

## Nuns for Breakfast

Handwritten in an exercise book on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 1977, ten years after the events and 43 years ago,  
a factual account that reads like a short story -- fact is stranger than fiction

**E**VEN in the seminary, I heard that expression, "Nuns for Breakfast," or more explicitly, "Nuns and egg and bacon for breakfast."

It was by a newly ordained priest explaining his "convent crawl during the first fortnight of priesthood: first Masses, then breakfast, with nuns. In those halcyon days, the nuns did not eat with you -- but were allowed to watch...

A number of years afterwards, I was posted to a parish with a large convent, a convent with a boarding school attached, and also that higher echelon of convents, a Provincial House. This meant that, as well as a Headmistress for the High School (not to mention lesser headmistresses for Primary Schools), there were also a House or Community Superior and an Almighty Provincial, Superior *in excelsis*. There was also an entourage, both for the large convent and schools, and also for the Provincial House, of lesser officers grouped as a general staff around the Commanding Officers.

The poor parish curate had to celebrate the daily Mass in their Convent-School-Chapel each morning, week and week about with the Parish Priest -- actually, it was the Administrator, since the P.P. was lingering on his death bed in hospital. Mass at such an establishment meant breakfast as well, and breakfast meant nuns to watch. A prim parlour was an adjunct to the Sacristy, which reminded me of a skillion kitchen on the main slab hut.

On finishing one's Prayers after Mass, entry to the parlour evoked a quiet but sincere greeting from the Lay Sister in attendance. A lay sister in those days was of the lowest order of angels, well down from an Archangel and, in fact, not much above a Guardian Angel for a rather scabby sinner. Times have changed and Lay Sisters are no more: they have all been promoted to full bloods and recycled with the rest...

Breakfast under covers was on the tray-mobile and placed piping hot before the hungry curate. With scarcely time to say grace and begin an interesting conversation with the Lay Sister, in would come the first Visitation.

The Local House Superior introduced herself. Then the sharp questioning began: "What school did you go to?"

I replied, "Homebush Boys' High School," which was nearby. Ascabby "public"! the dregs of society! the slime of the earth! Even if I had said, "Christian Brothers," it would not have helped. They were inferior, too...

This was followed up by further impertinences, clearly calculated to establish social rating, or to make one squirm at the lack of it. Breakfast was decidedly unpleasant, and not because of the food. A prim worldly

woman inquisitor is more than a match for an innocent polite celibate.

Day by day that routine was repeated. A really good conversation would just get going with the Lay Sister --- actually there were two of them, both fully human. One interesting subject was the Convent oil-burning steam boilers, which they tended **and** repaired.

To spoil it, in would march "the Big Brass" through the open hall door. None ever knocked. Even the gait conveyed a definite grimness. At once, and ever so silently, the lowly Lay Sister would glide out. She knew her place...

In this way, I suffered the various levels of Superiors. They never came together, but each extracted her own pound of flesh. The Almighty Provincial came, and asked the now routine questions, confirming the worst suspicions, no doubt already relayed from the other officers of the General Staff. There seemed to be no end to the supply of inquisitors.

Then came relief. The happy discovery was made: I did not have to have egg and bacon for breakfast -- or nuns either, as it would turn out. Without putting anyone to inconvenience, I could have my life-long favourite breakfast of porridge! The food came in by caterers, domestic kitchens being too expensive, and there weren't enough Lay Sisters to make them cheap. As long as notice was given, I could have anything I liked, even porridge.

From the day I switched to porridge, the high level visitations and inquisitions associated with breakfast ceased at once. It either proved the point about lack of social class or was too revolting to behold, for those who knew they had "class". What further need have we of witnesses? From henceforth, the only nuns at breakfast were the Lay Sisters, and their conversation was human and interesting.

With one exception, however: there was a high ranking nun on the General Staff who had been absent on my first arrival in the Parish. She felt impelled to make her own independent evaluation of the new curate. So in spite of the porridge, she steamed into the breakfast parlour, and then continued to steam up and down the room, like a cruiser performing manoeuvres off a coastline, firing salvos of questions, verbal broadsides, each time she passed the table. She was the Bursar, and a Big Bertha of a woman, and looked like she was accustomed to wringing out her clients as a washer woman her laundry.

Her worst fears of social class, or lack of it, thoroughly confirmed, she steamed out into the corridor and was gone.

Weeks passed, then months. The Parish Priest died, and the Administrator finally got news of his move, and promotion. In sheer delight, I suspect, at the feeling of impending freedom, he fell down the Presbytery stairs and turned his ankle. I bandaged it with my crepe bandage, and he was able to hobble, but could not drive.

