

The Grail Newsletter

The Grail
22 McHatton Street
North Sydney. NSW 2060
Tel: 9955-3053. Fax: 9954-0697.
Email: grailsydney@ozemail.com.au

December 2013

Vol. 45, No. 3

Prepared in Sydney

Shepherds, called by angels,
Called by love and angels:
No place for them but a stable.
My Lord has come!



Sages, searching for stars,
searching for love, in heaven:
no place for them but a stable.
My Lord has come!



His love will hold me,
His love will cherish me,
Love will cradle me.

Lead me to see him,
Sages and shepherds and angels;
No place but a stable,
No place for me but a stable.
My Lord has come!



Will Todd

CONTENTS

'My Lord has come' <i>Christmas song by Will Todd (b.1970)</i>	1
News from here and there North Queensland Melbourne Sydney International	3 - 7
Retrieving the vision of the people of God	7 - 8
Tracing Dad's war journey to Wolfsberg <i>Helen MacAuley</i>	8 - 9
In memory of Noella Liu	10 - 11

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2014

Between now and June 2014, we will be preparing for the next National Assembly, to be held in Sydney at St Mary MacKillop Place.

There will be more details in the April Newsletter.

ADDRESSES

The Grail Centre
22 McHatton Street
North Sydney. NSW 2060.
Tel: 02-9955 3053
Fax: 02-9954 0697
Email: grailsydney@ozemail.com.au

Sheila Hawthorn
2/105 Goodwin Street
Currajong, Qld 4812. (Townsville)
Tel: 07-4779 5931

Andrea Venier
2/25 McBean Street
Clayton. Vic. 3168. (Melbourne)
Tel. 03-9548 9432
Email: avenier@bigpond.com

Jill Herbert
14 Carawatha Avenue
Ferny Hills. Qld 4055. (Brisbane)
Tel: 07-3351 5390
Email: vidler_herbert@aapt.net.au

NEWS FROM HERE AND THERE

North Queensland

Renewing acquaintance with many friends in Brisbane recently, including Bishop Ray Benjamin, was a most enjoyable interlude in a busy agenda of activities I have had in the last few months. The main reason for being in Brisbane was to share with the local Grail group a little of my experiences at the very pleasant '70 – 100' Grail gathering in USA in May. My thanks to the Brisbane group for their hospitality.

In October, I was a guest at the Saints Catholic College Valedictory Dinner on the University campus, where I presented the annual Grail Award for a student recognised for the outstanding part she has played in the life and mission of the College. This year's award went to Georgia Reeve, a final year Pharmacy student who has lived at the College for four years. Georgia's strong character, integrity and honesty were some of her attributes acknowledged in her receiving the award. College staff agree that she is an excellent role model for her peers, who willingly offers her help to others and has a great attitude. She plays the saxophone, joined the Chapel choir and encouraged others to do so, and attends Mass regularly. Last year, Georgia planned and organised a community project with students to prepare birthing kits for women in Africa.

Johanna Wood is now an employee of the Anti-Discrimination Commission of Queensland and is currently working in a team organising a function, auspiced by the Multi-cultural Support Group, to celebrate International Human Rights Day on 10th December. I am seeing almost more of her these days than her mother, Margaret Tranter, is. Margaret has been quite mobile this year visiting her children in different parts of Australia, but also spends much more time now with her very near neighbour in Millaa Millaa, her elderly father.

Nearing the end of the school year, Deborah Pennington is surely in countdown mode after a very challenging year in education. As yet, we have not heard of any interesting, 'different' holiday travel plans from her or Cheryl. We do know,

however, that they have given a lot of time and energy to their parts in the *Aquapella Choir* that staged its big annual concert at the end of November. Impressive dedication from the 40+ choristers and their conductor was very evident in their singing, which the large audience appreciated greatly. 'It was absolutely wonderful', said one person and I totally agree. As usual Deb was tucked in with a small group 'doing the very high bits' (her words), while Cheryl's part had her centre stage.

A long-time Newsletter reader in South Africa wrote recently: 'Thank you for the Newsletter. I do read every word from all the cities and I keep some material. I have kept the poem on the dry, then flooded, river as a metaphor for the highs and lows of the spirit. The Pentecost homily from Rev. Franz Langstein offered another terrific metaphor for change and the trauma of it!' (See April 2013).

