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POOR FATHER

The parish adventures of Father Freddy King

by John O'Neill

Chapter One

In which we meet the Bishop and the Vicar General and Personnel Adviser

"Can you tell me, Thomas," Bishop Con Hardley, of the diocese of Hope Springs, was asking his Vicar General: "why on earth I appointed Freddy King to that parish. What got into me?"

"You felt sorry for him: his mother had just died," replied his second-in-command, Monsignor Henry (short for *Heinrich*) Heisskopf, whose father had been a tank commander with Rommel in North Africa, and had migrated to Australia in 1950.

"Well, look at all these letters," said the bishop.

"And what about all the phone calls," said the Vicar General.

"And to think that little place was so quiet..."

"You didn't even know where it was. I'll send him to nowhere, he can't do much harm there, you said."

"That's right," laughed the bishop: "you had to show me where it was on the map."

"It's very small. You're not expected to know everything, Cornelius."

"That bloomin' Freddy thinks he does. He's upset every group in the parish. Why don't I just absorb it into the place next door. Sink the ship and the captain with it."

"You can't."

"Why not, I'm the bishop."

"Expansion. There's lots of open space in Doonbridge Park. There'll be tens of thousands heading out there in the near future."

"Well, I'll just sack him. These complaints will drive me mad. "

"You can't do that either- he's there only six months."

"So what."

"You'd look silly: appointing him and then sacking him so soon."

"You'd better ring him. Tell him to come in on Friday, 11am if he can."

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Father Frederick King, Parish Priest of Doonbridge Park had no secretary – the parish could not afford one – and so he always answered the phone himself.

"Presbytery, Doonbridge Park."

"Oh, Freddy, it's Henry Heisskopf. How're things out there?"

"What have I done now?"

"God only knows, Freddy..."

"Ar...there could be one or two others."

"Freddy, the Bishop would like you to come and see him."

"Hasn't he got anything better to do?"

"Would 11am on Friday be suitable for you."

"Bad day, Friday. I have early Mass at the convent, Communion to the sick at nine-thirty – that takes an hour or so. Then State School children's Confessions – don't like postponing them – that gets me to midday. Then, this Friday the architect is coming for lunch....we're planning a church..."

"Yes, yes, yes. Freddy – we're all very busy, so is the Bishop. What about Friday afternoon?"

"Well, we've just started the junior Legion of Mary. They meet at four."

"I thought you've had the Legion since you went there."

"That's seniors. They're on Thursday nights. This is the juniors. It's only their second meeting. I need to be there."

"What? For four of five little kids?"

"Try twenty teenagers."

"You've got twenty teenagers? How'd you get all them?"

"Just announced it."

"And they just turned up?"

"Well, yes."

"How do explain that? Twenty!"

"You should know: the grace of God. We have some good families."

"Well, how about Monday...no, it's his day off."

"Mine, too."

"Well come in at two on Friday. He won't keep you long. You can be back for your twenty teenagers."

"Two. OK."

"Good, Freddy. See you at two."

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When Father Freddy walked into the Bishop's office at 2pm, the Vicar General was also present, and the famous Edna Bacciatutti (*author's note: 'bacciatutti' means 'kiss everyone'*) the Diocesan Personnel Advisor. She was a religious, but wore nothing to indicate that. She believed habits and insignia like crosses and things were a barrier to communication with ordinary people. "Those old relics of the past only put people off, and they hide the true self," she had often said.

The Bishop stood when Father King entered. Heisskopf and 'the nun' stayed put.

"Welcome, Fred," said the Bishop in an empty tone which Fred noticed. "Sit down."

"Thank you, my Lord," said the priest. Edna shuffled in her seat. The Vicar General lowered his head. The Bishop frowned. They were not keen on traditional titles.

"Like some tea...coffee?"

"Just had lunch."

"A good one, I hope," said the Bishop.

"Yes. Main meal. I have a marvellous housekeeper."

"Well, sorry to bring you out after lunch...siesta time?" asked the Vicar General.

"No, never have a siesta: hard enough getting up once."

Father Freddy cast an inquisitive glance at Edna. The Bishop noticed it.

"Edna's our Personnel Adviser," explained the Bishop.

"Yes, I know," said the priest.

"Yes," said Edna, beaming. She was a woman of Italian descent and of large proportions. Her parents named her 'Edna' to sound more Australian. "I wanted to come and see how you are settling in out there."

