

towards the end of my days

THEOLOGICAL & SPIRITUAL REFLECTIONS

**BISHOP
GEOFFREY
ROBINSON**

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garratt
PUBLISHING



Published in Australia by
Garratt Publishing
32 Glenvale Crescent
Mulgrave, VIC 3170
www.garrattpublishing.com.au

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Typesetting by Mike Kuszla
Co-ordinating Editor, Seamus O'Grady
Edited by Greg Hill
Cover image iStock

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ISBN 9781922484192 (paperback)
ISBN 9781922484338 (ebook)

Cataloguing in Publication information for this title is available from the National Library of Australia.
www.nla.gov.au

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With the heart of an engaging poet and the courage of a great bishop, *Toward the End of My Days* by Bishop Geoffrey Robinson (this) is an inspiring witness – when the chips were down – to a deep and abiding faith that can inspire and lend hope to us all.

– **Thomas Groome**
Professor of Theology & Religious Education at Boston College

In this posthumous collection of essays on theology and spirituality, the late Bishop Geoffrey Robinson is revealed not only as a multi-talented scholar but also as a sympathetic pastor with a genuine concern for Catholics struggling with contemporary issues that challenge their faith. In a spirit of encouragement he shares with clarity, insight and ecumenical sensitivity his thoughts about a wide range of subjects, many of which have bedevilled the Church in the decades following Vatican II. By way of conclusion he presents a list of pertinent questions that will assist the reader to further ‘process’ the wide-ranging content of this very readable book and provide parish discussion groups with topics for their meetings.

– **Dr Brian Grenier is Christian Brother**
Author, former college principal, book reviewer & in-service presenter

Bishop Geoff’s last book is a wonderful gift to all the faithful. It is serious reading for all of us who yearn as church to find a new heart. While I might pause over some sections and question others, *Towards the End of my Days* offers me reflections that I will return to for insight, inspiration, encouragement and courage. We’ve been enlivened by his refreshing and relentless candour in earlier writing. These last reflections breathe life and common sense into faith, theology and church. There is a determined insistence beneath the moderate language. There is stern advice within the measured tones. If one can have fierce modesty, then the book, *Towards the End of my Days* has it in abundance.

– **Anne Benjamin**
**Honorary Professor ACU, co-author *Leadership in a Synodal Church*,
co-editor *Not Forgotten, Australian Catholic Educators 1820-2020*,
former Executive Director Catholic Education Parramatta**

Acknowledgements

I would like to recognise the following people for their contribution to the publication of this book:

Colleen O'Shanassy, Jack O'Grady, Geoffrey Joy, Natalie McNamara, Francis Sullivan, Kelvin Canavan fms, Julian McDonald cfc, Brian Grenier cfc, Rodger Austin, Brian Croke, Tony Ishak, Fr Joseph Camilleri, Dante Aspite, Richard Allcock, Karen Tayleur and Greg Hill.

– **Seamus O'Grady, 5 October 2021**

Sample

Vale Bishop Geoffrey Robinson

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson died on 29 December 2020 aged 83. In this subdued time of Christmas and New Year celebrations, the sombre news of his passing seems quite apposite. He was a talented, sensitive man who cherished his priestly vocation.

Despite his academic achievements and scholarly output, he was humble, often understated and reluctant to occupy the limelight. As an internationally regarded canonist and trailblazer for the just treatment of victims of clerical sexual abuse, he regularly found himself at the frontier of church/state relations a place populated by power brokers and vested interests. His quiet, polite demeanour and formidable intellect usually paved the way for a collegial approach to problem-solving. It was this strength of character along with a capacity to negotiate the multitude of stakeholders that comprise the Catholic Church, that led the bishops and religious leaders to turn to Robinson to lead a new approach in the handling of child sexual abuse.

Public revelations of the scandal were more commonplace by the 1980s and the bishops and religious leaders seemed clueless, even incompetent, in handling the moral and legal aspects of the abuse cases. Criminal accusations were dealt with behind closed doors, victims were disbelieved almost by default, allegations were fiercely defended and Church authorities instinctively took the side of perpetrators lest the image of the Church be put at risk. When settlements were made, they were usually paltry and the details were kept secret. In short, the Church authorities were driven by risk management, not moral leadership. The interests of the institution, both reputational and financial, were paramount and the aversion to involving the police was universal.

