

The Wreck of the Deutschland

After my father had left to work in Iran, I was surprised by how much I missed him. What a gap there was in my life! He had established a strong bond of affection with me when I was very young and that had survived our ups and downs. Why did he have to go away? I admired his straightforward approach and his professional standards. In my eyes he was an accomplished person with a head full of knowledge. He took his responsibilities for us seriously.

My father's absence deepened my longing to do something meaningful with my own life. Compared with the only model of family life that I knew really well, and that had not convinced me that affections between men and women were necessarily lasting, or even joyful, the model of the Holy Family, Joseph–Mary–Jesus was unreal and insipid. I began to feel the need for something deeper in my own life.

My increasing involvement with the ideological positions of Tridentine Catholicism at my school, with its deep monastic influences and its other-worldly Jansenism—the flavour of Irish Catholicism inspired by French Puritanism—gave me the burning desire to bring my knowledge to those who were ignorant of its priceless treasures. And so I wrote my father a letter, saying that I wanted to devote my life to following the Master's 'bare, sandalled feet through desert sands'. Hundreds, even thousands, I wrote, had felt the same prompting with joy. The Middle East, where I had spent my earliest childhood, had begun to call me back, this time from the pages of the holy books. The urge to become internationally Catholic started to take up some of the space previously reserved for Germany-Austria as a home for my spirit.

My father was shocked by my intentions and immediately confronted me with '*Solch ein Blödsinn!*' (Such nonsense!). He had by now saved some money and so strong was his antagonism to my scheme that he was prepared to sacrifice the family's interests by offering me an air ticket to get me away from Australia. His sisters agreed to have me live with them in Vienna. I would have the opportunity to attend the Vienna Kunstgewerbe Hochschule, a technical high school devoted to the teaching of arts and crafts, and after that a good career.

Nowadays I regret the loss of such an opportunity, but then everything else that was good in my later life would be different too. While I was very tempted by the chance to study theatrical set design, or even glass-blowing or gold-smithing, I rightly suspected that this was a ploy to woo me away from my religious vocation. 'No,' I told my mother, 'I want to be educated first, before I go anywhere.'

My aunt's husband, Oswald Dittrich, whose father had been the first to take Western classical music to Japan, began sending me Asian books about Buddhist monks, in German translation, to engage my mind. To no avail. I remained a stubborn child when it suited me.

My mother gave vent to her frustration of missing out on living in Iran by grumbles about the artlessness of Australian daily life, the slovenly excuses people made that 'near enough is good enough', 'she'll be right mate', 'don't bust your boiler tidying up the mess'. People here, she complained, had little taste for ceremony, and nor did they make the effort of teaching their children good manners or how to respect their elders as was done *zu Hauss* (at home). Life for her was drab. There was no beauty or enough ritual in day-to-day living.

After seeing the artistic interests of the community in the camp, we children felt that culture shock as well. During Easter in Melbourne in 1949, no one painted Easter eggs by hand; before Christmas, no one made Advent wreaths to hang from the ceiling, with candles to be lit every week; no one painted Advent calendars with windows to be opened daily to reveal a symbol of remembrance: a shoe filled with sweets, a deer leaping over a pine sapling, a heart with a spray of flowers, a loaf of bread, a dove, a child in the snow, an angel, a star. Later '*Nicht wieder Schokolade!*' (Not chocolate again!) was mother's dismissal of chocolate Easter eggs which, she said, offered nothing but commercial sweetness to the stomach.

It was an interesting remark, coming from an accomplished maker of Austrian chocolate cakes. 'No one in Australia, except in the churches, does anything about the feast of *Aller Seelen* (All Souls),' she grumbled. 'No one here observes a person's name day,' my Austrian father would certainly have added, had he been with us.

'Here the seasons vary so little,' my mother continued to grumble. Christmas in Germany was usually celebrated with knee-deep snow outside, while inside the houses were made fragrant with branches of pine, with freshly baked gingerbread and apples brought out of storage and tied to the tree. In Australia, my mother complained, the candles melted from the heat on Christmas Day and 'you feel like crawling into a refrigerator'.