"Don't trouble yourself, Sister" said Father Freddy.

"Oh, no trouble, Frederck."

"It might be," said Freddy, resenting the use of his first name and not his title, though she had never met him.

"Oh no. I don't mind at all," said Sister.

"I do," said Father

The Bishop and Vicar general both frowned this time, rather more seriously.

"Hadn't we better get down to business," suggested Heisskopf.

"Yes, indeed," said Bishop Hardley. "Well, Fred, we thought we should have some dialogue about Doonbridge Park. We've had quite a few complaints coming in."

"What about?"

"I'm afraid the list is quite long: the singing group, the St Vincent de Paul, the finance committee, the catechists, the youth group. Important groups, important people. I'm afraid that

makes it all serious. Then there are complaints about your sermons. And one lady has accused you of being rude to her. That will do for a start. Could you comment?"

"No."

"No? I don't understand. You have no comment?"

"My Lord..." down went the VG's head once more and Edna shuffled again. "you are sitting there with your canon lawyer beside you, and your..Personnel Adviser, which office, in my view, ought to be filled by a priest because priests understand priests better, while I'm sitting here, with a whole lot of accusations about to be thrown at me. You had advice in preparing your questions, or accusations, but you haven't given me any opportunity to prepare my answers or explanations. I presume you've heard of *natural justice*? So I'll be like the Lord when he was accused. I'll say nothing. I'll just listen, and then I'll ask you to put your complaints in writing. Then I'll have time to prepare my response. And I know some good canon lawyers too."

Silence. Awkward silence. Finally:

"Freddy, Freddy... We just wanted a brotherly chat about things," said Hardley, softly.

"Fred, we need some solutions to the problems in Doonbridge Park," said Heisskopf.

"There are wider problems than Doonbridge Park," said Father Freddy.

"Wider problems?" queried the Bishop. "Are you referring to the diocese?"

"Yes."

"What problems?" put in the Vicar General.

"I'll put my comments in writing. You'll need some time – quite a lot of time – to prepare your reply."

Silence. Awkward silence again. Then more silence. Edna looked cranky, even a little out of place. Freddy thought she might be feeling unfulfilled.

"Mind if I go now?" asked the priest.

"I think you had better," said the Bishop.

"We're getting nowhere," said the Vicar general.

"Dear me," said the Personnel Adviser.

Freddy left.

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Chapter Two

In which we look back to when Freddy was made 'PP'

Father Frederick King had been assistant priest in the parish of George's Hollow. He had spent the usual three years there and thought he would apply again to be given charge of his own parish. The bishop at that time was John Riley, known also by the nicknames 'Smokey Jack,' because he was rarely without a cigarette when out, or a pipe when at home, or 'Snowy,' because it was said, on good authority, that the Man from Snowy River's real name was Jack Riley.

Our Freddy had long suffered from the dreadful disease of *Ospeditis*. Latin scholars will be able to work out what that disease is from the 'os' and the 'ped,' which come from the Latin words for mouth and foot. So, foot and mouth disease was Freddy's problem, not the agricultural variety, but the habit of saying, both publicly and privately, the right thing at the right time. In an ideal world he should have been made pope for that, but the diocese was far from being ideal, so they put Freddy way out on the outskirts at George's Hollow.

He had applied for parishes to Riley a few times, but was always rejected for some reason. The reply from Bishop Riley to him after the last application explained that 'In the past, your earnestness has had divisive effects. The Diocesan Council considered that you should have further experience as an administrator before being appointed as a Parish Priest.' Freddy thought that was only Latin for 'get lost,' and wondered what he had done wrong,

especially when fellows junior to him were given parishes. Freddy was not feeling all that happy, at least on the surface of things, but he consoled himself that he was still a priest and could help people get to heaven. Occasionally he thought the greatest charitable attitude one could have was to wish heaven for people: he was tempted to pray that certain people might experience immediately the fullness of charity.

When Riley retired, in came Hardley. He was in the place a month or so when Freddy's saintly mother decided she would rather be with God and her late loving husband, gave last binding instructions to her many children, including the priest who had just given her the Anointing and Viaticum; grandchildren, great-grand-children, relatives and friends, refused to go to hospital, and died in her own bed, surrounded by the large clan, fortified by Freddy's administrations and many rosaries.