Robinson's appointment in the early 1990s to chair a committee to review and recommend on the handling of sex abuse matters, was the turning point for the Church. It was a shrewd appointment. For too long the rubrics of canon law had been ignored by the bishops. So too their ethical obligations to victims. Robinson was exquisitely qualified to not only rectify but to reform the situation. He spearheaded a far-reaching and effective change to the protocols for complaints handling and the violations of professional standards. This was all the more impressive for the fact that very entrenched and powerful interest groups wanted nothing to do with a more transparent and accountable approach. He was adamant that the needs of the victim, not the interests of the institution, should shape a pastoral as opposed to a legalistic protocol. He actively engaged with victims, something which up to that point was alien to Church policymaking.

He consulted widely with Church bodies, civil authorities and community stakeholders. This broke new ground for a Church more comfortable with its separatist stance. In 1997 the new national policy, Towards Healing, was adopted across the country by dioceses and religious orders. It was lauded for its capacity to craft restorative measures for victims according to their circumstances. It introduced the requirement that victims receive a formal apology and a reparation package. It encouraged the reporting of suspected perpetrators to the police. In addition, it called for compliance with professional standards in Church workplaces and for safety guidelines and measures wherever children were involved with Church agencies. The protocol was expanded to include any vulnerable person involved in Church activities. Robinson had effectively overseen a paradigm shift that placed

the victim as the priority and insisted on a contemporary best practice approach to child safety. The fact that only the Archdiocese of Melbourne did not take up the protocol was a testament to his leadership and credibility. Towards Healing was a world first in the handling of sex abuse cases and was replicated in other Western countries.

Robinson was a serious man, introspective and considered. He gave the impression that the labours of life wore a heavy toll on his spirit. Yet his experience with the sex abuse scandal changed him. In an odd way, it liberated him. He was a prophet. A reluctant and shy one at that, but never timid to speak his mind. He was every bit a bishop of the Second Vatican Council. The notion that somehow the Church should act as a bulwark against modernity was alien to his thinking and vocation. After his days in episcopal office, he used his expansive intellect and writing skills to explore avenues through which the Church could more effectively engage with modern Australian life. He was particularly perturbed by the growing disinterest of Catholics with their Church and the schism between its teachings on sexuality and the lived experience of ordinary Catholics.

He was convinced that the Church needed a Third Vatican Council. The abuse scandal had laid bare the corruption and complicity within the Church's culture. It had revealed the fragility of the institution's integrity. Moreover, the abuse revelations only further fuelled the growing discontent amongst Catholics as the Church struggled to keep pace with advances in the social and biological sciences. Unless an open and honest dialogue was undertaken, Robinson feared the relevancy of the Church in the West was at severe risk.

His writings ranged from the abuse of power and authority in the Church to matters of sexuality, gender and marriage. He strove to find a pathway for Catholics who felt at odds with their Church through no fault of their own. His instinct was pastoral and his imagination was creative and refreshing. He was not always popular with the reactionary elements within the Church, nor with bishops who bristled at his suggestions for reform. His persistence was a testament to his deep commitment to the Gospel and to the naming of inconvenient truths. That he gave time to study, reflect, write, pray and publish speaks of a desire to make a difference and to effect change for those who were the subject of discriminatory and naïve attitudes. It seemed that his time with victims of sexual abuse awakened in him a sensitivity to the plight of anyone struggling to be heard and respected. He was one that did listen. And he has been respected widely for his openness and honesty.

In his final years he was once again embroiled in the sex abuse scandal. This time as an expert witness for the Royal Commission. His expertise and experience were invaluable as the Commission came to terms with the history of the Church's response to the crisis. His testimony was frank and compelling. As it happens it now stands as his last commentary on what has been the most destructive influence on the credibility of the Church he so faithfully served.

His was a voice that echoed the spirit of the Gospel – a siren for truth and justice. His legacy will sit comfortably with the style of missionary Church Pope Francis proclaims. He was a loyal and obedient servant, a courageous and dedicated disciple.

– Francis Sullivan, 5 January 2021
as CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council
guided the Australian Catholic Church's engagement with the
Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

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FOREWORD

In these simply written yet profound end-of-life theological and spiritual reflections, the late Bishop Geoffrey Robinson leaves the members of his troubled Church with a powerfully argued, accessible and thoughtful agenda for a credible debate on Catholic Church reform. Regrettably, not a single one of his ideas is likely to get past the 2023 Synod on Synodality censors which is a pity at one level for it is a ready-made hugely insightful schema for discussion of everything that is relevant to the contemporary Church. On the other hand, the fact that such a schema would frighten the Curial horses is not terminal for the Curia has no copyright on the words *synod* or *synodality*. The fact is that the People of God have already long since embarked on the Church's most significant synodal journey, and it is their own – informal betimes, spontaneous betimes, increasingly organised and progressively growing in confidence. Bishop Geoffrey can take real credit for the fact of the synodal journey of the People of God.