'At home,' she went on, 'the evergreen pines symbolise eternal life and the candles the return of the sun after winter. Here Christmas has no symbolic partnership with nature. Why don't they make up their own meaningful customs instead of importing them?'

We Girschiks followed our home traditions. Our father was particularly keen. He was a man of rules. As the year moved to its end, our mother was upset that her man was going to be away for Christmas.

She also complained about Australian food, which she found dull. Those who waited on others in restaurants, she noted, often expressed their resentment at having to do this, spoiling the rare occasion on which she was invited to dine out.

My mother demonstrated good sense in her sole parenting. One day when she found my brother reading *Man* magazine in the wood-shed, she told him calmly: 'If you want to see naked women, come into the house. We have lots of books that show them even more beautifully. Besides, you don't need to hide what your friends have given you. They are good boys.' Her tolerance was remarkable yet she could never quite bring herself to give us formal sexual instruction.

In Australia, we children were more open to experience than our nostalgic mother. We enjoyed the greater freedom that is part and parcel of a lenient way of life. As a child in an Australian home you could express yourself, voicing disagreement more openly. You also had many more choices.

Both my brothers cultivated a broader Australian accent than I. Their street slang was also proficient. Our highly disciplined upbringing, where at the table with our father we were ‘to be seen but not heard’, was not without its virtues. We developed a talent for patience. From our background, we acquired focus and application to our tasks. Our emotional repression and our excessive diffidence, however, we could well have done without. We cherished the delicious sense of freedom once the fetters were removed,

Time had lapsed since my father had sent his invitation for me to study overseas. With my Australian courage I approached this forbidding person by writing courteously. I did not inform him that I was afraid of losing both my education and my religious ideals. I could not bear to repeat the confusion of the first months at my Australian school.

My father warned me that the opportunity would never return. I remained obstinate.

At school my two friends and I confided our ambition to become nuns to Sister Lucy. She took an exceptionally practical approach. She told us to think carefully about this prompting in our hearts. ‘You are too young now,’ she said in an encouraging voice. ‘Leave it for the moment,’ she cautioned, ‘and if this feeling does not go away, then perhaps you ought to think more seriously about it later.’

Sister Lucy (whose family name we found out was Murray) was so tolerant that the girls in her class tried hard to find out how old she was and where she had come from. This is what we learned from various sources, including a girl whose sister had ‘entered’. Sister Lucy was Aileen, the daughter of a publican who ran a hotel in Brunswick and whose wife had died while the girl was quite young. ‘That’s why her father sent her to board with the nuns at Nicholson Street,’ one girl opined. Rumours continued: Sister Lucy’s father had been a sea-captain, it was whispered. As Head Prefect she had been expected to enter the order, as every other Head Prefect was said to have done. First, however, she went to university and completed a science degree. Having enjoyed the university’s social life, she then entered the Mercy training house at Rosanna in the full knowledge of what she was giving up.

We somehow discovered that she was about thirty-four when she came to teach that huge class alone, except for the single relief teacher. Sister Imelda sometimes took us for part of an afternoon. All our teachers were

nuns except the stout woman to whom I owed my swimming certificate, our physical education teacher, Miss Carey, and another robust woman who wore flowing gowns, Miss Murphy. She taught us elocution and took us through recitations of such poems as Hilaire Belloc's verses: *Do you remember an Inn, Miranda?* Another favourite was by Thomas Moore, the Irish musician: *Rich and Rare were the Gems She Wore*.

With a name like Murphy it was not surprising that our recitations were drawn from Catholic and Irish versifiers. I could never understand what was appealing about having verse spoken in chorus, especially if the poems were boring. I suppose it was easier than having us sing correctly. It also taught us to speak 'like ladies'.

