



Memories of Fr Jim Esler

Martin Cooke

Remembering Fr James Esler SM who passed away peacefully in his sleep on Dec 18th aged 99 after a long and fulfilling life.

Fr Jim Esler was our Rector during my theological studies with the Marist Fathers from 1977 to 1980. During that time in the seminary in 1979 Fr Esler made the observation that he felt my voice had developed considerably and encouraged me to resume vocal lessons with my teacher Evelyn Hall de Izal.

In this context I would like to acknowledge my affection and respect for Fr Jim Esler SM who supported me tremendously not only in my musical pursuits.

Fr Jim studied Law at Sydney University and was in the same year as former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam with whom he remained good friends for many years. Upon graduation he was awarded the Gold Medal in Law in 1946.
<https://www.sydney.edu.au/.../a-century-downtown-sydney...>
<https://www.sydney.edu.au/law/about/history.html>

He gave up a very promising legal career to begin his studies for the priesthood. In 1967 Fr Jim received the Papal Medal from Pope Paul VI personally for his doctoral thesis in Canon Law, which according to the authorities shed new light on the whole field of Canon Law.

A copy of Fr Jim Esler's doctoral thesis in Canon Law at Rome's Gregorian University was uncovered some years ago in Passau, Southern Germany. The rare four-volume copy is now in the care of the Marist community of Passau.

Fr Jim expressed pleasant surprise at the discovery: 'I'm glad to know they didn't throw it out!'

(Fr Jim's own copy resides at the bottom of Sydney Harbour, a casualty of careless stevedoring of the 1960's.)

Fr Esler was also a fine pianist. One day he was accompanying and teaching me the Gregorian Chant, *Vexilla Regis Prodeunt* "The Royal Banner forward goes, The mystic Cross refulgent glows, Where He, in Flesh, flesh who made, Upon the Tree of pain is laid."

He wanted me to sing it on Good Friday and also suggested that I enter the Sydney Eisteddfod in September 1979. As green as I was, I came away with several prizes

the highlight being selected for the semi-finals (with some now noted Australian and New Zealand opera singers) of the coveted Sydney Sun Aria Competition.

Finally, I would like to relate a story that sums up the character and person of Fr James Esler SM.

In 1979 the famous Italian tenor Carlo Bergonzi came out to Australia for a recital tour performing at the old Regent Theatre in Sydney. Late one Saturday afternoon Fr Jim came up to my room and asked me what I was doing. At first I thought I had done something wrong was about to get a reprimand. He informed me about the concert. He mentioned that he had heard Bergonzi several times during his studies in Rome and regarded him as a great artist.

I mentioned that I had to finish an essay and would see if I could book a ticket for the concert. He then said: "Finish the essay on Sunday as I have already booked a ticket for you and reserved the car so you can drive into town and experience this wonderful tenor".

I will never forget this act of kindness of Fr Jim. The concert was an inspiring occasion for me and I learned on that evening how an artist should present himself in a vocal recital.

Fr Jim Esler was a very special, kind and compassionate person. He cared about people and was an excellent Rector of the seminary at Hunters Hill. He will remain a very important part of my life and his encouragement I will never forget. Requiescat in Pace.

Martin Cooke
Dec 2021

