

**REFLECTING ON THE LIFE OF ERNIE SMITH,  
ON THE 3rd ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH**

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Palm Sunday is the overture to Holy Week which highlights the tensions that contend in each human being's experience, the tensions, for example, between triumph and tragedy, loyalty and betrayal, success and failure, life and death, sin and grace

We know that when we come to reflect on the life of Ernie Smith there is some tension. So firstly I think we need to acknowledge that, just 2 or 3 months before his death, in 2018, Ernie was found by an Archdiocesan inquiry to have offended against a number of women. He was deprived of the faculty to preside at the Eucharist – a severe penalty and a tragedy for a priest.

As far as I know Ernie was never convicted of a criminal offence; but I don't think we can say "innocent until proven guilty" is the end of the story for any of us. We need to be mindful that none of the women have spoken publicly for themselves. Ernie's own very bad health prevented him from speaking publicly about the Enquiry's decision.

Ernie was just 2 weeks younger than me. For quite a few of his final years he lived with increasing debilitation which he carried courageously and never allowed to curtail his Christian faith and ministry – at Collingwood, with Hands on Health and with the aged at the Good Shepherd Sisters, to name a few.

Ernie was ordained four or five years later than me, and survived 20 years longer in the priesthood. Those years he was working before he entered the Seminary he became a Young Christian Workers Parish and State Leader; and their See Judge and Act process undoubtedly formed his passion for the poor and disadvantaged. Grafted on to his inspirational charisma this led to a life of great fruitfulness culminating in his legendary leadership and work at Sacred Heart Mission from 1982. There are many stories of his deep impact on people's lives. Indeed he threw me a lifeline when I became a 55yo unemployable ex-priest in 1995.

We priests laboured in a Church that Pope Francis has acknowledged was and is a clericalist church (Letter to the People of God, 2018) ; and we who were priests, even though we may have done much good, must accept some responsibility for this and

the damage it has caused or allowed to happen, especially to women and children. I want to take this insufficient opportunity to say “I’m sorry....”

I visited Ernie in Caulfield Rehab soon after the announcement of his suspension. He had had a serious relapse. This was one of the saddest moments of my life as he was very agitated and clearly wanting to make a point but I couldn’t make out what he was trying to say. I thanked him for what he had done for me, and left. I was doubly sad that the Archbishop had made the announcement when Ernie was incapable of speaking publicly for himself.

When I worked at the Way in Fitzroy in 1995 – 6, a man of about 50 lived and died there. His kidneys had been ravaged by alcohol and other drugs. The poet Patrick Alexander reflected with me that John was both an agent and a victim of the hippie revolution of the 1960s. This points to another tension in Ernie’s life – he was both an agent and a victim of a fruitful and sinful church, of whom there are many beneficiaries and many victims.

We recently moved house. To prepare for the downsizing I spent nearly the whole of the Covid-19 year culling the paper and other paraphernalia I had accumulated over 60 years. There was an index card system holding two or three hundred cards. One caught my attention and I put it away somewhere. When I was opening a box in our new house this card fell out. I’d written it in 1976. It was a phrase used by the Russian novelist Solzhenitsyn. In the novel *The First Circle* he had spoken of “the unfathomable universe of one man (sic)”. It’s apt for the life of Ernie Smith

Palm Sunday has those elements of the double-edged sword, and of mystery, about it – triumph and tragedy, exaltation and betrayal, seeking life, seeking resurrection.

Rest in peace Ernie Smith.

Vin Corbett

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