The excessive Irish Catholic content was not a problem for me. Irish teachers belonging to an order founded in Ireland, with others who had come from there, expressed their nostalgia for a place they would never see again. This was understandable. We caught their longing, their romanticism, their sense of a true Catholic homeland, the great land of saints and scholars.

Vivid memories of the camp and revelations about the atrocities of the Nazi regime in Germany and elsewhere were weakening my attachment to Germany. Like a painting on transparent paper placed over another scene, Ireland began to slide across my sense of a true homeland. Such is the power of words and song to help construct an identity. The Irish nuns talked of Saint Patrick, the Irish slave of the Romans in England who had converted the Irish to Christianity; of Saint Brigid, that marvel of womanhood whose mother had been a Druid and had taught her the secret arts of nature; of the adventuring monks, Saint Brendan and Saint Columcille. Behind such talk was nostalgia for their homeland. Their heroes now also became ours.

In our motet choir we sang liturgical music in four parts, and the haunting melodies of their homeland. Their love became ours as well, as in the Gaelic *Shule Agra*, mourning Johnny, 'my darling love', who has gone for a soldier.

I misunderstood, thinking it was *the land* that had been taken away, not *the lad*. That was obviously what I preferred to hear. The loss of one's land brought tears to my eyes. I, too, had been dispossessed. Not able

to understand death, to me it seemed far worse for people to lose their homeland than for one person to lose a son in battle. Death is hard for the young to grasp. That's why we could long for it without serious misgivings.

Silent, O Moyle was the other beautiful dirge that we often sang. It is a song about the coming of Christianity during Ireland's tribal past. Cathleen ni Houlihan, for whom another song was named, was honoured for her embodiment as both Ireland and the Virgin Mary. Sentimental hymns of love and praise were, however, much more common.

The influence of Dr Percy Jones, the priest who conducted the St Patrick's Cathedral choir, who had compiled the diocesan hymnal, and who prepared sheet music for special occasions, gave this Irish influence an artistic impulse. For me, the quality of the Irish messages made it easy for us to open our hearts to the Irish heritage of Australian Catholicism. We adolescents were inevitably couched by the cruel story of the Irish colonisation by England after the Reformation. We sympathised with the Irish dispersed around the world as a consequence of the potato famine behind which the evil genius of the English lurked.

The cult of the dead which attends Catholic cultures in rural parts of the world found a ready response in someone who had no particular faith in the future and who had cultivated an inner life at the expense of social skills.

Yet as I progressed through school, I heard much about heroic English Catholicism, of priests fleeing from their would-be executioners into a 'priest's hole' in the house of protectors. We learned of great English martyrs, mystics and theologians who preached wisdom and tolerance and a love of history. I had a feeling that English Catholicism was more tolerant and rational than the Irish version. But I did not have the intellectual equipment to argue my way beyond what was daily to hand.

Sister Lucy was one of the few nuns not born in Ireland. Neither were some of the younger nuns Irish-born. Yet they all shared their Irish Catholic heritage. Sister Lucy's grey-blue eyes were like the sea, but took on a green metallic sheen when she was angry. This seldom happened. Her good nature overcame such temptations.

Our huge class respected her because she respected us. We were only uncontrollable when she was relieved by the mild-mannered geography teacher, Sister Imelda. We made her miserable.

One day Sister Lucy called ‘the three friends’ and from the small cupboard that was our library took out *Three Daughters of the United Kingdom*. She told us we should read it, because it had a moral: that nuns don’t grow on trees, and that it is hard work being a nun.

This book presented a typical scenario of the times with considerable sensitivity. It suggested that one of us would remain single in the world, another would marry and have a happy, large family, but only one was likely to become a nun. Statistics were beginning to show a slight decline in vocations.

We each read the book and were equally impressed by the choice of roles. But like many adolescents, our minds were set on being heroic. Each of us thought the same. Each of us wanted to be *the nun*.

