

Brother Leonard Colin Francis

1926 – 2011

by

P Mark O'Loughlin cfc



There is a river whose streams refresh the city of God, and it sanctifies the dwelling of the Most High.

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalm 46

Prologue

In July 1940 Len's younger and healthy sister Joan died after a brief illness from a then all-too-frequent fatal peritoneal infection resulting from appendicitis. Len was fourteen, and Joan was seven. The overwhelming pain of Joan's death reverberated throughout Len's life. He wrote of the personal impact: *With dramatic suddenness, God became real – not the distant Being I had known, but One whose power was absolute, reaching into our home, our family. I would look up towards the stars and ask: "God, where is Joan? Why have you taken her away?"* Len was propelled into two lifelong searches ... to know this awful God, and to find Joan. The first he pursued through his religious vocation. The second was evident in his embrace of relationships. In a remarkable disposition of a Loving Providence the two quests became one, and in his final years Len wrote of his experience of community life with men and women in West Ivanhoe: *I feel that my quest for the One who gives meaning to life is being answered in the many faces and personalities who give life to this*

community. For I can know the Infinite God only as well as I know and understand each person I encounter.

Family and Home Life

Len's grandfather came from Cornwall, and his grandmother on his father's side from Scotland. They followed the Methodist tradition. His mother's family was Irish, and Catholic. Thomas Francis, Len's father, was born in Corowa in New South Wales on 9 July 1895. Irene Anne Kennedy, Len's mother, was born two years later in Hamilton, a city in western rural Victoria. Thomas was conscripted into the Australian Army and fought in the First World War from 1914 to 1918 in the killing fields at Gallipoli and across France. He was gassed and wounded several times. He had joined agreeably, but returned with chronic pain and anger and bitterness at the futile horror and killing. He lived with a damaged back from a bomb blast. Thomas became a Catholic shortly before marrying Irene in Ballarat on 25 February 1921. He died in Melbourne on 28 May 1964, when Len was at Aquinas College in Ringwood. Irene lived to the grand age of ninety-eight, and passed away in Melbourne on 3 July 1995 when Len was a member of the West Ivanhoe Community.

Thomas and Irene had four children ... Beryl, Bernard, Leonard and Joan. Len was born in Thornbury on 20 July 1926. He lived with his family at 128 Gladstone Avenue in Northcote, a suburb of Melbourne in Victoria, until he was fifteen and a half years old. The four children attended Saint Joseph's Primary School run by the Good Samaritan Sisters in Northcote. In time Beryl married the late Martin Kearns, and Len became uncle to their five children ... Brendan, Danny, Joan, Sean and Terry. Bernie married Nancy, and Len became uncle to their four children ... Anthony, Michael, Paul and Peter. Bernie passed away in 2005.

The Francis family was poor, strongly bonded, and happy. Grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins visited, and the small house echoed to the sound of banjo and spirited singing. As he worked around the house Thomas sang wartime songs and Catholic and Methodist hymns. Thomas was hard working, and a carpenter. He loved wood, and was a cabinet-maker craftsman. Len remembered his father as "strong, gentle and full of love", a man of "high principles", able to be a "disciplinarian". During the Depression years Thomas was forced to seek work in the country while Irene cared lovingly at home for her own children, and also for the children of relatives and neighbours. Len remembered his mother for her laughter and singing and great kindness. Irene loved to tell stories and recite poems she knew by heart. The family was faithful to the Catholic tradition with Grace before and after meals and the Rosary in the evening.

Len carried a vivid memory of sitting on his father's knee, Joan on the other knee, arms around each other, singing. And with this memory a haunting one of teasing Joan, as brothers do to sisters, and being chided by his father that he could not claim to love him if he was unkind to Joan. First Confession and First Communion during Grade Two were big occasions in Len's early life. He remembered with some lingering dismay that when Sister Paschal directed him into the small dark confessional to wait his turn he did not know what to expect and was facing the wrong way when the priest shot back the small sliding window. He was so surprised that he wet his pants! A natural enough response for a young person to a bizarre ritual.

Perhaps a glimpse, too, of that Catholic fear with which Len's generation was burdened. Bernie and Len were altar-boys and each morning ran two miles to the church to serve 7.0 am Mass. Then it was the run home for breakfast, and a repeat two miles back for school.

Len's favourite pastimes in these years were being with his father in his small workshed, and reading. Len's confidence and skills with maintenance and repairs undoubtedly were learned at his father's side in that work-shed. Thomas and Irene had books, and loved to read. In turn Len read, and immersed himself in R. M. Balantine's *Coral Island* and Zane Grey's *The Thundering Herd* and Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. His lifetime love of both entertaining and serious writing took root in those years.

The personal traits evident in Len's life were so obviously acquired during those formative years at home with his family in Northcote ... generosity; fidelity to his family, to his Catholic upbringing, and subsequently to his Brotherhood; a respectful love of others; a deep love of reading and music; a readiness to be useful with repairs and maintenance; a capacity to live simply and with less; a readiness to get on with the tasks of life; and a personal ethic of hard work.

As a boy Len was short of stature but solidly built. He was not infrequently defending himself. Beryl was often told by her school friends "Your brother's round the back of the school with a blood nose. He's been fighting again". Len later mused wryly "Maybe I picked the fights"! His readiness for a 'fight' was also one of Len's enduring traits. At one stage he took the 'fight' up to Archbishop George Pell through some vigorous correspondence. The companion trait of this readiness for a 'fight' was courage. Len was courageous, and this enabled him throughout his life to take many steps into the unknown.