The kaleidoscope of issues that are being debated on that journey are all dealt with here in Bishop Geoffrey's legacy document, with no dissembling, no hesitation. The tone is forthright but humbly conversational, as if the bishop and his readers are walking together on the synodal Camino – chatting over coffee, lunch and dinner – for this is a gentle if urgent invitation to dialogue, not a stern command to magisterial obedience. The sheer breadth of Bishop Geoffrey's scholarship and experience is matched by a towering intellect and analytical skills that can synthesise the profoundest of subjects into unpretentious conclusions, for which he claims no infallibility and exercises no canonical superiority. His patience with human frailty is commendable. His impatience with magisterial absurdity is refreshing and entirely understandable.

I first met Bishop Geoffrey Robinson at the Rosemary Goldie lecture in Sydney in 2014. Though he did not then know it, he had been a source of real spiritual strength to me since the publication seven years earlier of his powerful critique of the role of clericalism and patriarchy in the contemporary Church, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church*. Coming from the Irish Church, where bishops normatively stay safely within the episcopal bunker where internal critique of the Church is definitely not normative, the courage and conviction of this rare episcopal honesty intrigued and reassured me. I was grateful to him for making himself so vulnerable, for his was a lonely road. There is little tolerance of clerical dissent or internal criticism at governance level in the Church. More than that, he as an eminent canon lawyer knew he was likely inviting censure.

The sheer lucidity and forthrightness of his views have always been underpinned by his formidable biblical scholarship and training as a canon lawyer and that is evident again in these reflections. By the time I met him I was

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a qualified canon lawyer and in the throes of doctoral studies on an unloved, neglected area of canon law, the rights and obligations of child members of the Catholic Church.

It is hard to credit given the scandalous revelations about the systemic culture of physical and sexual abuse of children throughout the Catholic Church that – with the exception of Bishop Geoffrey and the then former Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin – no bishop has ever bothered to ask me what my research and subsequent book on the subject has to say. Bishop Geoffrey asked with real interest, with probing questions and with delight. Sometimes meeting one's heroes can be a journey into disappointment, but not on that memorable day in Sydney.

Here was a humble priest with a brain full of wonder and empathy and feeling and curiosity that had not been pulped by an intellectually impoverished clerical formation and canonical obligations of obedience to the magisterium that conduced to silence and even cowardice. He was courageously prepared to train its guns on that no-go area, the dysfunctional, patriarchal inner workings and structures of the Catholic Church, not in order to further damage the Church but to limit the damage, to heal it and to liberate the divine grace long dammed up by ignorance, and a smug narrow-mindedness that must surely still make Jesus weep.

Here was a man who made Christ credible among an episcopacy almost hell-bent on consigning Him to an irrelevance that has become the tragic zeitgeist of the Western world. Bishop Geoffrey's thoroughgoing view of God made him first a child of God, a brother to all God's human family regardless of their view of God – and yet with humility he freely admits here that his views and vision are inchoate, imperfect, dimmed by just being human and incapable of anything as expansive as defining faith, or God, or timeless doctrines, or forever teachings.

Geoffrey's illness and death seemed at first to silence that rare and welcome voice, but with this new book that fine voice and fine mind speaks from the grave: strong and confident, perceptive and prophetic, timely and providential. Maybe, just maybe, Bishop Geoffrey's wise and urgent words – distilled from a lifetime of searching and seeing the sacred with an open heart and curious mind – may yet redeem a disoriented Church futilely chasing the long-gone ghost of early Church synods past, and lately embarked on a rash, chaotic so-called synodal journey into even greater bewilderment. Are we listening? We should be, for there is more insight, more guidance, more clarity, in Geoffrey's brief last words than in all the acres of impenetrable verbiage to which an increasingly uninspired, bored and disinterested People of God have been subjected from the Curial central command and control. Christ is visible, audible, credible in Bishop Geoffrey's beautiful, poetic *vade mecum* for the journey in faith ahead of us.

Yet he warns us over and over that we should be careful about assuming we have got our heads around the infinite, that God is our possession. The gravitational pull of man-made certainties is always threatening but that way lies a loss of growth, a paralysis that keeps grace out. Here in this one, marvellous excerpt, is Geoffrey's recipe for the kind of dynamic spiritual growth that excites and energises a life, gives it momentum, and lights it up from the inside – not with a self-righteous faith but with a burning love of God and neighbour.

“To promote growth, we must move from a god religious authorities believe they can possess, package and dispense to others to a god of infinite surprise

We grow in moral and spiritual stature when we constantly ask and live the question:

‘What is the most loving thing I can do here and now?’

