

Chris Geraghty: Cassocks in the Wilderness

By Justin Gleeson SC



Chris at the time he first went to Springwood as a 12-year-old.

Christopher Geraghty has been a Judge of the New South Wales Workers Compensation Court since 1993.

Chris's prior legal career commenced with his BAB/SAB studies in 1978 when he was working at the Health Commission of New South Wales. He had a stint as a legal reporter with Channel 10 in 1979. Between 1980 and 1983, Chris worked as a solicitor in the Litigation Department of Blake Dawson Waldron. Others there at the time include Rod Smith (of 7 Selborne Chambers), Gary Gregg (of 9 Wentworth

Chambers and artistic fame) and David Hall (of Henry Parkes Chambers). Chris did a wide range of litigation, including workers' compensation, personal injuries work, insurance and finance company work.

In February 1984, Chris came to the Bar and read on 8 Wentworth Chambers with Jack Mater. He recalls that Jack gave him the sound advice never to turn up to court in white pants. Other well-known names on the 8th floor at that time included Brian Murray, Brian Donovan, Jack O'Reilly, Peter Taylor, Geoff Lindsay and Lloyd Waddy. About two years later, Chris bought a room on the floor from Peter Young.

At the Bar Chris did a wide range of work, including workers compensation and personal injury work. Between 1989 and 1991 he was one of the counsel assisting the Chelmsford Royal Commission. After returning to the Bar in 1991 he did a wide range of work, including work for the State Crown such as prosecution under the *Pure Foods Act 1908* and the *Fisheries Act 1935*.

Since going to the Bench, Chris has found more time to resume some of his earlier interests. He has taken up again a great deal of reading and says that he has found himself dreaming for the first time in 10 years. Chris also began to write down some of his experiences in his earlier life. This has led to the publication in 2001 of his first book entitled *Cassocks in the Wilderness*. The sub-title is 'Remembering the seminary at Springwood'. The book deals with Chris's life between the ages of 11 and 18. As an 11-year-old he left junior school and spent the next five years doing his senior school studies at the Catholic seminary at Springwood. Those present were either completing their senior school studies with a view to becoming priests or actually studying the first three years of their training to be priests.

Cassocks in the Wilderness describes a world which would be totally foreign to most people. The Seminary was a closed and narrow environment. Rules were strictly enforced. There was little contact with the outside world. There was no exposure to poetry, television, newspaper, food or wine or the opposite sex.

Chris says that he commenced to write the book so that it would be an explanation for his sons as to where he had come from. After he had began writing, he realised that it was an important historical document because it records how those in a closed, narrow group do not look to or see values outside the group. He sometimes calls the Catholic Church authorities of those days 'the Taliban'.

Chris also believes, more controversially, that the book might help to explain the environment which created or at least allowed some persons to be ordained as priests who in more recent times have been convicted of crimes in the area of sexual abuse. In a chapter headed 'The system at work', he writes:

Later I came to understand why the juniors and seniors were so strictly separated at Springwood, why senior prefects appeared in pairs when mixing with us juniors. The system was structured for the mutual protection of the young and of those sexually maturing. Juices and fluids were circulating in bodies of boys in their late teens and on the edge of rebellion. Pubescent boys found themselves sealed off, starved of the sight and company of females, with all the powerful drives and impulses of youth conspiring to overflow. A few were delighted to be living among males, while others were content to be living with mates. Most of us suffered from the ache and harshness of a defeminised world.

Chris has received many letters from those who have read the book, some saying that it brings to life vividly an environment they experienced themselves. One wife of an ex-priest has said that, having read the book, she knows more about Chris than she does about her husband. Some have said that they found it quite a disturbing read.

Chris's portraits of some of the teachers of the seminary may seem to some harsh. He writes of Monsignor Charles Dunne:

I did not realize then that the monsignor was strange, that he was (to be blunt about this) a little mad. I was almost sixty before a flash on insight struck and I began to peer into the soul of the monster. He was able to engender fear in the breast of any seminarian, and also in the staff, though they were adults and ordained. He seemed to derive satisfaction, even glee in his power to elicit dread. When he was away in Sydney, a dancing, laughing mood of joy would come over students and staff. But when he was among us, his presence overshadowed all. Students were terrorized by the lazy wave of his fat, freckled hand, by his silent stare, his impatient grunt and by the whiff of tobacco which preceded his appearance. They shuddered at his slow, deliberate drawing in and expulsion of breath. He was the avenging, fearful god-figure in the mountains.