Vocation and Religious Formation

After completing his first eight years of education at Saint Joseph's near his home in Northcote, in 1940 Len began travelling by tram to East Melbourne to attend Saint Colman's scholarship class. His teacher was Brother Paul Bowler. There was to be a sequence of events that led Len to decide to become a Christian Brother. In mid-year, a week before Len's fourteenth birthday, his younger sister Joan died unexpectedly. As recorded in the Prologue, the sudden loss of Joan impacted dramatically in Len's life. There was now a question that demanded an answer. Who was this God who had taken Joan away?

On returning to class after the funeral and burial Len was tearful. Although not remembered as an affectionate man, Paul Bowler put his arm around Len and commented that "The tears are good, but you must be strong for your parents' sake". Paul's gesture and invitation had a profound effect.

In October of that year, only a few months after Joan's death, Brother Justus Smith visited St Colman's to talk to the students about the life of Christian Brothers. As Len recalled, he spoke about Brothers "following Jesus, and coming to know God". This struck a chord with Len. Here was a possible pathway to find his answer.

The following year, 1941, Len entered Year 10 at the nearby Parade College in East Melbourne. During the customary spiritual retreat at La Verna he studied a card that Justus Smith had given him. It depicted Jesus, with his hand on the shoulder of a young man, saying "Come follow me". Len remembered this moment as a decisive one. He knew that these words were addressed to him. He made his decision.

Len left his family in late January 1942 to travel by train to Strathfield, a suburb of Sydney, where he would complete his secondary education with other young men who were also thinking of becoming Brothers. Len found this step hard, but it was no doubt harder for his mother and father who had already lost Joan. They were to lose Bernard not long after when he joined the army. Len was conscious that only the cheerful Beryl remained at home to support their parents.

Len was to spend 1942 and 1943 in what was called the Juniorate, a small residential secondary college in Strathfield. Here he was educated and cared for by a community of competent and dedicated Brothers ... Claver Daly, Paschal Kent, Alban McKay, Evangelist McElligot and Borgia Murray. They looked after each young man as a person. Len remembered them as "all great men". Len's desire to be a Christian Brother consolidated.

After successfully completing his secondary education Len's journey to becoming a Brother took him and his classmates to the Novitiate in Minto, a small rural centre just outside Sydney. Under the direction of the Novice Master, Brother Patrick Harty, 1944 would be a year of learning about the Rule that governs the life of Christian Brothers, and a rigorous training for conformity, reliability, punctuality and attention to details. At the completion of his Novitiate year at Minto Len returned to Strathfield. He was found by the leadership of the Brothers to be acceptable, and Len publicly proclaimed his religious vows and so became a Christian Brother. These vows were taken initially on an annual basis. In 1945 he entered the Teachers' College. He was to be allowed only three months of training to be a teacher, and had the opportunity for just one practice lesson, before being sent to teach in a Sydney school. Len was eighteen years old.

Sydney Years

Throughout his life Len insisted that he never aspired to be a teacher. He wanted to be a "farm brother". He remarked later "Nobody listened"! Perhaps happily! Throughout his life Len never refused to teach or take responsibility for leadership of schools. He was to teach for 36 years in New South Wales and Victoria and Papua New Guinea, and was the founding Principal of schools in Victoria and in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. It was an extraordinary subjugation of his wishes and needs to those of the leaders of the Congregation. This reflected a personal fidelity into which he was educated within his family, and a religious obedience that he undertook with his vows. These were ever-present in Len's life.

Len's first teaching appointment in May 1946 was to take responsibility for Grade Three in St. Thomas' School in Lewisham, an inner suburb of Sydney. His first twelve years of teaching were at schools in Sydney ... two in Lewisham (1946 and 1947), six in Balmain (1948 to 1953), one in Paddington (1954), and three in Burwood (1955 to 1957). After initially educating primary classes, Len began to teach

at secondary level during his Balmain years and this was to continue throughout his teaching life. Len judged that he was a “successful teacher”, who had “no problems with discipline”. When he was nine years of age Len’s eye, but not his eyesight, was damaged by glass from a broken bottle. He remembered from his early years of teaching a student’s playful admonition “Don’t look at us with your evil eye”! From his youth Len bore himself with an inner self-assurance and confidence, and it is not surprising that maintaining class and school discipline was never a problem for him. The “evil eye” may well have added to the aura! A life-long friend and contemporary of Len, Brother Brian Moylan, remembered Len during their Lewisham time together at St. Thomas’ as being “good in class with Grades 3 and 4 ... always calm, friendly, business-like and really interested in the boys”.

Len’s first year of teaching at Lewisham left an inspirational memory of walking to school each day with Brother Majella Payne. Majella was suffering from Parkinson’s Disease, and the students would race up to him and fight over carrying his bag. It was to be his final year of teaching. Len was struck by Majella’s courage and cheerfulness. They were to be an abiding encouragement to him.

In 1947 Len began studying at Sydney University for an Arts Degree. University lectures were after school, and on lecture days Len’s routine was to teach all day, coach or referee sport after school, have a cold shower, pack his sports attire with his books, catch a tram to the university, attend lectures, and finally arrive home at 9.30 pm for a by then dried up meal left for him in the oven. This was to be his program for his second year at Lewisham and his next six years at Balmain. At University Len majored in English and History, and this academic grounding served him well throughout his life both as a teacher and with his passion for reading. He graduated from Sydney University with Bachelor of Arts in 1954.

The demanding routine of university lecture days fitted within daily life in those years that was structured inflexibly. Morning prayer and meditation preceded Mass at 7.00 am. Teaching began at 9.00 am and ended at 3.30 pm. If it was not sports engagements or university lectures after school, it was a vigorous game of handball. After evening prayer and a meal at 6.00 pm there was study and class preparation before a recreational game of cards or billiards at 8.45 pm. The days ended with the Rosary and night prayer, with a bell for “lights out” at 10.00 pm. An earnest spirituality in Len’s youth and early years as a Brother, of seeking to know God through knowing Jesus, in Len’s own words “petered out when for years prayer was a performance carried out dutifully and doggedly”. Len’s spiritual life was to reawaken years later.