It is persons, not religions, that God loves. No individuals may claim to be pleasing to God solely on the basis of the particular religion they belong to.

War, terrorism, violence, oppression, hatred or despising others, in the name of religious beliefs, is an abomination to God and a cursing of God's name.

There are no writings in any religion that were written or dictated or inspired by God in such a manner as to stand above the limitations of human agency and the inadequacy of human words. God has revealed important truths to us, but God has not revealed to us detailed answers concerning all we must believe nor detailed orders concerning all we must do, neither through sacred writings, nor through any human being speaking in God's name. It is God's gift that, both individually and together, we must constantly search for truth and goodness in uncertainty, for this is how we grow.”

The Robinson roadmap to spiritual maturity is only part of the story, for to understand why one should even bother to embark on such a journey – especially now when a cloud of pervasive and righteous cynicism hangs over the major global institutional infrastructure that promotes faith in Christ – it is necessary to go back right to the beginning of us and confront as he does the difficult questions about the point or pointlessness of Creation. If there is a God then why did they bother to create us? Why subject us to suffering, disease, death? Bishop Geoffrey does not shy away from the awkward questions, the unresolved paradoxes of hatred, greed, genocide, famine, violence, sexism,

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racism, sectarianism, homophobia and all the rest that make people wonder; where is God in all this? Is there a God at all? Is God responsible for the chaos?

And it is in reflecting on those questions that the ill, dying Bishop Geoffrey, with one foot in this world and one in the next, gives us his best guess, his best assurance with an opening chapter that is stunningly stark in its image of the relationship between God and creation and humanity:

“Science tells me that the world began with a big bang; faith tells me that this big bang was an explosion of God’s love ... The final goal of God’s plan is that the human race should continue to grow in its physical, intellectual, emotional social, artistic, moral and spiritual life until it in some manner returns the world to the love from which it came. If this process takes more billions of years, then so be it, for God can wait.”

Bishop Geoffrey allows that God watches and waits but also equips us with the tools to solve the problems that torment us and our journey back to his love starts with taking responsibility into our own hands for bringing solutions to “*a world of randomness and uncertainty*” for “*God is delighted when the human race makes progress without needing any intervention from God*”.

In other words, confronted by suffering, confronted by grave moral dilemmas such as abortion, euthanasia, militarism or migration, our response should not be to ask why God has allowed this but much more importantly to ask: “How shall I respond?” It is in answering that we find our feet as followers of Christ, cast adrift from the doctrinaire and the legalistic, the ritualistic and the perfunctory, from a narcissistic denominationalism that conduces to sectarianism. Now we are in an unmoored boat, out in the deep where faith and fear allow us to feel what the late Catholic feminist theologian Ann Louise Gilligan has called “the surprise of life”: God with us, God beside us, God all around us, embracing us kindly, not in a vice-like grip, but in the gentle surprise of love offered and ever-available.

No matter how alone we feel, no matter how unloved by others, Bishop Geoffrey is sure of one thing: that we can come to know that this God loves each of us unconditionally; carries us when we do not even notice; is our faithful, enduring companion, wherever we are in our life’s journey and whether we believe in God or not. It is that one belief that allows us to cope with wakening each day to “uncertainty and groping through the dark”. It is that conviction which should open our hearts to our common brotherhood and sisterhood, taking us beyond diffidence or fear of “the other” to a heartfelt gratitude for the abundance of God-ordained diversity from which comes the creativity of poetry, music, science, art, technology, imagination

– the very tools of problem-solving, or as Geoffrey would have it – returning ourselves to God’s love and the very purpose of our creation.

As the Catholic Church embarks upon a universal synodal journey that the hierarchy is already fearful of, already attempting to control, already micro-managing into disappointing dullness, we would all benefit from a reading of Bishop Geoffrey’s fearless last words, his inspired gift of a bold vade mecum, a navigational instrument designed to stop us from, as he says, arguing over doctrines, which are ill-fitting ideologies that can only be made to fit the facts “by violence” and keep us “going round and round in circles and lead nowhere”. A synod with that agenda would be worth the effort, worthy even of Christ.