Townsville Little Theatre's productions for 2013 have all now been performed and only the Annual General Meeting (AGM) remains for them.

The Multicultural Support Group with nearly 15 staff members has been hard pressed in the last few weeks coping with the challenges of settling some 70 refugees from Nepal, Burma, the Republic of Congo and Somalia. After this group's AGM, I remain in the Management Committee with five members from last year and two new members. The Committee has to face now the daunting task of finding more office accommodation and more 'on-arrival-short-term' accommodation for the refugee clients. It is daunting because our financial resources are very little and real estate is in short supply and expensive.

Apart from Christmas shopping and summer holidays, the other current preoccupation here is cyclones. A comprehensive, graphic 48-page *Storm and Cyclone* publication has, I suspect, arrived in every household in the region in recent days. It is subtitled *Your Complete Guide for the 2013-14 North Queensland Season* and gives emergency contacts for road conditions, telephone service difficulties, radio stations, animal emergencies, police, ambulance, gas leaks, hospital and power supply. It also includes expert advice for home care, stormtide evacuation, defence support, pet management, generation safety, solar

damage and beach safety, with a detailed map of North and Far North Queensland. All of this and much more with appropriate photographs to emphasise the main points! As well, 'Cyclone Sunday' has become a popular event bringing thousands to a public park to hear first-hand from the City Council and Emergency Services how best to prepare for cyclones or other severe monsoonal weather and the safest options when the storm is raging.

Whatever about the weather in the future, right now Townsville would appreciate a few rain showers, as it has been totally dry for seven months. However, I am sure not only my spirits are lifted by the stunning vivid red and orange poinciana trees, large and small, that, at present, dominate the landscape. I can't recall another year when this magnificent sign of nature's faithfulness to its cycle was so spectacular. Since early October, the frangipani – white, cream, pink and red – and the blooms of the golden rain have also made their contribution to the spiritual environment.

I am reminded, approaching Christmas, of Trina Paulus' words: 'May we struggle for a world of peace and justice where the lion and the lamb feed together and a little child will lead us until he comes in glory'. Christmas joy to everyone,

Sheila Hawthorn.

Melbourne

The last gathering for the year of the Melbourne Grail group took the form of a Eucharist and meal on Sunday, 1st December. We met in the home of June and Laurie Ryan at 5 pm and June's cousin, Rev. Michael Mason ccsr, was already there preparing to celebrate with us, as he has done for several years. Anne Day and Alison Healey had arrived from Sydney that day and joined us. Advent is a favourite season in the church calendar and we were glad to be together on this First Sunday of Advent, when we remembered the year gone with its joys and sorrows, remembered also those not present with us, and at the same time looked forward in expectation and hope. Then we shared food and wine, animated conversation and good wishes for Christmas and the summer break. June and

Laurie's hospitality was, as ever, superlative. We'll meet again as a Regional Group in February when we will focus on new developments for 2014.

On 8th September, we arranged an afternoon of reflection on 'Miriam of Nazareth' at the Brigidine Centre in Malvern. Grail members, friends and associates were joined by other women and men who responded to the invitation extended by both the Grail and the Brigidines. We explored what can be known of Mary's life, not only from the Gospels but also from history, geography, anthropology and archaeology. And we reviewed her status and role in Catholic spirituality over the centuries and in our personal spirituality, seeking an authentic place for her in our lives.

Anne and Alison stayed for a week in December to finalise the sale of Margaret McCristal's unit in Hawthorn. As the settlement date was 9th December, there were contracts to be signed, various services to be disconnected and the remaining furniture and contents of the unit distributed. All was complete by 12.30 pm Friday when Alison, feeling sad, closed the door for the last time and handed the keys over to the agent. We want to stay in touch with neighbours; and we thank them for their many kindnesses, especially Mary and Geoff Tregear. Genny Grabau and Ann Niall are two members who have been particularly involved with Grail property affairs in Melbourne. A big thank you to them both for their ongoing care.

Genny left for Europe in mid-November and will be home close to Christmas, spending most of her time in Germany. She went first to Portugal to stay a while with Be (Isabel) Marujo. Be is a Portuguese Grail member, a teacher, who spent the best part of two years in Melbourne working with Genny and fellow university graduates launching and establishing the Yarraville Neighbourhood House. This project was based in the community from the start and continues today with community leadership and management. The friendships among the founding group are also strong and enduring.