After successfully completing his university studies Len was to spend his last three years in Sydney at Burwood. These were more relaxed and enjoyable times, and community life more amicable and brotherly. In Len’s words “the sun was beginning to shine again”.

With perhaps a little understatement Len looked back on these Sydney years as “hard”. But he could add also “they were enjoyable”.

Return to Victoria and New Directions

Len's long-awaited transfer back to Victoria came in 1958, and he was posted to St. Mary's Technical School in Geelong. There he found himself with two Brothers who were exploring new directions in spirituality. Leo Cahill and Peter (Fin) Ryan were members of a 'Group' of Brothers who were regularly receiving spiritual guidance from a Pallotine Priest, Father Walter Sylvester. Len joined this informal group. And at this time they met Father Augustine Fitzsimmons, a Passionist priest, who introduced them to a spiritual rather than dogmatic theology. Of this experience Len wrote: *New vistas opened up before me. We were encouraged to find our Personal Ideal, a way of being unique to one's gifts and talents. God loves me, and so I must love myself. God loves all of my sisters and brothers, and so must I. But to lead them to God I must make it possible for people to love me. For me this was revolutionary. It was a positive not negative spirituality. Affirming myself, not denying myself, was the emphasis. My role as Brother was not to teach as much as to be a man whom others could see to be good and kind and loving.*

While Len was living in Geelong (1958 and 1959), Box Hill (1960 to 1962) and Ringwood (1962 to 1968) he was a regular member of Walter Sylvester's 'Groupers' and was not swayed by the negativity of some Brothers towards them. The impact of these formative experiences built on his early home upbringing and helped shape how Len was to "be Brother" throughout the rest of his life. It is evident in the testimonies of the people who encountered Len during his Ringwood and Papua New Guinea years.

After two years in Geelong he was appointed to the staff of the Christian Brothers' Teachers' College in Box Hill in 1960. During that year Len accepted the challenging task of being founding principal of Aquinas Boys' College in Ringwood, the first Catholic Regional College in Australia. The college served five parishes in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and Len collaborated with the five parish priests in this undertaking. The college commenced in 1961 and Len continued to live with the Brothers' community in Box Hill while a residence was being built at the college. In 1962 he founded and was leader of the first Brothers' community at Aquinas College. Len proved to be an able Principal of the then middle secondary school for boys, and filled this role at Aquinas College for seven years. A college for girls started at the same time as the boys' college and Brenda Monk, a parent whose daughter Kate attended the girls' college, remembers Len "knowing everybody, and creating a great working relationship between the boys' and girls' colleges, and even making up the lyrics for the house songs for the girls". Alison MacNeill became a long-term member of the Aquinas staff after Len's years as Principal, and was to become a good friend of Len. She found him to be "the most kind, gentle, gentlemanly man I have met." Len was followed by the late Brother Killian O'Donoghue as the second principal, and Aquinas College has grown to be a very successful Catholic regional secondary college for boys and girls.

Papua New Guinea

During 1967 Len's generosity, and adventurous and courageous spirit, led him to volunteer for the Christian Brothers' outreach mission to the people of Papua New Guinea. This was in response to the initiative of the Brothers' Superior General, Brother Austin Loftus, who asked all provinces to undertake their own foreign mission. In 1968 Len took pioneering responsibility as both the principal and

Christian Brothers' community leader at the mission-run boarding school Fatima College in Banz in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Two of his companions in this endeavour were Brothers Kevin Laws and Pat Mohen.

They did not receive the benefits of an enculturation course or language school opportunity, and did not experience the support of the New South Wales St. Mary's Province that had Brothers in Papua New Guinea for many years. The Victoria St. Patrick's Province Leader, Brother Linus Kelty, wanted to encourage the possibility of a fresh approach. This created early challenges, but Len was able to capitalize on the freedom.

The Brothers had planned to take white religious habits with them, but these were lost in transit. With the approval of the Province Leader they adopted a formal wear of grey trousers and white shirts with a Congregation badge. Living without the religious habit of soutane and cincture and symbolically half clerical collar was to be another of numbers of liberating experiences for Len. He reflected later "I seemed now to be a brother with a small "b", and was released from a touch of hubris that attached to me as a Religious".

Brother Kevin Laws was with Len in these pioneering years and describes Len's responses to the challenges facing the Brothers: *The initial challenges were getting the house completed, and sorting out the difficulty created by the school being co-educational as the Brothers' Rule did not permit them to be involved in girls' education. Father Peter van Adrichem was in charge of the Mission and controlled the school finances tightly, and this led to tension between the needs of the school and the approach of the mission administration. Peter was a wonderful priest but he did not understand the Australians. He viewed them as colonials akin to the white coffee planters and administrative personnel.*

Len understood the local challenges. He immediately began working closely with the Sisters of Notre Dame who were in charge of the girls. He welcomed to our house-warming the primary teachers, who were nationals, and fostered an atmosphere of acceptance and co-operation with all those living on the mission station. He undertook a two-week Pidgin English course to become familiar with the lingua franca of the area and used it to advantage when talking with parents.

At that time the Government was offering the mission schools an Integrated System to help them to pay teachers at the higher Government rate. Len was in favour of the Integrated System and worked on committees with the priests to help maintain the Mission influence and get better pay for teachers and improved conditions for the students. Eventually this was accepted and over the years has proved to be of great benefit to the Missions although they did lose some control of their schools.