**– Dr Mary McAleese, President of Ireland 1997–2014
Professor of Children, Law & Religion
University of Glasgow**

PREFACE

There were people both within and outside the Catholic Church who admired and respected Bishop Geoffrey Robinson. Many of these were his friends, and I was privileged to be one of them. I first encountered Geoff (as he preferred to be called) when I was interviewed for a significant role in the Catholic Education Office Sydney. He rang to tell me that I was unsuccessful – a task he had to do for many aspirants and which he told me recently was the most difficult part of his role as Chairman of the Sydney Archdiocesan Catholic Schools Board. Fortunately, some years later he rang me with good news that I had been appointed to another position, as the Director of Religious Education and Curriculum for the system of primary and secondary Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Sydney. Following that appointment in 1996 through many meetings, gatherings, professional learning and social events – but particularly in the Masses he celebrated for teachers – I came to realise that this was no ordinary man (or priest, for that matter).

People said that Geoff was a man of few words, reticent in social settings, but ever courteous and grateful. He particularly enjoyed a simple restaurant meal with my co-directors in Catholic Education. My wife, Colleen, and I were privileged to host him, along with close friends, in our home on a number of occasions. Here we enjoyed some delightful conversations. I came to count him as a friend, and felt honoured to be counted as one of his. Thus I also felt immensely affected by his passing.

A fortnight before he died, Bishop Geoffrey Robinson sent Colleen and I a beautiful letter:

I look back in gratitude to all the people who have made my life a time of warmth and wonder. You were a significant part of that process and I thank you for all you have been for me. I have been truly fortunate in my family and my friends, and I thank God daily for this.

I hope to go to God soon and I will do my best to carry your memory and your presence with me.

May your life be filled with inspiration. May you continue to grow in your physical, intellectual, emotional, social, artistic, moral, and spiritual being, for this is what we are all called to do.

(Handwritten) Thank you for the wonderful enjoyment you always brought to life and for the profound seriousness that lay beneath it.

God bless

Geoff

Much has been written about Geoff's courage in standing up for victims of abuse. He was chosen by the Australian Bishops in the 90s to be the spokesperson for the sexual abuse of minors by clergy and religious. In 1993 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 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 that 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, 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. The Pope's spokesman, Fr Hans Zollner, endorses 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

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Christ to the world and from his own great honesty and courage in naming the challenges facing the Church today.

In August 2020, a group of Geoff's former colleagues in Catholic education – Br Kelvin Canavan (Executive Director of the Catholic Education Office, Sydney 1987-2008), Miss Natalie McNamara (Director of Human Resources, CEO Sydney, 1992-2010), Mr Seamus O'Grady (Director of Religious Education and Curriculum, CEO Sydney, 1997-2012), and Dr Brian Croke (Executive Director of the NSW Catholic Education Commission, 1992-2016) – gathered in the presbytery of Enfield parish to discuss Bishop Geoff's contribution to the Church and society, in particular his stellar contribution to Catholic education. We had been chosen for this privilege by Geoff at the request of parishioner Tony Ishak of World Media International PL. Tony, was keen to create a video recording for use at the forthcoming parish celebrations to mark Geoff's 60 years as a priest.

Time and again in this gathering, tributes flowed about his integrity, scholarship, loyalty to a Church that largely rejected him, compassion, honesty, and love for his fellow human beings worldwide.

Particularly noted was his ability as chairman to ensure all sides of an issue were considered, and his concern for all parties – whether the decision went for or against them. His gentle wisdom was a huge gift in a period when Catholic education faced major issues particularly with respect to governmental policy around funding of Catholic schools.

On 13 December 2020, the Parish of St Joseph's Church Enfield honoured their special bishop and friend with a celebratory Mass and luncheon. Geoff, battling the final stages of cancer and wheelchair-bound, delivered his moving homily, "The Song that Jesus Sang". An overflowing congregation responded to Geoff with extraordinary affection and affirmation. Twice during the celebration they gave him an extended standing ovation. It was to be Geoff's final public Mass.

A memorial plaque was unveiled in the church which reads:

St Joseph's parishioners are grateful and blessed to have had Bishop Geoff in residence since October 1988. We are very honoured to call him our Bishop. He is our Preacher, Counsellor, Teacher, Listener, 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.

A few days later, on 15 December, I visited Geoff in his modest flat. We shared some great conversation over a cup of tea. A nurse visited and dressed his bandaged legs. He asked me to stay and chat while this was happening (if I wasn't too squeamish). I realised then that he had not long to live. We joked

about the Netflix show, *The Crown*. I knew that the lunch we had planned when he was feeling better was not going to happen.

Towards the end of those two hours, I queried whether he had done any more writing. To my surprise he said yes, he had written a book. I asked what he intended to do with this book. He asked me to critique it. I said, “surely you have others better qualified than I to do such a task”. He smiled and said, “They would regard it as heresy!” He walked me slowly into his study where he showed me some 26 separate chapters of a book entitled, *Towards the End of My Days*. He had disaggregated the chapters because he was worried about losing the whole book should he press the wrong key! We managed to send all the chapters to my email address and I promised to get back to him. Over the following days I read through this beautiful work.