Sister Lucy never singled us out for our piety, but she pressed into my hands separately a copy of Francis Thompson’s long narrative poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, a potent reminder of how God will hunt down a person, will claim his own, which means each one of us. One could also interpret the poem in the light of religious vocations. Religious vocations, after all, were a gift from God, as our teachers never tired of telling us. ‘He calls you. You do not choose Him.’

With her inimitable sense of fairness, and her reluctance to proselytise, Sister Lucy suggested to me one day that I might go to university, as she had done. ‘I believe it would suit you very well.’ She spoke gently, without labouring the point.

From her, this was a daunting compliment. I was struggling at school to understand the English language better and get on top of my subjects. I never ever caught up in mathematics, having missed the essential building blocks of learning, and with no remedial teaching available.

We understood that few girls from that school went to university at the time. Sister Lucy’s simple remark was to have far-reaching consequences for my life. I honour her respectful encouragement.

Two years later I read Gerard Manley Hopkins’ long narrative poem, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, about five nuns, refugees from Germany’s anti-Catholic laws, who went down with the ship during a storm close to

the English coast. The Germans later accused the English of waiting thirty hours before sending a rescue boat. Some 157 passengers were drowned, and the tragedy nearly led to war between the two countries.

Lucy's personal sacrifice, living such an enclosed life when she had such a fun-loving, sunny nature, I now viewed as the symbolic equivalent of the death of the *Deutschland* nuns, an immolation of herself for reasons greater than personal happiness. She was 'the lily' on the ship. She had done it in the cause of love and duty. I did not know it at the time, but through our rather remote relationship, she subtly inspired me to accept my lot, displaced in Australia with no geographic home to call my own.

Indeed, here were signs that the seeds of new acceptance were beginning to take root. *The Wreck of the Deutschland* was fast taking hold in my mind. Horrible details of the Nazi Holocaust were becoming public knowledge, to cries of disbelief: 'The shame of it all!' And the attendant shame of Nazi ideology, underpinning it! How deceived we had been as children by the songs about our *Heimat*. They had merely hidden dark political goals.

Of course, you never cease to love what is loveable in any great relationship in your life. My affections for grandparents and parents were still strong and loyal in my heart. I continued to love the music of my ancestors, and was inspired by the fine photographic studies of Austrian buildings, such as the Vienna Opera House and the monasteries along the Danube. They became models for the architectural drawings we were asked to do in Sister Bernardine's marvellous art classes. They made a fine complement to a watercolour I painted of a view across the rooftops of the slums of Fitzroy.

The fiercely competitive internment camp ideology had left me with an unfortunate competitive instinct for performing at least as well as others in school subjects. I enjoyed the notion of high standards and human excellence, but disliked the ill-will and snootiness it bred. At the end of that year, in a class of sixty-eight, I came twenty-third. That's how competitive it was: I can even remember it.

Everyone's name was placed against a number on the blackboard so that we could take it all in, over and over again. I was absorbing the idea that I was not particularly intelligent, an impression increasingly endorsed by my father, who understood me less and less. He was disappointed in

what he saw as indifferent results. I did not even do the sum that would have shown that I 'came in' just below the top third of the class, a good achievement given the handicaps of my background.

Sister Lucy, however, had lit a candle in my head which protected me through many painful hours. All around me was the message that God had willed us to do certain things. It was our duty to listen and pick up on that. No one really understood what a debilitating thing it is to be so dependent on dogma. We were not properly guided in a practical way to make something of our lives, except in moral and religious terms. Part of my religious scruples consisted in the fact that like so many teenagers I was ready to do whatever my idealism demanded. Camp politics and the other-worldly version of Catholicism presented at school had turned me off politics. They were at once dangerous and trivial, I believed.

There was a fair amount of anti-Communist rhetoric at school. But it did not leave any deep impression on me. In a fumbling sort of way I longed for liberal values, while swallowing precepts that encouraged moral, rather than political, censorship. At home, after my father's return to Iran, my mother and I fought out the battles between Luther and the Catholic Church. My ammunition was pat answers. My mother was worldly-wise. She was unceasingly devoted to us, working for us until late at night, repairing our clothes, cooking us fine food, mopping our floors, tidying our drawers.