Len cared for the community members and saw that there were suitable breaks and enculturation opportunities with attendance at many local "Sing-Sings" and Pig Killings and visits to many missions. Life without a car for the first year was isolating, and the consequent reliance of the Brothers on other led to a friendly and co-operative spirit. We also had the opportunity to visit many of the students in their home villages and experience their living conditions. The villages were not

underdeveloped as they had a subsistence economy, but finding money for fees and clothing was difficult.

The Mission did not easily grow to accept the different roles of church and state, and acknowledge that the school principal had legal responsibility for school finances, distribution of mail, the daily school program, and when students were permitted to go home or leave the property. But gradually the scene changed and all groups came to a better mutual understanding. Len related well to the local people and local Sisters, and created good relations with the lay missionaries and the volunteers from abroad who assisted with the teaching. Examinations were competitive within Papua New Guinea at the Year 10 level, and results during Len's time were excellent and a source of recognition for the Brothers and of pride for the Mission. Fatima was always regarded as a very good school. The good will that Len created continued on and the school expanded, managed its own finances, and worked within the Integrated Education system.

Len enjoyed this pioneering work and leadership for three years, but was then directed by the Provincial to return to Victoria after this short term. It was a hurtful decision for Len, but was accepted with good grace. The reason given to Len for directing him to return was that it was mandatory as he had now completed nine years as a community leader and served in two schools as principal. One suspects with Len that the real reason was otherwise. Len remembered that at one stage the priest in charge of the Mission had threatened to "have him run out of the country" over some incident that for Len was long-forgotten. Len's achievements in Banz were even more remarkable in the face of this sort of obstructionist hostility.

During his time at Banz Len began to experience angina, and heart problems were to accompany Len for the rest of his life. He remembered the nine years of exercising leadership from 1961 to 1970 as "exciting times ... times for action rather than for being". In 1971 he was back at St. Mary's in Geelong for what he remembered as "another quiet reflective year". A spirituality of interiority was deepening in Len.

In 1972 Len again undertook leadership, now at Trinity College in Brunswick, a small inner city middle secondary school. These were fruitful years, but the angina became more distressing. Len asked to be relieved, and in 1975 enjoyed another "quiet and pleasant year" at St. Thomas More College in Nunawading. After only one year in Nunawading Len was asked to be the community leader at Parade College in Bundoora. He found community life there "turbulent", and the angina pains returned.

New Formative Experiences

While in Bundoora Len asked for some time of renewal and was granted only two weeks. He undertook a Community Development Program in Adelaide. It proved to be very profitable. Len wrote that "this was my first experience of being on a program with women, and when I needed support on one bad day they sat beside me and did not judge me for my tears".

Then in 1979 Len was freed for three months to live in the Jesuit centre at Pymble in New South Wales with a group of lay and religious men and women. He wrote that "I had a beautifully wise and gentle Spiritual Director, Sr. Marnie Kennedy, and during

the thirty day retreat I had some deeply moving spiritual experiences. Now God was not up there above the stars but with me in the women and men around me”.

Len was appointed Vocations Director, and for the next three years (1979 to 1981) helped other Vocation Directors to run ‘camps’ and ‘retreats’ for young men and women. Len wrote: “My record was unbeatable – I recruited not one Brother during those three years. My daily hour of meditation began in those years, and I feel that I grew spiritually”.

Hospital Ministry

In 1982 Len began what was to be his last years of teaching in a classroom. Distressing angina returned, and he had open-heart surgery early in 1983. After his recovery the Province Leader, Brother Chanel Naughtin, gave him approval to undertake a Clinical Pastoral Education course with a view to working as a school counselor. The CPE course was conducted at the Mercy Maternity Hospital in East Melbourne. This inducted Len into hospital pastoral care ministry. He spent one year at the Mercy Hospital, and then took up this ministry in St. Vincent’s Public Hospital in inner Melbourne.

Mrs Joy White, who lives in Bendigo in country Victoria, gives us an insight into Len’s hospital pastoral care. Joy wrote: *Brother Len befriended my husband during the many times that Laurie was a seriously ill patient in St. Vincent’s Hospital in Melbourne. Laurie was a student at St. Virgil’s College in Hobart, and this created the opportunity to chat about Brothers. Late one evening Len turned up at Laurie’s bedside with a Brother from his St. Virgil’s days, and this gave Laurie great pleasure. After Laurie’s death in 1989 Len has continued to be a special person and friend to me. He would travel to Bendigo with a community member to see me, or we would catch up in Melbourne. I recall that before Len moved to Ivanhoe in 1995 he was worried about where the community would find a new home after being told to leave the Clifton Hill residence. One night Len phoned to say “Joy, your prayers and mine have been answered ... We have been offered a home”. A true and wonderful man, caring of all, giving of himself even when his health was waning.*

Mary Hevern observed Len in his hospital ministry. She wrote: *I first met Brother Len in the eighties when he was working as a chaplain at St. Vincent’s Public Hospital. I was a student nurse trying to learn the workings of a large public teaching hospital. My memory of Len as Chaplain are of a man large in stature, gentle in manner, with a keen sense of humour and an interest in the individual. Len seemed to take things in his stride, was always his own man, and welcomed all with whom he came in contact, especially with his smile. Nothing was too much trouble for him, and he quietly, and what seemed to me magically, was able to go from bed to bed bringing peace, joy and some consolation to the patients. In a large public teaching hospital such as St. Vincent’s in the eighties, the thought of a bed and three meals a day were a draw-card for the “regulars” as they were fondly known to us as nurses. Len was wonderful with these men, with never a hint of discrimination, and always a welcome. Men and women of all backgrounds were the scope of his ministry. As I reflect back on Len’s ministry I can see that there was a strong Christian ethic focused on the poor and marginalized always evident.*

Len worked for eleven years in hospital pastoral care in St. Vincent's. But heart problems again developed, and heart surgery in 1995 brought his hospital ministry to an end. During his years in hospital ministry Len was also negotiating dramatic changes in his lifestyle as a Brother.