The following Friday I rang him (he was actually visiting his birthplace in Richmond, NSW) and asked what he wanted done with the questions at the end of some of the chapters. He said, “check that they make sense” and asked whether he should alter the text in the light of my responses. I said there wasn’t much that I could disagree with! The following Tuesday I dropped by to deliver a copy of a book that a colleague and I had recently published. He gratefully received it and we agreed that his book must be published. He was clearly not looking well and left it in my hands... two days later he was admitted to Concord Hospital where he died on 29 December, 2020. Geoff had ‘returned to the Father’.

Geoff had given me permission to show the book to a few colleagues and friends, all of whom were enthusiastically emphatic that the book should be published. Accordingly, I contacted the executors of Geoff’s will and was given the go ahead by their solicitors in early April 2021. Garratt Publishing had handled Geoff’s previous books and it was logical to approach them for this one. Karen Tayleur and her team were keen to proceed as soon as possible and I am indebted to them for taking up this challenge. Worth noting that Geoff directed the royalties from his previous books to a struggling diocese in PNG. This will continue with royalties from *Towards the End of My Days*.

This wonderful book – bequeathed to us as his final testament – is the culmination of his scholarship, reflection and experience. Loyal to his Church to the end, Geoff was determined to leave no stone unturned in exploring every aspect of a Catholicity faithful to its founder Jesus Christ. In so doing he has made ‘being a Catholic’ a grown up, contemporary, intelligent, and nuanced response to a humanity in need of love and justice.

To act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6,8) is the precise epitaph for Geoffrey Robinson RIP.

– **Co-ordinating Editor, Seamus O’Grady**
BSc(Hons), MEd, MA (Theological Studies)
Balmain East, NSW
19 April 2021

CHAPTER 1

THE LOVE FROM WHICH WE CAME

A GOD OF INFINITE PATIENCE

SCIENCE TELLS me that the world began
with a big bang;
faith tells me
that this big bang
was an explosion of God's love.

If I do not have proof
that this religious claim is true,
no-one else has proof
that it is not true.

Unimaginable amounts of energy
swirled in the cosmos
until, over immense periods of time,
more solid objects began to form,
and stars, planets and galaxies came into being.

This world had its great beauty and majesty,
but there was no thinking and feeling being there
who could respond to the love that had created it.

TOWARDS THE END OF MY DAYS

More billions of years passed,
until on the planet we inhabit
the first primitive life forms came into being,
then crawled out of the sea
and began to colonise the land.

An extraordinary and beautiful variety
of plants and animals developed.
But there was still no being
who could respond to God's love.

More aeons of time went by,
until a few animals
began to stand upright on two feet
and develop their conscious lives.

Human beings slowly evolved
who could think and feel
and, at long, long last,
respond to God's love.

From the explosion of love in the big bang
to the first conscious response to this love
had taken the scarcely imaginable time of
13,800,000,000 years.

Over all that immense time God
had waited,
and waited,
and waited,
not interfering, but,
with infinite patience,
allowing things to develop at their own pace.

God waited all this time
for the level of growth we have achieved
and, if necessary,
will wait further billions of years
for the full working out of the divine plan.

THE LOVE FROM WHICH WE CAME

The final goal of God's plan
is that the human race
should continue to grow
in its physical, intellectual, emotional
social, artistic,
moral and spiritual life
until it in some manner returns the world
to the love from which it came.

If this process takes more billions of years,
then so be it,
for God can wait.



Sample

HUMAN MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD

THERE IS only one God,
but an endless variety
of human misunderstandings of God.

Unable to grasp the infinite God,
we constantly create
a lesser god in our minds
and worship that god.

Human ideas of God will always
be infinitely inadequate,
but some can at least assist
rather than hinder our growth.

To promote growth, we must move:

from a god about whom we use many words
to a stunned awareness of an “otherness”
beyond the reach of either words or images;

from a god who is contained within a book
or the teachings of a human authority
to a god who cannot be contained by any created thing;

from a god religious authorities believe they can
possess, package and dispense to others
to a god of infinite surprise;

from limited human ideas,
e.g. an elderly white male ruler,
to a god who is above all limitations,
e.g. a god who is neither male nor female;

from a god who should always agree with our ideas
to a god who constantly challenges our ignorance;

from a god greatly concerned with glory and majesty
to a god not concerned with self at all,
but caring passionately about what we do
to each other, to ourselves, and to the community;

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from a god whose glory is to be found
in our obedience
to a god whose glory is to be found
in our growth;

from an angry god,
not to a god of soft love,
but **to** a god who, out of love, wants our growth
and, like a good parent or teacher,
is not afraid to challenge us to grow;

from a religion in which
beliefs, moral rules, worship
and membership of a religious community
hold first place
to a religion in which
a love relationship with God and neighbour
holds first place.

from a commercial relationship with a god
whose rewards can be earned
by doing right things
to a love relationship with a god who is pure gift;

from a relationship in which we are firmly in charge
and determine exactly what part
of God shall be allowed in our lives
to a love relationship of total giving;

from a god who demands
that we bridge the gap between us
to a god who always takes the first step
and comes to us.