Sometimes when I came home from school I might find some loving kindness laid out on my bed in the shape of a white cotton jumper, a new pair of sandals, or a drawing pad. Her love was constant. My adolescence rewarded her in less generous ways.

She also had a clever, sharp tongue. Her habit of sulking, not talking at all for days if she was offended, without giving a reason, heaping guilt on others, persisted. It was her weapon. I recall some nights, after a spirited argument about faith, we would both be sobbing our hearts out, with our arms around one another.

The religious mania that was filling the vacuum of my displaced culture kept us apart. Ideologically, remembering the camp, I can over-simplify the situation by describing my fanaticism—or romanticism—as 'new wine in old bottles'. I was so consumed with the other-worldly outreach of soul that I attended Mass in town daily before going to school.

My mother thought me crazy because in those days one was not permitted to eat or drink anything before receiving the Eucharist at Mass. She continued to cut my lunch in her delicate way, so that I could catch up on food at lunch-time. When my father had done this, in contrast to the thin, white, refined-flour sandwiches of my peers, my father's crude slabs of wholegrain bread and fillings of uncooked smoked cod, smelly cheese or plum jam had little appeal. At that time my lunch regularly found its way into the rubbish bin. 'Think of the starving millions', a familiar exhortation, fell on deaf ears. It occurred to my blunted sensibility that my smoked cod sandwiches were not likely to appeal to anyone else either.

Except for water, I often fasted until I reached home late in the afternoon. Then my mother's delicious cakes and several cups of tea restored me to normality.

Since no one else in my class behaved with quite such a degree of quiet fanaticism, I began to think that something was indeed moving my spirit. I really wanted to try for a life that was different, not simply banal. But how to get there? To think I was different was dangerous. Vanity and pride may have been motivators. And yet, I still often felt so wretchedly alone, confused and troubled. My struggle with language and its application to school work no doubt gave way to the religious and moral imperatives that provided me with an attractive choice of escape.

My mother was both proud and alarmed when I told her one day that toleration is a form of weakness. In those days I still belonged to those thinkers who needed black and white categories. That's why I was also committed to knowing 'the truth', as if it was something one could fit into a mental box.

The candle that Sister Lucy had lit in my head was a crucial influence. Whenever I stayed with Margaret in Princess Hill during the long strike at the end of 1949, I travelled by tram. I gazed with great interest at people pouring over work in lighted laboratories in the medical faculty buildings at Melbourne University. Why did their absorbed activity touch my heart? The word 'university' and the notion of wishing to understand became a new influence. This was a long way from the ideologically restrictive German political program into which I had briefly been plunged in the camp.

I have a lasting image from that time of my life. It was a Persian miniature in a book belonging to Mr Zapf, which I used as a model for the cover of a leather photograph album I was embossing for him, in gratitude for giving us somewhere to live. I worked on it in Sister Bernadine's craft class. A prince is on a journey on horseback. He stops to speak to a wise falcon: 'Where can true happiness be found?' he asks. The falcon answers in riddles: 'True happiness cannot be found in this world!'

I was isolated within myself, far from my brothers, my parents and most of the people with whom I had contact. Only my family guessed what I was going through. Like so many wretched migrants, anxious to be accepted, and therefore anxious to please, I was outwardly an extremely cheerful person. I was certainly no threat to my peers. Everyone seemed to like me. I did not challenge their opinions. In this sense I was too polite—a coward.

The following year took me into the much smaller Intermediate class of about thirty-six. This was a relief. Suddenly the girls had changed. They had come back to school after the Christmas break as adults: comely, respectful of school, interested in their books. On the threshold of adulthood, they now seemed much more calm within themselves.

