



Tribute to Fr Jim Esler

Fr Peter Slack

I have just received the news of the death of Fr Jim Esler sm. Those of us at Woodlawn in 1967/1968 came to know and respect Jim as a Marist, a teacher and a friend. Over the years this continued. Given his link with our presbyterate, and our strong historical links with the Society of Mary, I thought it appropriate to pen this tribute.

Little did we rough hewn students at Woodlawn know the intellectual calibre of the priest who came to us in that year. He had just returned from his Roman studies where he had gained a Doctorate in Canon Law at the Gregorian, gaining the prestigious University medal (as he had also at Sydney University Law school). We only came to learn of this later. I presume he was there to settle back into Australia after the years of academic study in Rome. He filled in with Latin and other subjects. Above all, he was a gentle-man in the true sense of the word, an outstanding and humble priest in the tradition of the Society of Mary. Who could forget his introducing us raw school boys from the North Coast to the delights of jazz! Later, those of us who went on to the seminary at Springwood or to the Marists at Toongabbie, learnt of his academic acumen.

He possessed a giant intellect – but like most who possess such a gift he wore the mantle lightly. While he devoted much of his teaching life to moral theology, his essays in canon law are still as relevant today as ever...

It was sometimes jokingly said that Jim's footnotes were always more important than the text! His article on the laity is as fresh as when it was give so many years ago.

In letting me know of his passing, Fr Tom Ryan sm, wrote,

“Jim was 34 when ordained. He had worked as an articled clerk and solicitor in Sydney after and Arts/Law degree at Sydney University (where he was a university medallist, in the Professor Julius Stone era). Gough Whitlam was a contemporary student. Jim did a DCL in Rome – another gold medal – then over thirty years teaching in the Marist formation house – Toongabbie or Hunters Hill – in Catholic Theological Union, mainly canon law and moral theology. He retired around 2000. He had been spiritual director for Catholic lawyers for over 25 years. Jim was delightful company. He was an accomplished pianist (jazz). Most importantly, he loved being a Marist.”

When Jim died last Saturday at the age of 99, he moved from the visible to the invisible feast of Christmas.

On learning of his death, I recalled these words, “But they that are learned shall shine as the brightness of the firmament: and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity.” (Daniel 12:3)

Peter Slack