WORKING WITH GOD

ALL PEOPLE are called by God
to the development
of their full potential
– physical, intellectual, psychological
social, artistic, moral and spiritual –
so that we may use to the full
all the gifts God has given us
to help both ourselves
and the whole world to grow.

We grow in moral and spiritual stature
when we constantly
ask and live the question,
“What is the most loving thing
I can do here and now?”

The communal path we walk
on this spiritual journey,
Jewish or Christian or Muslim or other,
is important,
for no one can find all answers alone.
But so is our continuing individual search,
for each must take personal responsibility.

A way to God is authentic
if it eventually leads us
to find God in the very depths of our own being.

It is persons, not religions, that God loves.
No individuals may claim
to be pleasing to God
solely on the basis
of the particular religion they belong to.

A good Jew is more pleasing to God
than a bad Christian;
a good Christian than a bad Muslim;
a good Muslim than a bad atheist;
a good atheist than a bad Jew.

THE LOVE FROM WHICH WE CAME

Holding true beliefs is less important
than sincerely seeking true beliefs.
Seeking only beliefs that suit oneself
can never be sincere.

Any coercion to join a particular religion,
or imposing of penalties for changing religion,
is hateful to God.

Suicide can never be martyrdom.

War, terrorism, violence,
oppression, hatred or despising others,
in the name of religious beliefs,
is an abomination to God
and a cursing of God's name.



THE SEARCH FOR RIGHT BELIEFS

WRITINGS CONSIDERED sacred arose because their authors believed they had experienced the presence of the divine in their lives and sought to reflect it to others.

While strongly influenced by this perceived contact with the divine, they remained human authors writing in human words.

There are no writings in any religion that were written or dictated or inspired by God in such a manner as to stand above the limitations of human agency and the inadequacy of human words.

God has revealed important truths to us, but God has not revealed to us detailed answers concerning all we must believe nor detailed orders concerning all we must do, neither through sacred writings, nor through any human being speaking in God's name.

It is God's gift that, both individually and together, we must constantly search for truth and goodness in uncertainty, for this is how we grow.

There are two sources of our knowledge of God:

- sacred writings inspired by an experience of God,
- the world around and within us created by God.

There is one tool given to us to understand the two sources – discernment – which includes reason, feelings, spiritual insight,

THE LOVE FROM WHICH WE CAME

and a respect for the development
of understanding over time.

In this study, faith, reason and feelings
can and must work together in mutual respect.

To apply sacred writings to our own times
we must seek to understand
the human story that gave them birth,
discern as best we can
the presence and voice of God in that story,
and then bring this discernment into dialogue
with the knowledge of the divine we can gain
from the world around and within us.

There is no subject on which
we have been spared the hard work
of using all our powers of discernment
to discover God's truth.

We must also humbly acknowledge that
faith can often do no more
than help us to live
with the mysteries and paradoxes of life
in an ambiguous world.

Faith does not claim to have an answer
to every conceivable question.
It can offer us,
“enough light for those who want to believe
and enough shadow for those who do not.”¹

Whether we have religious faith or not will depend
above all on two factors:

- our own personal story, and
- whether we **want** to believe.



1 Blaise Pascal (1623-62).

THE SEARCH FOR RIGHT ACTIONS

PEOPLE GROW in moral stature when,
at one and the same time they

- constantly seek God's truth rather than create their own,
- and take personal responsibility for their decisions.

It is possible to increase in our understanding
of what God's goodness asks of us,
but this involves a serious and never-ending search,
both for individuals
and for the whole human race.

We should spend our whole life in this search,
while also constantly making decisions and acting
on the basis of the best understanding of that goodness
that we are capable of at the present moment.

The relationship between our conscience and God's goodness
should be a constant, humble and loving dialogue.