Shortly after that, Freddy applied for Doonbridge Park, also a small place on the outskirts. Bishop Hardley did not know Freddy, except that he had read one or two articles Freddy had somehow got published in Catholic journals. Freddy's stuff was always one with Church teaching. Hardley thought while that would not do too much harm, it would not much help the Church to 'relate to today's thinking.' Anyway, he did not consider Freddy's obvious devotion to the Catholic Faith to be an obstacle to him being made parish priest somewhere. His advisers, the same Diocesan Council that Riley had had, thought that approach to be naïve, and that the new bishop showed lack of experience when he let his thoughts slip at the Diocesan Consultors' meeting, at which the future of Doonbridge Park was discussed.

Anyway, as we now know, Freddy got 'his' parish. His predecessor, a young man, Father Turner, was doing special studies, by correspondence, with a University in California, U.S.A. and had been in the parish a few months only. He was sent out to 'the Park' as a stop-gap until a permanent appointment could be made. Turner was well named, Freddy thought, because he seemed to be heading in no definite direction in religious matters. However, he had *personality* plus energy, and was liked by many who rather enjoyed the experience of travelling in circles – much more fun for them than straight lines.

Freddy King arrived in Doonbridge Park on the Monday, two days before he was to take up his appointment officially. He needed time to 'move in.' Turner had already left the place. Everything was locked up at the house, such as it was, just an old weatherboard building, originally a farm house when agriculture had ruled the district. There was still some of that, but the city sprawl was moving in rapidly. A fibro hall was the temporary church.

No one at all was about the place. A prominent notice by the front door of the house announced that it was not a presbytery at all, but the PARISH CENTRE. Turner had told him where the keys would be hidden. He found them and let himself in. He wandered through every room. Freddie wondered if it had been designed by Saint Francis. The floor was bare of covering except for an occasional mat, frayed at the ends and sometimes threadbare in the middle. One room was full of cupboards and shelves piled with religious texts for teaching children in the state schools. He noted the titles of some of them: 'Be yourself for Jesus,' 'Ten Rules for Self-discovery,' 'Jump for the Lord.' He fingered through them quickly: there were some nice pictures of happy faces.

There was a room, apparently for meetings: it had a large table with chairs around it. He could not find a dining room, but there was a smallish kitchen. The cupboards had some crockery and the drawers some cutlery of dubious quality. There was a lot of plastic. A microwave oven occupied an over-large section of bench. He finally found a bedroom. It was adequate. A simple reception room was by the front door, while another small room was packed with the paraphernalia for counting money. A metal filing cabinet, he decided, must be the safe. Parish registers were sitting on top of it. He wondered what would have happened to precious records if a fire had hit the place. A sitting room had three reasonable easy chairs, an old television set and a low long buffet, empty except for some glasses. All the walls in all the rooms were bare of holy pictures, but there were some large posters with sunsets and scenery; a series, no doubt, thought Freddie, as each had only one word on it, *Tranquility*

Father King had been brought up in a largish family in a normal home, and in the parishes he had served in so far, there were always things like dining rooms, easily accessible from the kitchen. This 'parish centre' bore almost no resemblance to a home. He wondered how he would receive friends, especially priests. Surely he was not being unreasonable to want some living-space, he thought. The 'parish centre' had not impressed him. He found out later it was Father Turner who had changed things rather drastically during his short stay in the place. The first pastor had set it up with his own furniture and at his own expense, and, naturally, took his belongings with him when he retired.

Despite the parish being twenty years old, there was no Catholic school. There was another task for the new pastor, and for the incoming flux of new parishioners. Well, he was young and fit enough, he thought, and he looked forward to seeing Doonbridge Park develop, in the Providence of God, working through people with the faith, into a vibrant Catholic community. He thought of the countless parishes throughout the country which had once been vacant paddocks, and a line from the old priest-poet came to his mind: "and church and school and convent mark the path of Father Pat." It had all been done before, and he looked forward to repeating the glorious story in his new parochial charge.

Chapter Three

In which Father Freddie meets some parishioners

The new Parish Priest of Doonbridge Park 'moved in' officially on a Wednesday. He spent the day shifting furniture about and trying to make the 'centre' into a presbytery. That evening he heard loud rock 'n' roll type music pouring out of the church. He investigated, entering unseen by the sacristy.

Four people, in their twenties, he thought, were the source of the racket. Two were strumming electric guitars with their thumbs, a third was going demented on his drums, and a young woman seemed to be contemplating eating the microphone as she yelled into it. The words sounded like:

Go, Jesus, go, you're the guy we want to know,
Tell me how I should be me,
Then I shall be truly free.
Go, Jesus, go.