Alternative Communities

Brother Tom Kingston shared life with Len from the mid-1980's to the early 1990's in three atypical communities of the type described as Basic Christian Communities (*ecclesial communautes de base*) by Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Tom provides us with a personal account of life with Len during those years: *Over the course of a couple of years, at various Christian Brothers' functions, Len and I had conversations about living what we considered a simpler way of life in a poorer area of Melbourne. We were both drawn to living away from our ministries and in a 'normal' house in a 'normal' street. In mid 1985 Len and I approached the Brothers' Leadership Team about setting up a community of Brothers in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Brothers had once lived in Yarraville but had left. With the support of the Leadership Team Len and I began looking for possible places to live. Our wide search narrowed to Yarraville and West Footscray because the price of housing was on the lower end of prices in Melbourne, there was good public transport, and the local Parish was welcoming. We eventually chose a simple weatherboard house in Empress Avenue in West Footscray and the Leadership Team purchased the property. Len and I asked communities for furnishings, and the house was fitted out with left-over goods. The Leadership Team invited Brothers to volunteer to join this new community, and in January 1986 Len and I were joined by Sean McManus.*

As we started this new venture Len was working in Chaplaincy at St Vincent's Hospital in East Melbourne, Sean was teaching at St Mary's Boys School in West Melbourne, and I was working at St Joseph's Technical College in South Melbourne. Len would travel to and from St Vincent's Hospital each day by public transport. Len was very keen on hospitality, as we all were, and therefore our spare room was nearly always occupied. At one stage Len had befriended a young man who had just been released from Long Bay jail in Sydney. He was looking for accommodation and stayed with us for a time. One of the early tensions in our simple lifestyle was around TV. Len was very much against having TV at all, but Sean and I were keen on the news and other TV interests. A compromise was reached with a TV set in a side room and not in the main living area. Len was faithful to his no TV lifestyle, and preferred quietly reading. The community was very welcoming, and Len was its heart and soul as Sean and I were often busy with many things. Len was the one most at home, and the one who engaged us with our neighbours. He was indeed the stabilizing influence in the community, and always the welcoming presence. Len took the gospel injunction to "welcome the stranger" very seriously. And Len enjoyed our many community celebrations. After two years circumstances brought about the closure of this community at the end of 1987. Len now waited patiently for a new opportunity to respond to the call to live by 'Gospel' values.

With the closure of the West Footscray community Len moved into the Brothers' residence in Park Street in Parkville. During his second year at Park Street he moved again to house-share with Father Barry Robinson, the Parish Priest at St. John's in

East Melbourne. Relations were good, but Len found his nine months there lonely. In his own words he “needed community”.

Tom Kingston takes up the story: *After I had completed a study year Len and I met up again and this time we talked about setting up a community of religious and non-religious members. Our idea was that if Brothers indeed had something to offer then one way to show this would be to open a Brothers’ community to others. We pondered the possibility of a ‘mixed’ community. Again we met with the Leadership Team and again the Leadership Team supported the idea and so in 1990 Len and I moved into a house bequeathed to the Brothers on Grey Street in East Melbourne. This time we were joined by a young university student, Patrick O’Sullivan, and a young woman work colleague of Len’s from St Vincent’s Hospital who was studying theology, Anna Duffy. The four of us lived together for the year. Again Len was on this cutting edge of a new way of being a Christian Brother. And again Len was a faithful and committed member of the community who looked to the needs of each member. Len’s gift of hospitality was again evident and our home was a welcoming place, especially for young people who related well and easily to Len. Len was always on the lookout for linking the religious life with the current ideas in modern society and without losing the distinctiveness of what he brought to community as a Christian Brother. Len was faithful to the Edmund Rice tradition as well as trying to respond to the Second Vatican Council call to be faithful to the “signs of the times”.*

The house at East Melbourne was limited in size. Len and I were looking for a house that could accommodate a larger family of religious and lay persons. The Brothers’ Leadership Team suggested the possibility of the former Christian Brothers’ residence on Queens Parade in Clifton Hill that could house about ten persons. So during the 1990 year in East Melbourne Len and I invited a number of persons who had some interest in living together as a ‘Gospel’ community to participate in a series of meetings to plan for 1991. Finally seven people decided to form what came to be known as the Clifton Hill Community.

Brother Mark O’Loughlin was a third Christian Brother amongst the seven who formed this community, other members being Vic and Vanessa Gatti (a married couple), Maureen O’Donnell (a Sister of Mercy), and Tom Keogh (a lay man). With the generous and gracious welcome of the Parish Priest of St. John’s in Clifton Hill, Father Frank Harman, the community took up residence in Clifton Hill early in 1991. Len and Mark were to embrace the life of this community for the next twenty years, four in Clifton Hill and sixteen in Ivanhoe.