It was good to see Joanna Waite at the Advent Eucharist. She had been most unwell with a chest infection but is, thankfully, recovered from it. Pat Sheeran is

clearly content with her move this year from the Balwyn unit to the Corpus Christi Aged Care Facility in Clayton - alone no more, well cared for and well occupied. She continues to go to the Brigidine Centre in Malvern for card-making each week, where she is producing a lovely variety of cards. On Thursday, 5th December, Anne and Alison were Pat's guests at a pre-Christmas dinner arranged for residents and their family members and friends. When the time of the year would lead you to expect a warm, dry evening, there was instead cold, steady rain outside, but plenty of warm friendliness and thoughtful attention within. The generosity of the Corpus Christi staff was extraordinary.

A final thanks to Andrea Venier for her role coordinating and communicating among us. After an exhausting year, she is looking forward to a less stressful but nonetheless productive New Year, beginning with some well-earned rest and refreshment. We send our best wishes and prayers for renewal to all in this blessed season.

Melbourne Grail group

Sydney

On Wednesday evening, 11th December, our public activities for 2013 come to a close with the annual Advent service of music, readings and prayer in St Mary MacKillop Chapel, prepared by the Grail Singers. Director, Margaret Quinn and the choir of men's and women's voices have been rehearsing for it for many weeks. Margaret never fails to find new and challenging works to combine with traditional favourites.

Our weekly evenings of *lectio divina* on Wednesdays, convened by Tricia Gemmell, have been devoted in recent months to David's story in the two Books of Samuel. These evenings never fail to illuminate our response to Scripture. They will begin again in February next year. The bi-monthly reflection that Tricia offers on Tuesday mornings has also finished for the year now and will resume in 2014.

The women in the Book Club, together with their partners, celebrated their friendship and the conclusion of a stimulating year of reading at the home of Sonia

and George Mrva at the end of November. We enjoyed delicious food and wine, shared a number of short texts – poetry and prose excerpts – made a list of proposals for 2014, but managed only to decide on our January book, *Dear Life*, the most recent collection of short stories from Canadian Alice Munro, recently awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Ruth Crowe and a core group working with her in the *Training for Transformation* program had a very productive – and, by the sound of the laughter, enjoyable – planning meeting in November to continue the work in 2014. This program is developing successfully with every gathering.

The ‘Journal for Prisoners’ project is reaching its completion. In October, 2000 journals were printed, each consisting of 80 pages, including photographs and words of wisdom from across cultures and times with blank pages inviting personal writing or drawing. The aim is to sell 1000 journals at \$10 each, allowing the remaining 1000 to be given to inmates in correctional centres in the State. We have about 400 left. Perhaps you could consider purchasing some for Christmas or New Year gifts, or selling them to others in your locality? To order copies, email grailjournal@ozemail.com.au

On Advent eve, 30th November, Grail members and friends spent a day in reflective preparation for the coming of Christmas. Tricia Gemmell led the day on ‘The Newness of God’. We spent the morning with texts from the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels, which Tricia had chosen, and, in the afternoon, used part of a DVD, combining beautiful pictures by Victorian photographer, Emmy Silviu, with excerpts from Elizabeth Johnson’s writings on creation and feminist spirituality. A highlight of the day was the celebration of Nour Barcha’s commitment in The Grail. Nour was one of a group of women who explored participation in The Grail this year, but was away overseas when the others expressed their commitment. Welcome, Nour!

Despite the tight deadline, a group of members in Sydney worked on, and submitted, a Grail response to the Consultation on marriage and family life for the

2014 Synod of Catholic bishops. A copy of their paper is available if you contact the Sydney Grail Centre (see p. 2).

Campaigning for justice in trade agreements has been another arena of action that has absorbed time and energy. As you know, The Grail is represented in the Work Group of AFTINET (Australian Fair Trade and Investment network), which is a major Australian voice for just trade. The Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) currently being negotiated between 12 countries has been a primary focus of effort as AFTINET and other networks in the areas of health, labour, media, pharmaceuticals and the environment try to ensure that the Federal Government does not capitulate to USA pressure and allow foreign corporations to dictate Australian policies and standards that are not in the interests of Australian citizens. The threat of this is real and present; and we are doing our best to be heard by the government and its negotiators. Mary Boyd (Grail Canada) and Alison Healey co-ordinate a Grail network, *Justice and Trade Agreements*, with over 100 participants in all six continents that publishes a 4-page Bulletin six times a year to keep people informed and updated on related matters from an international perspective. If you'd like to be part of this network, contact Alison and she will happily include you in the mail-out in 2014.