The group were facing down the church, and so had their backs to the sacristy door. They did not see their new 'PP' until a break in the music when he coughed. The singer, if she was that, saw him first. She was quite pretty: "Oh, she said, "are you our new parish leader?"

"I'm your new parish priest, yes. Father King."

"Don't you have a first name?" said one of the men.

"Frederick."

"Mind if I call you 'Fred?'" said the drummer with a smirk.

"I think 'Father' is what I'm used to. Do you play at Mass?"

"Sure do," said the lead guitarist with a smile that said 'we're the greatest.'

Freddie was not all that impressed so far, and said, somewhat undiplomatically: "I hope we're not going to have too much 'bush-Baptist stuff.'"

The singer said: "We have had Vatican two, you know."

"Good, then let's put it into practice. You'll find it advocates Gregorian Chant and the pipe organ."

Wanting to make a better start, Freddie offered his hand to them and asked them their names. They offered him limp hands, but gave no names.

"I take it you have keys, and will lock up when you leave."

"As we usually do."

"Well, good night then," said the priest.

"See yer," said the drummer, and then after a pause, ".....Fred." They all giggled.

On his way across to the presbytery, Freddie wondered what had happened to respect for priests. He saw he had a problem: restoring good liturgical music through people, who, he sensed, could not stand a bar of him. The days of 'Father said...Sister said...', were well and truly over.

Father King had just settled down, tired after a heavy day, to watch TV for a while. The door bell rang. A tallish, smooth-looking gentleman about forty five, accompanied by an attractive lady and another younger man about thirty, greeted him with smiles.

"We're the parish finance committee," announced the smooth man, "Welcome to Doonbridge Park." Didn't anyone call priests 'Father' in this place, wondered Freddie.

"I'm Albert Carlton," he went on. This is Jenny Lovejoy, and this Grant Peckingham."

"I'm Father King. Come in."

"It's Fred, I'm told," said Peckingham."

"Yes, but only my family call me that."

Mrs Lovejoy giggled – Freddie wondered if there was an epidemic of giggling going on: "You must be one of those old-fashioned priests – no first names."

"No, not really. I think 'Father' is more practical – for various reasons."

"Oh, then it looks like we're not going to get very close to you, then...Father," said Jenny.

"Why would you want to do that," replied Freddie, "I'm not God"

They all looked puzzled.

They settled in the reception room, such as it was. Carlton opened up: "Well...er..Father..we thought we should approach you as soon as possible about parish finances. We invited a professional company in to help us buck up the envelopes and collections. Father Turner started the ball rolling."

"He was a very up-to-date priest," added Jenny.

"Yes, a real goer," put in Grant.

"Is that why he went?" asked Freddie, with a sly grin.

No one seemed to understand that remark.

"How much are they charging you to put in their scheme?" asked the new PP.

"Well, with the team-training nights, cost of printing brochures, envelopes, etc. – twenty thousand."

"Have you got it?"

"No."

"So we're borrowing twenty thousand to pay off a debt to professional money-raisers hired to reduce our debt? "

"We can't do it ourselves," said Grant Peckingham.

"Do what, Grant?"

"Well, conduct a big money-raising programme."

"What do you want to do with the money, presuming you make some?"

The parish has some pretty desperate needs," said Carlton.

"We've discussed our needs among some key parishioners," Jenny said, "and we have a list of priorities.

"Good. What are your priorities?"

Peckingham came in: "We're gonna buy a bus."

"Good idea. Just a couple of things though: someone will have to get a bus driver's licence. Then you have to protect it from vandals – no good just having it sitting in our paddock. Of course, I suppose I could sleep in it.."

"And we need child-minding facilities," put in Jenny Lovejoy, then added: "Also a drop-in-coffee-shop for the youth. And we really do need to develop some sort of service for the children during the school holidays."

"Like putting in a BMX track – we all agree that's needed," said Peckingham.

"And you consider these things desperate needs?"

They all agreed with enthusiasm that this was the case.

Freddie wondered how much research they had actually done among the other parishioners. Anyway, the parish was growing rapidly, and there was sure to be people among the newcomers who would want a say in things.

"What about a church, and a school?" he asked them.

"Inward looking," said Jenny.

"Not formative of the community," said Grant.

Freddie thought for a moment:

"OK. Well thanks for your advice. I'll certainly consider all those things."