Clifton Hill Community

Len joined in creating community life with a rich variety of persons during the Clifton Hill years: Peta Cain RIP (a displaced secondary student referred by Vanessa who was a counsellor at Aquinas College); Bev and Neil McKindlay (a farming couple from New South Wales, referred to the community by St. Vincent’s Hospital following Neil’s near fatal accident on their farm); Jacqui (a Thai student); Peg Fitzgerald (a member of *Pax Christi* and at different times a Missionary Sister of Service in Tasmania for twenty years, member of the armed services in World War II, and lay missionary with Bishop Arkveld SVD in Papua New Guinea for fifteen years); Jacinta Rice (a Brigidine Sister); Sonia Robbins (a medical doctor and

specialist hand surgeon); Brian Jory (a former priest); Paul Gleeson (a former Christian Brother); Debbie Hsu (a student from Taiwan); Michelle and Lois Chuang (Taiwanese students and subsequent immigrants); Anne Slattery (a nurse); Rob and Michelle Carrucan (a young married couple); Elizabeth Milunas (a teacher); Fiona Vance (a music therapist); Rosaline McGettigan (a former Brown Josephite Sister); and Elsa Castillo (an El Salvadorian nurse who had been brutally abused by the army and forced to leave her country).

In *Reflective Writings October 2005*, the former St. Patrick's Province Monthly Newsletter, Len contributed an essay on *Communities of the like-minded*. He wrote in response to an address by Timothy Radcliffe OP in Rome in 2004 to Leaders of Religious Congregations. Radcliffe posed the question "Can I be deeply at home with one who has another ecclesiology?" Radcliffe asserted "Communities of the like-minded are weak signs of the Kingdom ... Religious communities should be crucibles of renewed language ... If we are at home in the spaciousness of God in the Kingdom, then we must be at home with anyone." The Radcliffe address and view of the Kingdom resonated with Len, and he felt reassured for the discerned choices in his own life. In 2005 Len wrote: *The communities that I have now lived in for over sixteen years were not communities of the like-minded. Fifty nine persons have lived in these communities for durations ranging from a few months to frequently four years and longer. There have been men and women, young and old, religious brothers and religious sisters and lay persons, a variety of professionals and many students. Religious affiliations have been Catholic, Uniting Church, Buddhist and Muslim. Nationalities have been Australian, Thai, Samoan, British, East Timorese, Taiwanese, and El Salvadorean. We have had regular meetings, chaired by each in turn. We have shared cooking and shopping and household chores equally. Evening meals have always been lively and enjoyable. I have been kept in touch with the young, the marginalized, with those of different faiths and cultures, and I have been continually challenged. I feel that as an old Christian Brother I do have relevance in the mission to spread the Kingdom.*

During the fourth year in Clifton Hill the Melbourne Archdiocese, without any communication with the community, decided to take over the residence. The Parish Priest was powerless. To its dismay the community was told by the Archdiocese to vacate the property. This dislocation became a blessing. The community was to spend many Saturday mornings on the road looking at real estate for rent until through friends of Len, Chris and Di Dixon, the community was invited by Saint Bernadette's Parish in West Ivanhoe to take up occupancy of a former convent building next to the church. Len helped with this move to West Ivanhoe where he was to spend the next fifteen deeply satisfying years.

West Ivanhoe Community

Len, Mark, Elizabeth, and Fiona took appropriate furnishings with them and made the transition from Clifton Hill to Bond Street in Ivanhoe in April of 1995. Mark drew up a formal tenancy agreement and rental arrangement with St. Bernadette's Parish on behalf of what would now be known as the West Ivanhoe Community.

The Parish convent building had been occupied by the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition, and after they left the Parish hoped to generate some income by using the

building as a hostel for Catholic girls from the country who were attending tertiary courses in Melbourne. Costly refurbishments were made, and a manager employed. But only two students took up residence. This was financially disastrous for the Parish, and the Parish Priest, Father Paul Gurry, and the parishioners welcomed the possibility of a community renting the building. The two students in residence, Melissa Ayres from Myrtleford and Jane Moloney from Warrnambool, were invited to join the community and did so.

During the West Ivanhoe years Len and the community articulated its 'Principles of Life' as follows:

1. To seek to live with deep respect and care for each other, valuing the uniqueness and sacredness of each person.
2. And to seek to live this respect by caring for each other person in the community, and supporting them in their life tasks.
3. To seek to be practical in this care for each other by sharing fully and equally in the life tasks of the community ... housekeeping / property and grounds maintenance / recycling / shopping / meal preparation / maintaining the safety and security of our home.
4. To seek to be hospitable in a discerning and responsible way.
5. To seek to live simply but enjoyably together, by keeping costs to a minimum, by avoiding waste of food and water and power, and by recycling.
6. To gather on a weekly basis to share a meal and discuss and celebrate the life of the community.

Peg Fitzgerald spent many years with both the Clifton Hill and West Ivanhoe communities and wrote of her experience: "In their book *Gathered in God's Name*, Carmel Leavy OP and Rosalie O'Neill RSJ describe this sort of community as a *community of presence*, and the community trusts that it may be responding prophetically by linking church and non-church persons together in building the Kingdom of God within the Edmund Rice Family."

Representative of the numerous fellow community members with Len in West Ivanhoe during sixteen years were: Melissa Ayres, Hayley Costa, Tracey Spiers, Melissa Ivone and Natasha Fitzgerald, who had all attended Marion College in Myrtleford; Lorraine Brosnan, a Sister of Mercy; Nazlin Remtulla, a nurse of Muslim adherence; Noppramart Thammateeradaycho and her brother Kitsanachai, Naruemon Choochinprakarn and her sister Siriporn and brother Teep (for a time a Buddhist monk) and niece Nina (Jump, who attended St. Bernadette's primary school for some weeks over three years during her long vacation) and Teep's son Earth (who attended Parade College for some weeks during his long vacation), Aor (Yada Techatanadirek) and Ann (Wanida Longthaweephol), and Wanida's family during her hospitalization for a terminal illness, all from Thailand; Maria do Ceo Soares, Francisco Soares (Maria and Francisco were auspiced by *Pax Christi*), Decio Sarmento, Nelia Babo Soares and Tita Sousa, all from East Timor; Milena Benavides Serrato (a marine science graduate working with Mark O'Loughlin) and Carol Castaneda, from Colombia; Sera Tapu from Samoa; Anne Jackiw and her daughter Michelle Slenders; from time to time Elsa Castillo from El Salvador; Sang Jun Park and his mother Angela Shin and brother Stefano, Maria (Hyun Joo Kim), Koun Kim (Jennifer), and Semi Kang, all from Korea; and Alice (Zhang Li Bo) from Yunnan Province, and Allan Wu from Guang Xi Province, in China.