In August we mentioned Helen MacAuley's trip to Europe with her sisters tracing her father's movements there during the Second World War. Helen writes an absorbing account of their journey in this Newsletter. The Saturday Seminar at the Grail Centre in October, on 'Retrieving the Vision of the People of God: Opportunity in a Time of Crisis', was an excellent day and there is a brief report of this below as well.

To Cath Mullane and Biddy (Bridget) Kennedy, both pioneers of the Grail in Sydney, who are enduring ill health at this time, we send our loving best wishes. Mary Robertson, too, hasn't been well recently. We pray for them and wish all a peace-filled Christmas and New Year.

Sydney Grail group

International

On the 1st November, the feast of All Saints and the foundation day of The Grail, the election results for the **International Leadership Team (2014-18)** were announced: Zodwa Mabaso (South Africa), Maria Carlos Ramos (Portugal) and Marian Schwab (USA). We feel sure the combination of their gifts will serve the movement well in the next years and thank them for accepting the responsibility. We are very grateful to the outgoing team – Carol Webb, Christa Werner and Cristina dos Anjos – and wish them well as they relinquish the load, yet continue to give themselves generously to the mission of the Grail in other ways.

The Grail Centre in Golega, Portugal, was full to bursting in the last week of October when it became the venue for an **international meeting gathered to reflect on the history and meaning of what we currently call the Nucleus in the Grail**, that is, those who have made a formal dedication of their lives to God in The Grail. Present were women from South Africa and Uganda, Germany, Slovakia, Italy and Portugal, Canada, USA and Brazil, Papua New Guinea and Australia. Alison Healey had been asked to prepare a presentation on the history of the Nucleus and did so on the first morning, happy to be able to relax through the remaining days. At the end of the week, two Portuguese women, Joana Fialho and Teresa (Ticha) Vasconcelos made their dedication, joyfully celebrated in a Eucharist with a much enlarged group, including family and friends and other Portuguese Grail members. During this same week, Christa Werner convened some meetings of a team who will facilitate an international consultation in 2014 on the Nucleus in The Grail.

Schola Manembe, a member of the **Papua New Guinea** National Team (NT) with particular responsibility for formation, attended the Portuguese meeting. The term of office of the current NT – Schola, Angela Bugatar and Albina Namuesh - will end in the New Year when national elections are concluded. The National Assembly of Papua New Guinean members will take place around Easter 2014.

Alison writes: ‘After the Portuguese meeting, Schola and I spent four days with **the Grail group in Milan** before returning home. Anita Saisi and Claudia Poggi

were our generous hosts. These were four days never to be forgotten. Beneath the stunning Milan cathedral of palest pink marble, with 3,600 statues, is an excavation that now makes it possible to stand in the baptistery built by St Ambrose in the 4th century where he baptised St Augustine. In a surrounding of curved alcoves like petals, is a large, beautifully proportioned octagonal bath, into which water was pumped and into which catechumens entered to be immersed. Awed stillness was the only possible response. On another day, Schola and I were treated to a trip to Lake Como with Anita and Claudia. How very beautiful are the glacial lakes in this part of the world. While we were in Milan, Anita received the news of the death of **Nicoletta Crosti**, the first Italian Grail member. Nicoletta, a biological scientist, chose, in her later years, to withdraw to a small apartment in a family home overlooking Lake Lugano in Switzerland in order to devote herself to the study of Scripture and prayer. From time to time, she shared her reflections in person with groups or by mail with friends around the world. Anita, Claudia and I drove to the village to join Nicoletta's family, friends and fellow parishioners in prayer during her Requiem Mass and burial in the family vault. The heavily clouded sky opened to reveal the setting sun glowing over the lake and mountains just as we were leaving for home. The Grail in Milan feel the loss of Nicoletta deeply. We take this opportunity to send them loving greetings from The Grail in Australia.'

RETRIEVING THE VISION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

*An open seminar organised in response to the strong desire
among Catholic laity for change in our church*

So read the flyer, advertising the Saturday Seminar in October at the Sydney Centre. Some months earlier, Fran Warner had pointed to the need for such a meeting and gathered a small team to plan it.