I tried to study British history in Intermediate but found it too difficult. I lacked the skill to take down fast dictation in English, which was the way the subject was taught by the oldest of the nuns, Sister Borromeo. 'When James the Sixth of Scotland became James the First of England ...' she droned, mumbling with age, making only a few headings on the board.

That opening sentence is etched into my mind like a 'keep out' sign. It was the gate to other people's territory. I could proceed no further with the wordy exactitudes of history. Algebra was equally problematic. My mind had become too twisted by trial and error to proceed from foundations to lucid logic. Geometry, however, with which nearly everyone had problems, came to me with great ease. This joy was short-lived. There was no one to teach it at the higher levels.

Latin was another subject that suddenly stopped at the school. An administrative ruling, which dictated that the nuns would move to another religious house every few years, deprived us of a teacher, as well as a community of scholars.

My imaginative English teacher in Form 4, Sister Phillipine, made a breakthrough with me in English expression by presenting us with little essay topics on a wide range of descriptive and interpretive subjects. She also began sentences, which she then asked us to complete. Reading us a sample of Dickens's prose, she gave us a comparative exercise. For instance: 'One night as the rain was beating against our windows I heard a knock on the front door,' she read. 'Complete the paragraph.' We spent part of that year engaged in such delightful prose exercises.

I was also taking art lessons and my work was often on display in class. Sometimes one of my intricately decorated frames surrounding a saint, holy scene or general notice appeared behind glass on the school's general notice board. My conspicuously talented art and craft teacher, Sister Bernardine, contributed to an illuminated address sent to Pope Pius XII by all Melbourne's Catholics. I was proud of such a teacher, a woman who was able to appreciate the magnificent nudes of Michelangelo without false modesty. It was known that in some schools nuns and brothers tore out pictures of nudes in school texts.

The nuns never talked about themselves. I found out later that Sister Bernadine was the child of a noted Irish Catholic country doctor with the family name of Carr, and that she had probably been sent to board at the Nicholson Street convent from an early age. Her sane influence on me was greater than I perceived at the time.

I was fortunate to have an artistic outlet, for during the whole of the Intermediate year I was without friends. Margaret and Maureen were now in the commercial stream of the school, preparing for secretarial studies. The two streams did not mix, and nor was there mixing between classes. I began to belong to the whole school community.

Much of our daily lives seemed to us endless endurance tests of grey-coloured banality. To learn under those conditions was like pushing a barrow full of bricks uphill, with only occasional respite. Somehow I continued to pass whatever test was expected of me.

My religious preoccupation continued. At home I tried to read serious books of theology which I had borrowed from school, and to compose music in two parts with the aid of my recorder. While sick with a heavy cold, I made an attempt to build a model of Salisbury Cathedral from glued cardboard and paper, using illustrations in an encyclopaedia probably owned by Mr Zapf.

Hopeless attempts at making music and constructing complex scale models demonstrate the continuing influence in my life of my father's family background and career. He had spoken to me often enough of them. In his absence his presence still haunted our home and my imagination.

I dragged my willing brothers and unwilling mother by train to St Patrick's Cathedral to Sunday High Mass, and to evenings of liturgical music during Easter week. My mother, who missed her husband keenly, was astonished by the resemblance in stature to my father of chubby Dr Percy Jones, the priest choirmaster. I thought my father was much more a lookalike of the Australian politician Dr Herbert Evatt, or the Russian composer Schostakovich. Because of the splendid way Dr Jones led the choir in procession into the Cathedral and the music produced with such vigour by his boys, my mother enjoyed coming with me.

The musical programs of the ABC also provided us with a fine education. My mother and I came to Berlioz that way, through the *Shepherds' Farewell* in the *Childhood of Christ*. This stood out from the usual Christmas music. A performance 'on air' from a record of the splendid Berlioz *Requiem*, with double orchestra and chorus answering each other from balconies across the nave of Strasbourg Cathedral, showed a maker's hand so original that years later we identified it immediately, after hearing only a few bars.