"Consider?" said Carlton. "Father, we are the Parish Finance Committee. I think we have some authority to make decisions, especially since we live here. You priests just come and go."

"Not this priest. My appointment here is permanent. I came out a few weeks ago and looked at the place carefully, enquired from the bishop and Father Turner...and his predecessor, the founding pastor. On that basis I applied to come here. Besides, final decisions in such matters lie with the priest."

"Why?" asked Carlton sullenly.

"Because he is responsible for the welfare of souls before the bishop, and ultimately before God. Canon Law enshrines all that. It started when Christ told his apostles 'Go, teach all nations.' They were his first priests, you know.Anyway, there's no need to worry. Those things you mentioned are all good. Let's not be in a hurry, though. The place is filling up – new developments everywhere. Let's just wait a while. There's plenty of time. And I'll apply the most practical means of raising money ever enunciated.

"And what's that?" asked Carlton.

"'Seek first the kingdom of God, and all the rest will be given you besides.'"

Somewhat grumpily, the finance committee declined Freddie's offer of refreshments and left.

Nothing much happened until his first public Mass came around on the next Saturday evening. Freddie knew their first impressions of him would be important. He was praying before the crucifix above the altar, kneeling at the priedieu at the right hand side. People began arriving. Only one or two attempted to pray. Most sat and chatted loudly.

The new PP's prayers were distracted. His first Mass in the parish had been the previous Tuesday, and he had taken care to consecrate a bread for the Benediction Host, so that now the Blessed Sacrament was reserved in the Tabernacle. The sanctuary lamp was burning, but very few seemed to notice it.

This was Freddie's first experience of people talking in the church. In his previous parishes this never had happened, and certainly never during his upbringing. He felt some anger. "Control yourself, Freddie boy," he told himself. He thought they would do better during Mass.

They didn't! After the Prayer of the Faithful, conversation broke out again. Freddie recalled the old unwritten rule for new Parish Priests: "Make no changes during your first six months." He thought he would say nothing. Then he thought, "Blow that," and stood up. The wardens had begun taking up the First Collection.

"Excuse me, good people," he said. The talking slowly died down. "I don't know what your customs have been here in Saint Peter's, but we won't be talking during Mass. This is a time for prayer, not for conversation."

Silence. Resentful silence and stern looks from many. Relieved smiles from some. Surprised looks on many faces. One fellow got up and walked out and was never seen again. As he was processing down the main aisle after Mass, behind a female 'special minister,' two 'altar girls' and one brave altar boy, a well-dressed man, a teacher as it turned out, whispered in Freddie's ear, "Ten out of ten, Father." Hurrah, thought Freddie, there's one at least on side.

He was hardly back in the presbytery when the phone rang. A lady's voice said, "I'm Patricia Flannery, Father. I just want to thank you for giving us back our Mass. We actually met at a family baptism in your previous parish: you baptized my nephew." Freddie thanked her. Then she said, "My

brother told me you were coming here, and said their loss would be our gain. I know what he means now. We've been in the wilderness for too long, Father."

More trouble was to come after he announced that the parish would be building its own primary school. Hitherto the children had gone to the school in the big neighbouring parish, from which Doonbridge Park had been cut off. One of the first 'phone calls he got was from its parish priest: "Welcome to the district, Freddie – Harry Braceall here."

"Thanks very much, Harry – good of you to ring."

"Freddie, a lot of kids from your place come to school here: you should really send us some dough."

"Well, Harry, if last Sunday's collections are any indication, we'll be battling to pay the food bill – might have to do a 'John Vianney.' But cheer up: I'll be announcing next Sunday that we'll be building a school. I'll also tell them our needs, future ones too, and that our parish has to be subsidized by the diocese. We'll see what that does."

Freddy did just that, and the collections doubled. It wasn't long before the bank account was very much in the black. A principal of a neighbouring Catholic Secondary School had said that parishes needed to be rationalized because of the shortage of priests, and that Doonbridge Park might have to be closed down. Freddy reported that from his pulpit, which gave more motivation for generosity.

He announced a meeting for interested parents for the following Sunday evening in 'the parish hall', a World War Two army hut which had served as the first church when the place was part of the big parish, Brownleigh. The 'big three' or BMXers, as Freddy was already calling them in his mind, turned up, with twenty or so supporters, including a group of teenagers, and also present were four sets of young parents with their pre-school children. Freddy saw a problem straight away: the big three and company were going to get control of the meeting and try to stop the school. Freddy called on his political abilities, inherited from his union executive father. He opened the meeting with the prayer to the Holy Spirit, a Hail Mary and 'St. Peter, pray for us.'