Three resource persons were invited to present three different perspectives on the theme. Norma Tracey, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, directly addressed the feelings of deep disappointment, anger, hurt and loss among the ‘people of God’ resulting from the abusive behaviour of a number of those with power in the church. She referred to the thinking of Derrida: that in every model of purity is the beginning of impurity; in every good, a kernel of beginning bad; in every bad, a kernel of beginning good. The challenge for the ‘people of God’ now is to rid ourselves of illusions about the church and its structures, to ‘face the chaos and, in the despair, in the loss of faith and in the lovelessness, to return to the beginning, to seek there faith, hope and love’. In every new beginning, there is resilience, the possibility of a better way. There needs also to be the acknowledgment of humanness, that problems of the past will come again. But only in humbly returning to our Source can a new church emerge.

Alex Nelson, theologian and psychologist, referred to a recent book, *Come Out, My People*, by North American biblical scholar, Wes Howard-Brook, who discerns in the Bible two diverse ways of understanding the identity of God and God’s relationship with humanity and all creation. One he names as the ‘religion of Empire’ and the other as the ‘religion of Continuing Creation’. Separation, competition and dominance, as if the world belonged to humankind, are marks of the first approach; respect for the world that God continues to create, living in gratitude, community and collaboration, are features of the second. Howard-Brook notes that *ecclesia* is a place for those who are called *out of Empire* and called to ‘come and see’ how and where the values of Continuing Creation are

lived out. Seminar participants were invited to consider what characteristics of Empire and what of Continuing Creation can be found in the church; and, in small groups, we recalled personal experiences of both. Alex offered insights into living with tension, non-violent communication and action in relation to oneself and with others.

We have been here before was the title Sydney priest Edmund Campion chose for his important contribution to the day's thinking. Well-known historian and writer and honorary professor at the Australian Catholic University, he told two stories. The first was from the autobiography of 'the father of Australian archaeology', John Mulvaney, and told how he had left the church, at the age of 80, because he disagreed with Cardinal Pell's public statements. The second story was about the mess the Sydney archdiocese got into, in the 1850's, over Archbishop Polding's Benedictines-first policy and how Rome had sacked his vicar-general. These were Australian stories that resonated with experiences of his listeners.

The seminar was filled to capacity with thoughtful, committed people eager to explore the topic of the day. They were wonderfully served by the three speakers, enriched and nourished by them. We need to pursue the theme further in 2014.

'We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.'

T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

TRACING DAD'S WAR JOURNEY TO WOLFSBERG

It all began last year after my sisters and I saw one of the television series, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, featuring the actor, John Wood. John Wood traced his father to the prisoner of war camp, Stalag 18A, where he was interred after being captured in Greece during World War II. This was particularly interesting to us, because we knew that Dad had also been captured in Greece and held in Stalag 18A, but we didn't know much more than that. Following the John Wood show, we learned of an exhibition being held in Wolfsberg, Austria, where Stalag 18A was situated, and a plan to trace Dad's war journey on the way to Wolfsberg was hatched.

Some preliminary research revealed documents in the Australian War Museum, including a statement Dad (Charlie MacAuley) had written for the War Crimes Commission detailing his capture in Greece, his escape while being sent north to a prisoner of war camp (he and his mate, Frank Hickey, jumped out of the train), fourteen months on the run in the mountains of northern Greece and subsequent recapture. Dad also named villages and people who had helped him. These were all astounding revelations to us, as he had barely mentioned them.

When we first decided to trace Dad's footsteps, we didn't realise the extent of the challenge - a lot of Greek villages have changed their names since he was there, and we had to make some guesses as to what the modern names were. We were helped by a librarian at Marrickville Library and the director of the Athens War Museum, who gave us the current names of the villages and helped us make contact with people in them. When we left Australia, we had a general idea of where Dad had been and we were hoping to get a bit of an idea of the landscape and people he had experienced. That was all we expected, but the reality proved to be much more exciting and the welcome from the Greek people much warmer than we had anticipated.

We started with a trip to Kalamata, where Dad was first captured. We saw the war memorial and where he had originally been captured; and the story began to feel real to us. Next we went to Kilkis, a place mentioned in Dad's statement, then to the village of Isoma, where our journey started to become really interesting.