The ABC broadcast performances of orchestras and visiting celebrities, like Ginette Neveu, before she and her magnificent Stradivarius violin were burnt to death in a plane crash as she was leaving Australia. Baritone William Warfield, and later his wife Leontyne Price, sang with aplomb on behalf of all American blacks still entangled in discrimination. We discovered Erna Berger, the petite German soprano, who sang Mozart with such angelic purity, sincerity and warmth that Wolfgang Amadeus should have leapt from his grave to embrace her.

Every weekend for years, a whole opera appeared on radio. When our household first acquired a radio in 1948, it was as if electricity had suddenly been connected to the house and the switch turned on. After life in the camp and the boarding school, the marvel of music on radio was unimaginable.

My mother was making noodle dough when I heard my first-ever opera, *The Magic Flute*, sung in German. It was such a marvel that for years I recalled the names of the others that followed it, one by one. With my

father away from home it was no doubt easier for a child like me to have control of the home radio. It was also lucky that my mother and I had shared tastes in music and literature.

Years later I met women who had been more precocious in their music and reading than I when they were children. Unbeknown to me then, there had been many of us, marooned in philistinism, quietly storing up nourishment over the years through books, the radio and our own imaginations.

My spiritual life continued to both nourish and confuse me. While I found Catholic theology rich and purposeful, but riddled with mysteries, I could never entirely believe deep down that Catholicism had the monopoly of 'truth' or that there were physical places beyond death called 'Heaven' and 'Hell'. I could understand that Hell could be found on earth. The degradation and genocide of the Jews, victims of the Nazi regime, was such a Hell, I understood. So were things such as the imprisonment and torture of Cardinal Mindzenti. My mind still could not grasp the notion of eternity.

Once while in a dream I crossed boundaries which in conscious life I could not comprehend. But they did not confirm me in a belief in the impossible. Nevertheless, in every Mass we were obliged to declare our credo, a statement of our Catholic belief in which the forgiveness of sins was the humanising ingredient. We were then also asked to believe that during the Consecration the wafers turned into the real flesh of Jesus Christ and the wine into his real blood we had to consume for our own redemption. We were assured that this was not 'magic' but reality.

I still did not believe, but felt I had to. I was satisfied that if this was not 'true' the symbolism was extremely important.

A strange phrase in the Credo made a particular impression at that time. 'And on the third day [after His resurrection] He descended into Hell.' I now took this to mean that Jesus stepped into Hell to share the pain suffered by others, before departing to continue as an invisible presence both in Heaven and on earth. Love must be prepared to walk through Hell if it was sincere and true, this told me.

The novels of Graham Greene, which I read much later, dwell on a similar interpretation: that evil is a mystery; that God's ways are strange; and that God does not necessarily favour self-righteously virtuous people.

While the basic structure of the Mass was unchanging, the readings and lessons of the Gospel contained within it had historical, pedagogical and ritual significance to us. The Mass was still entirely in Latin, but we had learned enough of that language to make a general—if tantalisingly incomplete—interpretation of its drift.

Priests, some nuns and classical scholars reaped the benefit of the moral lessons, the epic stories and the poetry conveyed each day from the Bible as well as repeated at Mass. My daily familiarity gave me a sense of ritual intertwined with literature from the Bible and sacred Jewish texts, which we did not study at school. The Old Testament was regarded as simply the pre-history of Christianity, but I loved what I heard, if not relating well to the violence of the battles. Jesus was the revolutionary who, as reported in the Gospels of the New Testament had set many traditional values on their heads, favouring the poor, untutored, alienated, despised, incapacitated, modest and those who genuinely placed the welfare of others before their own.

Jesus rejected tribalism that insisted on retaliation. His ethics set out to break cycles of violence. The seeds of Christian humanism are there. But extracts from the Old Testament—the ‘old dispensation’—were also woven into every Mass. Thus was a sense of history respected by the Church.

I got hold of a translation of the Bible and discovered memorable beauty enshrined in its Psalms. Jewish experiences focusing on the deep love of their God had universal appeal and resonated with my own experience. My soul, too, longed for its God, like the doe that thirsts for water.