Then he thanked everyone for coming, and before the BMXers could take over he said: "We're here mainly to talk about the school, but there are a good number also who wish to discuss other matters. As you see, there are parents with young children here – about the little ones' bedtime, I would think, so we might deal with the school first and let them go home to bed."

He explained there would be the usual government grant, but they would have to organize other parents to provide the parish's quota. The parents were very keen and an impressive dad thanked 'Father' for going ahead with what they had prayed for for a long time, their own school. The school people then went home.

Turning attention to the BMXers Freddie said: "I support whole-heartedly your suggestions, and have even had a little experience in those matters. I used to have a Morris J2 mini bus – carried about fifteen: handy for youth group and altar-boy outings; and when I was in Oakdale parish we had an old cottage – the young people did it up, painted it and all, and we met there on Sunday nights. They called it 'The Shack' and even made a house sign to go over the front door."

"Friday nights were open nights for any youth in the district to come in and have coffee. Years later I heard from the lad who had been president that we destroyed a three-tiered youth crime system: there were the Oakdale Grubs for sixteen and under, then the Kentville Juniors, sixteen to eighteen, and the Kentville Seniors for the older ones...well organized too – they worked in with organized crime. What happened was that these kids experienced the happiness and friendship of decent young people. We had some dramatic changes in their outlook on life."

Grant Peckingham raised his hand: "Yes, Grant," said Freddy.

"What about a youth group starting – we could use this hall for meetings."

"What age group?"

"Aw...fourteen and over – secondary school kids."

"Who'd supervise?"

"They'd run it themselves. No adults."

"Of course, I always did that in past parishes – they elected their own executive. But what if the local goons turned up to – that happened in Oakdale once or twice. They were trying to sell pot to the kids. No, the priest should be there."

"No. As I say, let them run it themselves."

"Grant, there are some wild types around here – you should all know that. I don't want kids going home with bleeding noses or worse. When they're up here I take the place of their parents – I have to protect them. Parents expect that." No one could argue with that.

Father Freddie went on: "How about Sunday outings – there's the little bus and parents could help with their own cars. We're only half an hour from the mountains: get 'em into the bush. Teach them to get the fire going – boil the billy in good ol' Aussie style. We could have camping-trips in school holidays. I've seen great development in youngsters when they develop their bush skills."

'OK, Father, when's all this gonna start?' asked Peckingham.

"How about next Sunday evening."

And it went very well. Father Freddie went to the trouble of getting some soft drinks and nice biscuits, even cakes, for supper, but insisted on a meeting first, inviting each to have his or her say. They were keen on outings and especially a camping trip'. He had had lots of experience from his student days – the junior seminary was in the mountains – and from bush-walking with his best mate, Father Brian James, the king of the bush-walkers. In addition they wanted to meet every Sunday evening, just for some music and indoor games. As well, they got to know each other, especially during the supper. Father Freddie was very impressed with them.

Chapter Four

Father Freddie was feeling happy about the youth group – he had a very good relationship with them and was still young and fit enough to keep up with them; but trouble came from the BMXers.

They organized a meeting with the catechists, eleven in number, who taught, or were supposed to teach, Christian Doctrine in the State Schools, known as 'Scripture Classes.' The material they were using had official approval, which didn't mean a great deal. It was called 'Sharing Our Story.'

He read it through: 'Our Story' ! Thought Freddie: 'It's not 'our story', it's Christ's Truth' we must teach. He gave the stuff a new name – 'Make up your own Jesus', since it was all about the students' opinions of who they thought He was.

He imported orthodox lessons from another diocese and insisted they be used. The catechists resigned, except for two. He appealed for new catechists the following Sunday – and he got nine, made up mostly of an elderly grandma and her offspring. This lady had been awarded papal honours for her teaching the Faith in India. Freddie said they marched onto the scene like a regiment of Swiss Guards. Problem solved.

Next opposition came from the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Freddie's experience had always been that the Society was always the first to support the priest. At his first meeting with them he was about to give them, as the handbook required, a short spiritual talk. The President said, after the spiritual reading from the handbook: "Not even you could improve on that, Father."