In Isoma, we met a Mr Pantellis, who is 95 and actually remembered meeting Dad. We were also introduced to John, an English-speaking tavern keeper, who insisted on taking us up the mountains in a four-wheel drive to see the ruins of some of the villages Dad sought refuge in, as well as the memorial to villages destroyed by the Germans. This last was particularly moving for us, as we know from Dad's statement that he witnessed the destruction of one of the villages, having just escaped after hearing the dogs barking.

Our next stop was Himarros. We happened to speak to the chemist, who told us that Mr Alecho, aged 96, had been in that morning, talking about the war. As Mr Alecho and his family spoke no English, and we had no Greek, I dredged up some lingering German and learned from Mr Alecho's daughter that he remembered meeting Dad during the war. In a typical display of Greek hospitality, his son drove us out to see a mill Dad had stayed in, as well as the very spot where he was recaptured by the Germans.

On our return, we were introduced to Maria, who at the age of eight had given Dad food and clothes while he hid in her family's mill shortly before being recaptured. She had never heard any more about him after his capture and had no idea if he had even survived the war. She was so overwhelmed with happiness to find out that not only had he survived, but had made a home with a wife and family, that we had a great deal of trouble retrieving the only photograph of him we'd thought to bring with us!

After this, we headed north to Wolfsberg, following the train line, and Dad's journey after recapture, as much as possible.

While Dad's story was remarkable, we heard yet more like this at a reception for relatives of the Stalag 18A interns held in Wolfsberg, and we even made a story of

our own. The local host, who shared our table at the opening dinner, was a lovely lady named Klaudia, who grew up in Sydney quite close to where we grew up. Given the connections we'd found in the Greek mountains, I suppose we shouldn't have been surprised! We learned a lot about the camp itself and its workings, as well as meeting relatives of the interns from around the world. The local council was very generous in their hosting us all for the weekend. They felt that it was a significant part of the local history that had been buried - so much so that the post-war generations were largely unaware that Wolfsberg had been the site of a war camp. The local museum is planning to host a permanent exhibition on this chapter of Wolfsberg's past.

This, however, is not the end of our journey. Dad's hidden diary contains much more detail about his life on the run than was prudent. We are still hoping to locate the Pavlides family, who offered Dad a great deal of help; and Frank Hickey, his close friend and fellow escapee, has never been heard from since Dad saw him heading off with a group of partisans. While these hopes all seem impossible, we would, just a year ago, have said the same about our experiences this year in Greece and Austria.

Helen MacAuley

IN MEMORY OF NOELLA LIU

from the eulogy at her Requiem

Noella's death has come so quickly after Philippa's. We need more time to contemplate the significance of her dying and of her life. Today, I want to speak of her when she was young and vibrant and enthusiastic and full of energy and then say something about her last years when illnesses had laid her low, left her body spent and rendered her more and more dependent on others to provide her most basic needs.

Noella was a small child when the Japanese invaded China and one of her first memories was the terror she felt when armed Japanese soldiers broke violently into their family home one day. Trauma was one of her earliest experiences. But, there were lovely times, too. She and her brother Steven were very close and they had loving parents. Her father was an architect and obviously a highly respected one, as he was entrusted by the authorities with the task of drawing up plans of the Summer Palace in Beijing, which were then to be kept hidden against the day when they may be needed to rebuild the Palace authentically to the last detail should it be destroyed by enemies. Noella and Steven often went to the Summer Palace in weekends with their father. When she was a schoolgirl, they left China for Hong Kong because of the emergence of the communist regime in the country. There she and Steven were sent to Catholic schools and both became Catholics at that time. At Maryknoll College, Noella joined a Press Club of aspiring cadet journalists, and this is how she met The Grail. There were two Australians there at the time, one of them Elizabeth Reid, a journalist with *The Sunday Examine*

I met Noella in Singapore in 1967. She had dedicated her life in The Grail after some years in formation and training in Europe. She had gained social work qualifications from Edinburgh University and was working for the Singapore Archdiocese. She took me to lunch and told me of her anxiety that the Singapore Government would not renew her work permit for the following year as they were wanting jobs for their own people. By this time she was in her mid-thirties and was still a stateless person. Only later did I get some insight into what this insecurity cost her in the depths of her being. She had no passport identifying her

as a citizen of anywhere; only a piece of paper containing her basic personal details - a piece of paper then tatty and held together with sticky tape. She imagined herself being deported from Singapore on a ship, but not allowed to disembark anywhere. She was happy to come to Australia, if I could arrange it, even though it would take five years before she could become a citizen. With support from a senior Member of Parliament and an accumulation of documentation, she was accepted as a migrant with permanent status in early 1968 and took a slow cargo ship through Indonesia and down the east coast of Australia arriving in Melbourne on Anzac Day, 25th April.

