

RICHARD CONNOLLY (1927-2022) – A Tribute

The Catholic Church in Australia has lost one of its most distinguished composers of Church music with the death of Richard Connolly in Sydney on 4 May 2022.

Connolly's name is associated with some of the finest hymnody produced during the twentieth century liturgical movement – anywhere in the English-speaking world. Born in Sydney on 10 November 1927, Connolly initially trained for the priesthood at Springwood (minor) Seminary and later St Patrick's (major) Seminary, Manly, NSW. During his studies he undertook organ lessons with a Spanish immigrant priest and composer, Fr Joseph Muset-Ferrer (1890-1957). Later, during preparation for the priesthood at Propaganda Fide College in Rome, Connolly came under the influence of other priest-musicians, including Dom Herbert Desroquettes, OSB and Maestro Praglia at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music. He also enjoyed the opportunity to sing at Papal liturgies within the Vatican and to study Latin polyphony and Gregorian chant. Connolly's early training in organ, composition and his exposure to the riches of the Church's plainchant and choral tradition where to pay dividends in the years surrounding the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and probably influenced some of the modal flavours of his later hymnody..

Leaving his seminary formation in 1950, Connolly went on to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree (including studies in Latin, History, English Literature and Philosophy) at the University of Sydney (1952-1955). He simultaneously worked for *The Catholic Weekly*, serving as a proof-reader and film reviewer. In 1956, he started work at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC], and was eventually appointed Head of Radio Drama and Features. One of his early claims to fame was the composition in 1960 of "There's a Bear in There" for the TV programme, *Play School!* Connolly was blessed with an innate gift for setting words to memorable tunes. He once recalled that some of his colleagues referred to him as a VTS or vulgar tune-smith! A number of the hymns set in common or duple time (e.g. "In Faith and Hope and Love", "By Your Kingly Power", "Father We Praise You", "Holy Father, God of Might") seem ideally suited to processional movements in the liturgy.

It was Connolly's early association with the Living Parish Series of publications organised by three Sydney priests, Frs Ted Kennedy, Roger Pryke and Tony Newman that was to prove crucially influential for Church music in Australia [see Francis Ravel Harvey, *Traveller to Freedom: The*

Roger Pryke Story (Freshwater Press, Sydney, 2011) pp. 147ff]. During the mid-1950s, Ted Kennedy introduced Connolly to Australian poet James McAuley (1917-1976). Recognising that each man was gifted in both music and poetry, Kennedy suggested they produce some hymns for the “low Mass” which was pastorally common practice in Catholic parishes at that time. The aim was to foster the participation of the people. Their first collection of hymns entitled *We Offer the Mass* (1959), comprised various hymns such as “Father, We Praise You” (Entrance), “From Many Grapes and Grains of Wheat” (Offertory), “Where there is Charity and Love” (Communion) and “Holy Father, God of Might” (Recessional). Common to each hymn was the use of the responsorial form (i.e. refrain, verse, refrain, verse, etc.), inspired by the responsorial psalmody of French composer, Joseph Gelineau SJ (1920-2008). The responsorial form was intended to inspire the participation of the people with the assistance of a cantor or small group of singers leading the refrain and verses.

Connolly believes James McAuley wrote poetry that was characterised by “the best words in the best order” [cf. Richard Connolly, “Hymnody and Poetry” in *The Summit* 30:2 (May 2003) 14-16]. The hymn texts often feature single-syllable words that evoke powerful emotive or visual images and theological themes, for example:

In faith and hope and love,
with joyful trust we move
t’wards our Father’s home above.

Christ, our star, our map, our road
to the Father’s high abode.”

So finely crafted was McAuley’s poetry that Connolly was able to set the words very easily to music with melodies and accompaniments that could be described as accessible, dignified and memorable. Connolly believed the Latin phrase *Laeti bibamus sobriam ebrietatem Spiritus* (tr. joyfully let us drink the Spirit’s sober drunkenness) is the phrase that perhaps best captures his approach to liturgical expression and ceremonial when it comes to setting hymns [see his “Some Thoughts on Hymns” in *The Summit* 29:2 (May 2002) 15-16].

Connolly’s and McAuley’s hymns were widely circulated via their inclusion in *The Living Parish Hymn Book* (Sydney: 1961-1968; accompaniment edition 1964) that eventually sold over one million copies through the local Catholic parish and school network. It became regarded as one of the best-

selling religious books in Australia's history, second only to the Bible. Their second collection of hymns for the Church's year entitled *Hymns for the Year of Grace* (1963) [and later revised as *Year of Grace Hymns by Richard Connolly and James McAuley* (Sydney: Willow Publishing, 2012)] comprised familiar favourites such as "Come, O Jesus, Come O Lord" (Advent), "May This Lenten Discipline" (Lent), "O Jesus Crucified" (Good Friday), "By Your Kingly Power" (Easter) and "Jesus in Your Heart We Find" (Sacred Heart). Their last significant contribution from the Living Parish period was a collection of lesser-known hymns for sacraments entitled *Songs of the Promise* (1968), the better known of which is "A Song of Cosmic Praise" (or "Sing a New Song, Sing a New Song") [for further information on their collaboration, see Richard Connolly, "Making Hymns with James McAuley: A Memoir" in *The Australasian Catholic Record* LXXII:4 (Oct. 1995) 387-398].

Connolly's hymns with McAuley were recognised by other Christian traditions here in Australia via their inclusion in *The Australian Hymn Book: With Catholic Supplement* (Sydney: Collins, 1977), *With One Voice* - the AHB's counterpart in the United Kingdom - and the second edition of AHB entitled *Together in Song: Australian Hymn Book II* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1999). Many of their hymns were published in *Catholic Worship Book II* (Melbourne: Morning Star Publishing, 2016). Hymn texts and tunes from the McAuley-Connolly corpus have transcended denominational boundaries and are still sung across the traditions both in Australia and abroad. Some may argue that in the interests of "inclusive language" some of the earlier hymn texts should be revised, however, it is not unreasonable to suggest that many "classic" texts (and works of art in general) are best left in their original form - as civil communities do with most Christmas carols and traditional poetry - and for users to appreciate afresh their historical context.

After a period of time working for the British Broadcasting Corporation in England (c. 1988-2001), Connolly returned to Sydney and continued to compose liturgical music, in other liturgical genres such as the *Mass of Our Lady, Help of Christians* (Charles Town, WV: Cantica Nova, 2010) and a collection of 35 Responsorial Psalms for Sundays, Seasons and Feasts entitled *Praise the Lord, My Soul* (Sydney: Willow Publishing, 2015). Richard Connolly's outstanding contribution to Church music was recognised in 2009 when he was awarded the Doctor of Arts degree, *honoris causa*, from the University of Notre Dame, Australia. This was followed by The Dempsey Medal (2017) award from Sydney's Archbishop Anthony Fisher, OP, following Connolly's 90th Birthday in November 2017.

Richard Connolly once commented that apart from his family, the hymns with James McAuley were “the best thing I did in my life” [*The Catholic Weekly* (4 March 2018) p. 15)]. Richard Connolly is survived by his wife and nine children.

[Much of the material for this tribute was written by the author for a tribute to the composer in *Liturgy News*, quarterly journal from the Archdiocese of Brisbane in June 2018.]

Dr Paul Taylor
Executive Secretary
Bishops Commission for Liturgy
Australian Catholic Bishops Conference