"Probably not, but I'll say a few words anyway." Next thing he knew was that they moved the meeting to a property they owned in the next parish.

A few days later a letter from the bishop arrived:

Dear Father King,

I am in receipt of a letter signed by significant parishioners from the Parish of St. Peter's Doonbridge Park: the Parish Council, the Catechists, the St. Vincent de Paul Society members. These, of course, are surely the most responsible members of the parish and it is therefore necessary that I act upon their complaints.

Would you be kind enough to come to the Chancery Office next Monday at 2pm, when we shall discuss these matters....etc.

Freddie sat outside the bishop's office. The door opened and the secretary, a young priest, invited Freddie to come in. The bishop remained seated and simply said: "Thank you for coming, Father. Now, I think you know why I have sent for you so there's no need to waste time. I am giving you a new appointment, which will be confirmed officially by letter. You will be assistant to Father Mark Welldown..."

"He's junior to me..."

"You will be assistant to Father Mark Welldown at Happy Valley. Take up your appointment by next Saturday."

"That hardly gives me time to pack up, and besides, most parishioners will get a shock – there are only a handful complaining. My advice is to leave things alone – they'll work themselves out."

"Happy Valley. Next Saturday. And would you please sign this letter of resignation of your parish."

Freddie read it and said: "I can't sign that."

"Why not?"

"Because it says 'I wish to resign'...I don't wish to resign."

The bishop showed some anger and got his secretary to reword it to: 'I hereby resign,' and out of deference to the bishop's office, Freddie signed it. The bishop smiled and said: Thank you for coming in, Father."

Freddie rang his friend, Father Brian James, as soon as he got home. James had also had trouble with the bishop after taking on the Housing Commission over the poor quality of the accommodation they were providing. He had called in a lawyer to accompany him to his interview with the bishop and later with the Housing officials, and he won the case.

Two days later the bishop's letter re-appointing Freddie arrived. He got together with Father James and the lawyer. The lawyer immediately asked for a copy of the Code of Canon Law. He went straight to the second last chapter: it dealt with the removal of parish priests. Among the long list of causes none applied in Freddie's case. The lawyer wrote a letter rescinding the resignation and informing the bishop that, if necessary, he would be taking the matter to a higher authority, the Roman Congregation for Clergy, and Freddie signed it saying: "He won't like that: he wants the archdiocese – can't afford to have a case like this hanging over his head in Rome."

Next day he was in the bishop's office. The secretary came out and Freddie handed him the letter: "Would you give this to the bishop," he said. "I'm rescinding that resignation." The secretary smiled as he took the letter. Freddie went home.

He waited three days – another letter came from the Chancery. It was from the bishop, very brief, decrying Freddie's appeal to Canon Law and stating that he was to remain in Doonbridge Park. He noticed at Mass the following Sunday that all the BMXers and their families had crammed into the front pews, all with expectant looks on their faces, quite certain that the parish priest would be announcing that he would be leaving them, but before he began Mass, Freddie announced: "You may or may not know that some parishioners are not satisfied with my administration of the parish and have taken matters to the bishop. That is their right. The bishop asked me to resign, which I did, but on legal advice, rescinded the resignation and the bishop has decided that I remain here as your parish priest."

Frowns of resentment on the faces of the BMXers, smiles of relief on the faces of Freddie's supporters – most of the congregation, and looks of bewilderment on the faces of those who were never aware of the trouble.

Word of Bishop Hardley's handling of the case got to Rome. Another bishop was appointed to the archdiocese. Now Hardley had a big number of his priests against him, friends of Father King, so he retired early, to his little holiday house on the coast, and from being a 'fisher of men' he became a fisher of fish, to be seen standing on the beach with his rod reaching into the waves, hoping for a bite, and pondering on the might have been.

On the Sunday after Freddie's announcement there were some empty spaces in the pews: the BMXers had all gone 'next door.' His main concern, however, was who was to be the new bishop. Monsignor Heisskopf was very confident of getting the job, and the 'trendy' element among the clergy thought so too. What a shock they got! After a few weeks inter-regnum, poor Heisskopf had to announce at the next clergy conference, reading a letter from the Apostolic Nuncio, that none other than Father Brian James has been appointed by the pope as the new bishop of Hope Springs. No one was surprised to hear that the new Vicar General was a Monsignor Frederick King, and that Monsignor Heisskopf was last seen buying a fishing rod and heading for the coast.

Sic transit gloria mundi! as someone said.