Five years passed; Noella and I had both moved from Melbourne to Sydney and went together to the citizenship ceremony in the city and then to a restaurant for a celebratory meal. How enlightening that lunch was. 'Now', she said, 'They can't do anything to me.' She meant that she now had a rightful claim on this place, this society, something she hadn't had for over 30 years. I began to comprehend a little how frightening those years of insecurity had been, how much more trauma they had brought into her life. Despite her coming here with the promise of permanent acceptance, she had been intensely fearful over the five years lest she inadvertently do something that would deny her citizenship. I had encouraged her to get to know the Chinese Catholic community in Sydney and was baffled by her reluctance. She told me over that lunch that Chinese spies were known to have infiltrated overseas Chinese communities and she was afraid, not knowing who they were, that she may be seen by personnel of Australia's security organisation talking to one of these and be judged guilty by association. Recalling that flimsy, fragile piece of paper – the only verification of her identity - we went straight to a passport office after lunch and applied for a passport, not that she was planning to go anywhere, to reinforce her sense of herself as a person of equal status and value with everyone else. That limp, torn piece of paper patched with sticky tape remains for me a moving symbol of the material and psychological vulnerability of people like Noella – refugees, displaced and disempowered.

Over the years, then and since, I've marvelled at Noella's courage and resilience and faith as illnesses laid her low and increased her insecurity. Her trust in God, in Christ, in the saints and the angels sustained her. In the last few weeks, she

seemed to be placing her trust in a Chinese protector of their home and family she was told about as a child, who always was on guard at the gate. She had a dream in which this protector told her that she would always be kept safe. Whether a protector from ancient Chinese tradition or the angels of Jewish and Christian traditions, she entrusted her safekeeping to them all her life

This year brought increasing signs of her strong life in the spirit, her personal communications with God and her close bonding with her beloved brother Steven, who died 25 years ago. Her conversation became a fascinating mix of present material realities and places, voices from her memories and her conversations with God and the spirit world. I took them to be indications of her slowly leaving us, of tuning out from the preoccupations of this here-and-now, matter-of-fact world and tuning in to other realities, other relationships.

One day not so long ago, she said, 'I am the Ark'. You need to know Grail traditions to know what she meant. 'The Ark' was a house in the grounds of the Tiltenberg, the international Grail formation and training centre in the Netherlands, dedicated to a contemplative life rather than an active one in the world. The intense life of prayer of the women who chose to be there was, as it were, a counterbalance to the life of action in the secular world of most other women in The Grail, a resource of spiritual energy within the movement. Noella chose to be there for a time during one of the years she spent at the Tiltenberg. She was telling me that, while 'the Ark' as a material place no longer existed, it gave meaning to her life now to be a spiritual resource for the others of us.

I hope Noella believed us when we told her we'd been happy to accompany her on the way, as we had been able to do these last 45 years. She has taught us a lot that we needed to learn. She has given us memorable moments of laughter and celebration. Her gifts of hospitality and kindness made her shine. I have felt humbled by her steadfastness and spiritual confidence. I've been deeply touched by her simplicity in sharing her brokenness when illness seized control.

A copy of the Beatitudes was her last request and they lay on her bed for visitors to read aloud to her during her last days. Both Mary Robertson and Fran Warner

were with her not long before she died. Both read the Beatitudes to her; both found her very attentive. The Beatitudes were, we believe, in her consciousness as she finally slipped away to discover what beatitude – blessedness - is really like.

At such times as these I recall a favourite text of mine – from John Henry Newman’s beautiful description of dying and death in *The Dream of Gerontius*:

‘I went to sleep; and now I am refreshed.
A strange refreshment: for I feel in me
An inexpressive lightness, and a sense
Of freedom, as if I were at last myself
As never had been before.’

Alison Healey



*Noella Liu, born in Beijing 24th December 1933, died in Sydney 28th August, 2013.
At her request, Noella was cremated and her ashes scattered on Sydney waters.*