Noppramart Thammateeradaycho (Krung to the community) was aware of the community from being taught English in Bangkok by the former community member Elizabeth Milunas. Elizabeth facilitated the arrangements for Krung to live with the West Ivanhoe Community while she further improved her English language skills and then undertook masters degrees in law at the University of Melbourne in 2001 and Deakin University in 2002. Krung wrote: *Len was the first Australian person I met when he picked me up from Melbourne International Airport in September 1999. My first memory of Len is that he looked very kind, with a face like Santa Claus. I know that my life and studies in Melbourne would have been much more difficult if I was not living with Len and Mark in the West Ivanhoe Community. Len and Mark were always assisting and encouraging me, and I can say that they were the best English tutors and life models for me. Len was very kind and gentlemanly. I remember when Len's car was hit and badly damaged by another car. He was not angry, but rather sorry for the lady driver. He blamed himself. Unlike Thai seniors Len was always energetic and active whether it was enjoying an outing with his brother Bernie each Tuesday, or reserving and reading books from the local library, or giving me copies of relevant legal matters that he came across, or reading to the blind or accompanying them on outings, or doing jobs around the community residence. I always knew when Len was home because of his music. He was always singing when working around the community residence. He was amazingly carefree about his heart problems, and seemed to be not worried. I left Melbourne in March 2003. I believe that something led me to finally choose Melbourne for my masters studies. I call it destiny. I thank God who led me to the West Ivanhoe Community and allowed me to spend some part of my life with Len. I always miss him.*

Krung's younger brother Kitsanachai Prasitmonthon, or Gom to the community, was a member of the community from 2003 to 2007. During this time he learned English, and then completed his graduate Diploma in Journalism at La Trobe University and Masters Degree at Deakin University. Gom found Len to be a "great teacher of English", and felt that he could never have graduated without Len's assistance. And, for Gom, Len was a "great chef". Gom noticed how much thought and attention Len gave to doing his share of preparing meals for the community, and found Len's Christmas and Easter roast pork dinners a memorable delight. "Kindness and generosity" were Gom's dominant impressions of Len.

Siriporn Choochinprakarn, a devout Buddhist Thai lady, wrote of Len: *I first met Brother Len at my Australian Nationalized Ceremony in 2003. I was in Australia alone, without any family, and was impressed with how warm, kind and caring he was. He was always attentive to other people's needs. After spending almost two years with Len in the West Ivanhoe Community, I would like to say that Brother Len is the kindest person I have ever met. I have learned from him how to be a good person, as he always was. I will never forget his sense of humour that he shared with us sometimes after dinner. He is a deeply spiritual person, and I am honoured and blessed to have had the opportunity to know Len and spend part of my life with him.*

Siriporn's sister Naruemon, Maow to the community, also lived with Len in the West Ivanhoe Community (2004–2008) while she completed her doctoral studies in Melbourne. In writing of Len "kindness" was Maow's overwhelming impression from sharing life with him ... with specific memories of Len correcting English in essays

and assignments for the overseas students, driving them to and from the airport, and accompanying them to hospital on occasion. Maow counted Len “a dear friend”, and considered it a “great honour” to know him.

Jen (Koun Kim) from South Korea was a member of the community from 2007 while studying Hospitality and Tourism at La Trobe University and wrote of Len: *Len is my lovely grandfather. He is kind, with a wonderful warm heart. He is like a real grandfather for me, like real family. I can talk with him about everything. He makes me laugh and smile, and while I am with him I feel happy and peaceful. Whenever I returned home I would always go straight to his room where he would welcome me with a great smile. I would tell him about everything that had happened, and about how I felt. He gives me lots of love. He always says “I love you Jenny”. And even if he does not say the words I still experience his love through his eyes.*

Alice (Zhang Li Bo) arrived in the West Ivanhoe Community from China early in 2009. She was to undertake graduate studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and her supervisor had sought out what he judged to be the most suitable situation for her accommodation. Alice is a lecturer in English at a university in Kunming City in Yunnan Province in the south west of China. Her husband is a medical doctor, who works in a local prison. Alice is a member of a Christian community in her city. She wrote of Len: *I liked Len from the first time I saw him. I arrived at Ivanhoe on a muggy afternoon in 2009, really tired after a 19 hour plane trip. I was welcomed by Len and Mark, whom I would discover it would be my privilege to know. Len was extremely helpful and thoughtful. He helped me by carrying my baggage to my room. The room had already been arranged by Len several days before. It was comfy, pleasant, neat and tidy. There was a soft bed with clean pink linen. To my surprise I noticed there was a Chinese Kwan-yin picture on the wall. Later Len told me that he put it up just wanting me to have some familiar feeling while living in this room. How thoughtful he was. I felt that I was loved and cared for from the very first minute I stepped into this strange and unfamiliar land. Len was very caring. After settling me down he showed me over all of the residence, and explained patiently how everything was run. He also asked me what food I liked to eat and what my hobbies were. I told him that I liked Asian food and noodles. The next day he came with lots of Asian noodles for me. I wanted to get an Australian bankcard and did not know where I should go, so I went to talk to Len. He told me that when I was ready he would drive me to the bank. He drove me there on the following day. He patiently sat and waited while I talked to a bank assistant and sorted everything out. I spent nearly one and a half hours at the bank. Len did not complain. After I filled in all the forms he drove me back to our community residence. When I was about to have some rest I got a phone call from the bank saying that I had left my passport behind. They wanted me to come and get it. Again, Len drove me to the bank. I felt so happy and grateful for his timely help. His help and care were not only for me but for all of the students living in our community. He helped Ben who was a Korean young boy whose English was not very good. He proofread and helped Jennie with her assignments. He encouraged Maria. He proved to be an ordinary person but extraordinarily kind, caring and helpful. I am blessed to know Len and may The Lord always takes care of him.*

