviour for those involved in the ministerial life of the Catholic Church. Geoff outlined further steps in the process of the church facing up to this issue, an issue which has done irreparable damage not only to victims and survivors, but also to secondary victims: their families, the parish, the school communities and other people as well as to the credibility of the Church at large.

Geoff began by personally listening to victims, hearing their stories, witnessing the pain and damage done to them. Through that, he began to understand something of the complexity of factors which lead to abuse. He also realised the need to get into the mentality of those responsible for abusing.

Geoff urged us, his brother bishops, to listen to victims and to deal decisively with complaints of abuse. He saw the need to go further, trying to understand the weaknesses and failures in the Church's systems which enable such a betrayal of trust and power. All this was years before the Royal Commission of 2014.

At the time, some thought Geoff was going too far. Subsequent events have shown that we all owe Geoff a tremendous debt of gratitude. Didn't Jesus say, "The truth will set you free"?

I believe history will show Geoff Robinson to be one of the very significant leaders of the Catholic Church in our country, a real champion. His focus was on the pastoral side of reaching out both to victims and perpetrators with compassion and mercy. He was a light in the darkness, ahead of his time - prophetic. As with all prophets, he suffered for his honest appraisal of our situation.

In many ways, the wheel has come full circle. For while the Vatican was initially alarmed at Geoff's proactive stance and he was even taken to task by the Nuncio at the time, we now have Pope Francis setting up the Vatican's Commission for the Protection of Minors, and the Pope's spokesman Fr. Hans Zollner endorsing the very insights Geoff had taken, back at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st-century. A prophet is not welcome in his own country.

As Bishop Power wrote, Geoff "was a faithful son of the Church wanting the Church to be its best self while knowing it was *ecclesia semper reformanda* - the Church continually in need of reform.

Bishop Geoff's courageous book, "Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church - Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus" came from his deep-held desires for the

Church to be true to its mission of bringing Christ to the world and from his own great honesty and courage in naming the challenges facing the church today.

Through the liturgy of this Mass of Christian Burial, we gather in friendship here, to ask God to forgive whatever sins Bishop Geoffrey may have committed through human frailty. We ask God to take care of Geoff, now that his earthly life is over. We commit his bodily remains to the earth, but his spirit lives on. We all cherish many happy memories of what Geoff has been to each of us.

Through this Mass we share in the sacrifice of our redemption, the mystery of Christ who has gone before us through death on the Cross and has, by his resurrection, bequeathed to us all, the one sure ground of hope and fulfilment. Death is a mystery with which we can hardly grapple at all satisfactorily without faith; death, without faith, leaves us puzzled and disturbed.

Pope Saint John the 23rd said: "The priest is to be a good Shepherd who seeks to reach souls and to look upon the truth." The Pope then added, "Truth and goodness are like two wings to keep us airborne." Any bird will testify you need both the left and the right wings to be able to fly!

So today let us not so much more mourn Geoffrey's death as celebrate his homecoming, his birth to eternal life. We give thanks to God for Geoff's life, dedicated to the Lord in the service of his Church. We give thanks to God for the example Geoff's goodness, generosity, and consistency gives us; and we give thanks to God for the lessons that we have learnt from Geoffrey Robinson.

May Bishop Geoff's gentle soul rest contentedly today in the happiness of God's home where Jesus, "the way, the truth and the life...has gone ahead to prepare a place" for him and for each and everyone of us.

May Geoffrey rest in the Lord's peace and receive the reward of his goodness.
Amen.

† Bishop Peter Ingham