Cassocks in the Wilderness is marked by a great quest for honesty about what Chris experienced at that time, how he behaved and matured and the sort of person he became. The book does not pretend to be an objective, historical record of the history of Springwood Seminary than necessarily to reflect the experience of others who were at the Seminary. It is rather deliberately written as a memoir, with everything that follows



On a trip to Egypt in June 2000.

from the immediacy and necessary subjectivity of a memoir. Chris describes how he always seemed at the bottom of the system:

I waited impatiently for promotion to a chapel stall further back from the centre aisle. I also waited impatiently to be moved from the top table, away from the scrutiny of the eating, watching priests. But I never seemed to finish my apprenticeship. That feeling of juniority remained all my life. As soon as my goal was claimed, more was expected. Another goal came into view. No sooner was I a senior at Springwood than I became a junior at Manly, then as a senior in the major seminary I became a junior member of the clergy, and later a junior member of the seminary staff, and later still, a junior solicitor when I was quite senior, then a junior barrister, and finally a junior judge. I always felt that I was at the bottom of the pile, to be seen, observed, assessed, but not heard. I never seemed to be able to demonstrate my loyalty to the satisfaction of others, always under suspicion, oozing rebellion, waiting to be chosen as part of the team.

Chris's two sons, now 20 and 22, were amused by reading the book. Even after reading it, it seems to them to be a foreign world.

Chris found time to write the book over the last five years, in particular when he was on circuit with the Compensation Court some 12 weeks a year and during his holidays. As will be well-known, the Compensation Court travels to many places, including Newcastle, Wollongong, Albury, Broken Hill, Byron Bay, Tumut and Batemans Bay, and this provided some of the opportunities for the reflection and writing necessary to create the book.

Chris has further works in the pipeline, including a book which is intended to be published by the end of this year which will deal with his life as a student at the Manly Seminary between 1958 and 1962. Father Ted Kennedy of Redfern will be writing the foreword to that book.

Between 1963 and 1972 Chris was a young priest in a parish and completed his doctorate at Manly Seminary on Irenaeus, the third Bishop of Lyon in the second century AD. He taught at Springwood in the area of liturgy. Between 1972 and 1975 Chris studied liturgy in Paris and subsequently returned to teach at the Manly Seminary. He left the priesthood in 1976, after which he married and moved into a working life in the law.

Cassocks in the Wilderness is published by Spectrum Publications, Melbourne.



What are they doing now?

This column is an occasional piece which will update readers on what some of our former barristers and judges are now doing.

Gerald Edward (Tony) Fitzgerald will be known to many from his time as a Federal Court judge (1981 – 1984), commissioner of Inquiry into Corruption in Queensland (1987 – 1989) and inaugural president of the Court of Appeal in Queensland (1991 – 1998). More recently, Tony has been a judge of the Court of Appeal in Sydney (1998 – 2001).



However, Tony's time as a judge has now ended forever (he says). He describes his occupation now as 'mediator, arbitrator and dispute resolution consultant'.

As examples of some of the work Tony has done recently, apart from his work in the area of commercial disputes, he conducted a four-month study into issues of justice involving the Cape York Aboriginal communities, providing a report in November 2001. He has also acted as a mediator between the Queensland Police and individual and group demonstrators relating to the CHOGM conference held in Queensland.

Some of his other activities include his position as Chairperson of the Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales. One of the important forthcoming projects of the Foundation is a survey of the special access to justice needs of socially and economically disadvantaged people (whether indigenous, poor or disabled). He is also Chairperson of the Advisory Board for the Key Centre of Ethics, Justice and Governance established by Griffith University. One of their current projects is the Pathways Project. This concerns the impact of early childhood opportunities on later criminal behaviour.

Tony is also a member of the mediation and arbitration panels established by the body known as ADR Chambers International. This body is a cousin of the original ADR Chambers, which was established in Canada. The Canadian body consists of senior counsel and former judges who have combined to provide a one-stop shopping point for ADR services. Another cousin is ADR UK Limited which, as its web site proudly discloses, contains a large number of the former law lords and former lord justices of appeal as its members.

Bar News wishes Tony well in this next and varied stage of his distinguished legal career.



Observed on New Year's Day (2002), in the alpine shelter at Harris Saddle in the Southern Alps, Margo SC reading Odgers on Evidence (800 grams).