We may discern six levels of moral living:

- 6) Superiority and Vengeance.
The pointless and endless cycle of revenge
- 5) Justice without Mercy.
Getting even: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth
- 4) The Usefulness of Others to Ourselves
- 3) Respect for Human Dignity.
Respect for Life and Physical Integrity
Respect for the Relationships that Give Life Meaning
Respect for Material Possessions
Respect for Good Name
- 2) Love as You Love Yourself.
- 1) Love as God Loves Us.

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There is no one who cannot fall back
to the lowest level in a single moment,
but there is also no one
who is not capable
of rising to the highest level.

A person who strives to live at the higher levels,
but has some incorrect beliefs,
will always be closer to God
than a person who has correct beliefs,
but does not strive
to live at the higher levels of moral living.



Sample

THE SPIRITUAL AND THE UNSPIRITUAL

WITHIN EVERY human heart
there are both longings and fears.
They occupy every waking moment of our day,
and fill our nightly dreams.

The deepest and most constant longing
is always
the longing for love.

Indeed, all our longings
are nothing more than
different expressions of this
one longing for love.

Many expressions of longing are immediate
(I'd love an ice cream, a glass of wine, a good meal).
But we are always aware of deeper longings.

We long for a life-work
that will inspire us
and give meaning to our lives.

We long for a soulmate, a life-partner,
who will share our journey,
support and inspire us.

We long with all our hearts
for the safety, growth and happiness
of our children.

We long for family and friends around us.

We long for a world
not bound by constant greed
and the striving to be the greatest.

We long for a world without war,
where no family will be forced to join
the millions of refugees
trudging through the ice and snow

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towards an uncertain future;
where no child will be washed up on a beach
like a piece of garbage.

We long for a world willing to sacrifice
to overcome global warming,
so that we may not leave a barren world
to our children.

We long to do all in our collective power
to ensure that we never again have to see
the enormous eyes and distended stomachs
of thousands of children dying of hunger.

We long for many things in the depths of our hearts.
We are frustrated by our own limitations,
and we long to soar beyond the stars.

Somewhere in the very depth of our being
we long for a love without limits,
a love so deep that we cannot find
words for it,
and do not even know what it is
that we are searching for.

We know only that
we will never be fully satisfied
until we find it.



TOWARDS THE END OF MY DAYS

Advertising spends vast sums
seeking to concentrate our minds
on superficial longings
for things that can be bought with money.
It strives hard to get us to buy
things we do not need.
But those who
seek to meet only
their more immediate longings
are unspiritual people.

Those who genuinely seek to respond
to their deeper longings
are spiritual people.

The deeper we descend,
and the harder we work
to fulfil our deepest longings
the more spiritual we will be.



THE CIRCLE OF LOVE

WE USE the simple word “love”
for the most noble feelings in human life,
such as parents at the bedside
of a desperately sick child.

But we also use the same word
for quite selfish feelings,
such as love of self
or love of money.
The ancient Greeks expressed it better
by using three different words.

Eros means love as *desire*.
It expresses the unquiet aspect of love,
the creative fire within,
the restlessness and loneliness,
the wildness and ache
at the centre of our being.²
All love starts as this desire.

Philia is the deep *affection*
we feel for those important to us.
We want them to be
a constant part of our life,
and we want all that is good for them.
We want these two things so much
that strong feelings spontaneously arise in us.

Agape is the *action*
that goes out to others
without looking for anything for ourselves.
It is the love we feel for people far away
who are suffering or in need.
It can be known only from the actions it prompts.

There is a beautiful circle of love,
for all true love begins as desire,

2 Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1998, p.4.

TOWARDS THE END OF MY DAYS

leads to affection,
then rises to self-giving actions.

A couple desire a baby (*eros*),
are overwhelmed by feelings of love
when they first hold their baby in their arms (*philia*),
but that very night quickly discover
that love involves immense self-giving (*agape*).

The circle must then be completed,
for the self-giving actions
must be constantly renewed
by the desire and the affection.

Love of God must also be a circle.
It must begin with the desire (*eros*)
that God be an important part of my life,
and lead to the desire
for all that God wishes for this world.
This will lead to an affection (*philia*)
for the God
who inspired the desire.
And this in turn will lead
to a giving of self (*agape*)
to bring about all that God desires for this world.

We grow through this process
when the giving of self constantly leads us back
to the desire and affection that inspired it.

For many thousands of years
people have followed the ways of violence,
coercion, force and domination,
but every day brings further proof
that these ways have not created a better world.

Is it not time
to try working with God
by entering into the circle of love?



ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PRAYER

MY GOD,

I adore you in your infinite greatness.

I thank you for your constant, loving care.

I need your help at every moment of my day.

Forgive the failings of my weakness.

Do not let me drift away from you.

Help me always to love you more.

Sample