Came the day of his formal farewell from the Nun Kingdom, and I drove him to the afternoon tea. Sporadic conversation had rattled almost to a halt, like small arms fire on depletion of ammunition, when the subject of his ankle came up. It was cooed and caressed over (verbally only, of course) when one of the nuns asked him who bandaged it for him.

"I did," I rejoined, entering the conversation for about the first time.

Big Bertha the Bursar fixed me with a gimlet eye of derision: "And what would you know about it?" she demanded.

With rare inspiration, words came to me: "Sister, I'd love to treat you for snakebite!"

It stopped her in her tracks, like a ship running onto a submerged rock. The splatter of mirth from the others sloshed over her like foam, extinguishing her verbal fire, but not her chagrin.

It was not intended as revenge, but was still deeply satisfying.

#### POSTSCRIPT

"Love to treat you for snakebite" appears in *Bush Boys and Bush Rangers* chapter 26, p. 258.

#### Religious Brothers & Sisters for the Glory of God

**THE TEACHING ORDERS** of nuns in the pre-Vatican II Church before 1962 often practised an extra apostolate on Saturday mornings.

**They taught music to children.** These were not only the children from Catholic families, but also from the Christian families of the Separated Brethren, -- "our brethren outside the Church" as the beautiful Prayer for the Conversion of Australia at Benediction expressed it so aptly.

In teaching music to outsiders, they **pioneered the Catholic ecumenical movement** in Australia.

**PROTESTANT SUSPICIONS** -- but not of nuns... Whereas Protestants were sometimes suspicious of Catholics generally, and of Catholics schools in particular, and perhaps most of all suspicious of priests, these Protestants were usually pleasantly accepting of the good sisters.

They also saw the sisters going around on Sunday mornings, in pairs (like the seventy disciples sent out by the Lord Jesus), to **visit the sick**, the shut-ins, the bereaved, and also the lapsed Catholics.

In teaching and visiting, these Religious Sisters from the parish convent were bearing a wonderful witness

to the Kingdom of God.

But it was the **music teaching** with Protestant parents that built up "good will towards men" and "peace to men of good will".

The **nursing nuns** likewise built up a rapport with Protestant visitors and patients, who discovered for themselves the richness of humanity graced by God.

But **contemplative orders** were an enigma to those Protestants less religiously inclined in their own lives

#### SATANIC SEIZURE

**A**LONG with sixty years of ruination of so many Religious Orders, there has been the parallel ruin of the **priesthood** and **episcopate**, and, what is not so often realized, the havoc and destruction of **matrimony** by divorce, the pill and lack of essential virtues.

Our benighted Federal Government has abolished marriage by destroying its *raison d'être* (= its reason to exist) which is matrimony, children and family.

Only a woman can have a child and only a man can make it happen -- the complementarity of the sexes. The gender-benders are bewitching many.

The common enemy is the Devil and his cohorts. They operate through systematic corruption of the thinking of clergy, Religious and laity in the Church, and of the rest of humanity outside the Church.

Trendy ideas in theology are the corrosive, the disease, the virus, the infection. They are spread by **trendy theology, preaching and catechetics**, through the gurus loaded with scholarship but lacking in faith and piety, and the many they manage to corrupt.

#### REVIVAL OF RELIGIOUS ORDERS

Every parish needs a **Convent** and **Monastery** as well as a **Presbytery**, and many **Catholic homes**.

Every diocese needs contemplatives.

As the persecution of religion increases, only real believers will persevere with our Lord, and there will come a **Godly revival in Religious Life, priesthood and matrimony**, for which we work and pray.

Though with a scornful wonder, Men see her sore oppressed,  
With scandals rent asunder, And heresies distrest.  
Yet saints their watch are keeping, Their cry goes up, 'How long?'  
And soon the night of weeping, Shall be the morn of song.

#### Prayer for Religious

**O** GOD, Who inspire and bring to fulfilment every good intention, direct Your servants into the way of eternal salvation, and, as they have left all thing to devote themselves entirely to You, grant that, following Christ and renouncing the things of this world, they may faithfully serve You and their neighbour in a spirit of poverty and in humility of heart, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### Prayer for Religious Vocations

**H**OLY FATHER, Who, through urging all the faithful to perfect charity, never cease to prompt many to follow more closely in the footsteps of your Son, grant we pray, that those you have chosen for this special calling may, by their way of life, show to the Church and the world a clear sign of your Kingdom, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Father James Tierney*