These unique and detailed testimonies from persons of diverse cultures who had no prior experience of Australian ways and Christian Brothers present an integral picture

of Len as a wonderfully warm, welcoming, hospitable, kind, caring, generous, patient, loving and deeply spiritual person.

Spirituality

The foundations of Len's spirituality were laid during his formative years with his family. And the tragic death of his sister Joan impelled Len into two lifelong searches ... to find Joan, and to understand a God who had snatched her from his life. Len himself recognized that his early life was one of "doing and teaching", as the motto of the Christian Brothers expressed ... *Facere et Docere*. But after his years of leadership in Ringwood and Papua New Guinea he saw a change in himself to a life more orientated towards "being Brother".

Len never failed to seek and avail of opportunities to find resolutions for his lifelong searches. And one cannot but recognize a providential array of experiences that were to shape Len's spirituality and provide him with his answers. These began with the group mentoring by Fathers Walter Sylvester and Augustine Fitzsimmons during the 1960's. These were built on in the 1970's with the experiences of a Community Development Program in Adelaide, and a retreat at Pymble in Sydney directed by Sr. Marnie Kennedy. In the 1980's Len had the further experience of a Clinical Education Program. And with these formal opportunities for spiritual growth came the lived experiences of life in Papua New Guinea in the 1960's, working with other Vocation Directors in the 1970's, pastoral care in St. Vincent's hospital in the 1980's, and living in mixed communities for the final twenty-three years of his life. Len fully engaged an extraordinary life-journey from religious life based on uncritical adherence to Catholic religious beliefs and practices to a personalized spirituality of Being Brother.

Len wrote of his own journey: *For forty seven years (1942 to 1989) I lived solely with men, my Brothers, teaching, praying, recreating with them. Until 1978 I had not shared my home or chapel with any layperson or woman. But the years of 'camps' and 'retreats' with them opened up a window in my spiritual life, letting in feminine qualities that made me more caring and compassionate. Twelve years of hospital chaplaincy brought me into intimate contact with pain and suffering, giving birth and dying, and twice during those years I was close to death myself. These have been the pinnacles of my religious experiences, and I seem to have been moving towards them for a long time. I feel that the quest for the One who gives meaning to life is being answered in the many faces and personalities who have given life to my communities. For I can know the Infinite God only as well as I know and understand each person I encounter.*

And here, too, Len found Joan. Not the baby sister of his youth, but in the experiences of the transcendent feminine that is at the heart of all life and that Len discovered and embraced. The universal Joan. The Mary of the Christian Tradition.

His life-long friend Brother Brian Moylan wrote: *Len was a deeply spiritual man, a deep thinker, hospitable, caring and compassionate. He was a good friend, and a most dedicated and faithful Christian Brother.*

As a Brother who deeply valued Len's fraternal companionship and support throughout the lives of the *Clifton Hill Community* (1991 to 1994) and *West Ivanhoe Community* (1995 to 2010), and now as his biographer, I am surprised to read the testimonies of so many who saw in Len a deep spirituality. Len and I never discussed our differing spiritualities, and I valued Len's acceptance of mine without finding language to describe his. But his spirituality was certainly recognized by those who came to experience life with Len. I have been led to recognize that it was a spirituality of deep interiority ... of inner harmony ... and of an outreaching generous and respectful and loving relationality. I am prompted to think of John's Gospel "Father, may they be one in us" (John: 17:21). A spirituality of being, not of words. Len's life was an incarnation of the yearned-for spirituality of the 2002 General Chapter of the Christian Brothers in Rome that articulated the invitation to "Be Brother".

Final months

Towards the end of 2009 Len's health began to decline rapidly, and his heart condition was a worry to the medical professionals. He became frail, and recognized that he needed more care than the community could provide. A room was found for him in Mercy Place in Parkville. With his accustomed recognition of reality Len embraced Mercy Place as his "home", and talked about it being "the last place where I will live". He settled peacefully, and while he remained frail his health stabilized. The ever-respectful and tolerant pastoral care worker in Len emerged, and he commented one day "there is a real apostolate here". His sense of humour remained, and he recounted with delight that one morning an aged, white-haired impish lady arrived at breakfast and asked of all within earshot "Is there any future in this?"

Epilogue

That reassuring Psalm 46 proclaims that Yahweh Sabaoth is on our side. Mounted on the front of the writing desk in his office in West Ivanhoe, that Len occupied during the last fifteen years of his life, is a small decorative wooden plaque with a phrase from that psalm: *Be still and know that I am God*. A preceding phrase declares: *There is a river whose streams refresh the city of God, and it sanctifies the dwelling of the Most High*. It was evident in the closing decades of his life that Len had entered the stillness, and the river had assuredly brought its refreshment. A profound personal contentment and peacefulness in Len's final months were the human face of that sanctification. Len died peacefully in what he regarded as his home at Mercy Place in Melbourne on the afternoon of 10 August 2011, finally entering the eternal rest that he had begun to long for,