We learned only the meaning of the main structure of the Latin Mass, together with translations of passages used on Sundays. The priest spoke at and to the altar, with his back turned to the congregation. There was much boredom associated with not knowing precisely what we were hearing. Our emotional highs came from the introduction of music, the aromatic smoke from the censor attached to its golden chain during the procession at High Mass, or during the fairly short ceremony known as Benediction. Then the golden artefact in the shape of the sun on a stem, the ciborium, was held high for worship. It housed the living presence of Jesus.

As in ancient times, the role of the priest was that of mediator between the divine and the human. It is easy to slip into modern clichés rejecting churches and religion as superstition unless one tries to recapture what it was that then gave meaning and support to so many believers.

At the time I could not argue for my religion with my critics using words appropriate to the wealth and complexity of my experience. I now see that religion was my walking stick in times of emotional instability. But it also fuelled my withdrawal from ordinary reality. I could not understand how so many Catholics could live their faith like unthinking clocks. In that sense I was a typical convert, a 'pillar of the Church'.

Throughout the liturgical year were commemorations of the days of the deaths of saints. If a saint was also a martyr, then red was worn as a remembrance of the blood spilled for the faith. At the time Australia had no saints of her own. Everyone named after a saint shared a day of honour with them, a custom more fully developed overseas as one's 'name day'. In this way one also had a strong identity forged as a 'citizen of the world' and of an international Church. 'Everyman' was also us. That was the odyssey of life.

Such internationalism did not free us from a sense of being beleaguered at home. The very entrenchment of Catholic practice, its esoteric mystical ritual, its hierarchical religious chain of command from Rome to every Bishop and his flock, and the belief daily drummed into us that the Catholic Church was 'the one true Church' made us suspicious of everyone else, especially Protestants.

We were not permitted to attend Protestant services, marriages or baptisms, except with special permission, which was usually denied. My Aunt Else married an ex-internee from the single men's camp, Alfred Erlanger, a Berliner by nurture who had worked in Iran. His father had been a Jewish businessman who had married a Christian woman.

Both sets of parents were against such an inter-faith union and both disowned them after they married. Else and Alfred married in the German Lutheran Church at East Melbourne. I had to seek permission from the school chaplain at St Patrick's Cathedral to attend the ceremony. I was told that I could go provided I kept at a 'proper distance', towards the back of the church. This was extremely liberal. I had not expected to be given permission. It was not that we could not mingle. The idea was not to give the impression of approving of heretical beliefs.

Nevertheless, my Lutheran relatives and I never had any religious disagreements as I grew up. Alfred's son was to marry into a Jewish family, while his daughter reclaimed her Jewish roots. Their mother, my aunt by blood, was always truly ecumenical. Alfred taught his children enlightened tolerance. He thereby undid the destructive intolerance of his four German grandparents.

I joined the Young Catholic Students movement, the YCS, just as most of the girls in the school did. It was the school student youth arm of the Church, dedicated to promoting the faith in every part of our lives, including travel on public transport, should the opportunity for conversation arise. We were permitted to carry our beliefs into a world perceived to be hostile to Catholicism.

The internationalism of the Catholic Church enabled us to cross boundaries in religious art and music to secular knowledge. Although our theology channelled us into a bigoted sectarianism, I nevertheless adored Protestant music such as Bach's oratorios, especially his *Sleepers Awake*, which, in my opinion, contains one of the most beautiful love songs ever composed, between the soul and God, the bride and her bridegroom. Like every piece of music I love, I played it over and over again. I also loved Handel's *Messiah*. For me it was unrivalled in its ability to raise the heart to an affectionate recognition of what we used to call 'divine inspiration'.

Art always transcends sectarian boundaries. My Catholic bigotry was being subtly subverted on several fronts, while my need for a German-Austrian 'nationality' had weakened. I was becoming Australian by stealth.

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