

a centenary of canberra's catholics

In the 11th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power tells of the unique contribution of Christian Brother Don Gallagher.

Canberra is fortunate in its abundance of works of art not just in the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery but in a whole host of art-spaces with an appeal to connoisseurs of art and ordinary citizens alike. Local artists have made a huge contribution to such cultural richness.

Br Don Gallagher deserves to be counted among those painters who have given pleasure to large sections of Canberra's population since his arrival here in 1967.

His October 2011 retrospective exhibition *58 Years Behind The Brush* was the culmination of a series of exhibitions which latterly have been held in his own studio at St Edmund's College.

College historian Michael Moloney describes how it all came about. "In 1994 ex-student Tony Larobina noticed that Br Don didn't have a suitable place to paint. He spoke to other Old Boys and the word soon spread.

"They came in their dozens to donate materials and their knowledge and labour to build, free of charge, his dream studio and gallery. In my experience, this is the greatest tribute that has ever been paid to any teacher by a group of his ex-students."

Donald Gallagher was born in Warrnambool, Victoria, on 23 July, 1925.

His blacksmith father, Daniel, and devoted mother, Jean, provided a loving atmosphere for their three children who would all ultimately follow a religious vocation, Don as a Christian Brother, Laurie as a priest and Imelda as a Sister of Mercy.

Don Gallagher's years of formation which began in 1939 were at the Brothers' training college at Strathfield in Sydney.

Although a native Victorian, all of Don's appointments were in New South Wales before he was posted to St Edmund's College, Canberra. He got closest to home when he was appointed to Albury. It was there that he began to paint in 1953.

It was my good fortune to become live-in chaplain at St Edmund's towards the end of 1967 and to share community life with Br Don and his Brothers until I was transferred in February 1971.

I witnessed first-hand his gentle nature and his natural rapport with students, enabling him to bring out the best in them. This was true in the fields of singing and music, sport and art, as well as in teaching the "Three Rs".

His students as well as his fellow teachers and parents were able to recognise that his deep faith informed all that he did and how he related to others.



Br Don Gallagher ... gentle nature and rapport with students.

Gentle touch of Don's brush with Canberra

Br Gallagher's Folk Group was formed in 1968 from some of his primary school students, singing at functions at Parliament House, the Prime Minister's Lodge, embassy gatherings and naturalisation ceremonies.

They took part in concerts and eisteddfods in Canberra, Goulburn and Albury. Michael Moloney reflects: "I never tired of listening to them. While the rich soaring voice of Robert Lucerne held audiences spellbound and moved them to tears, the vocal comedy of Paul Gleeson, Raymond Blewitt and Vincent Connors had them roaring with laughter.

"They were a remarkably talented group of boys, but they would, without exception, agree that the single factor that lifted them so far above the ordinary was Br Gallagher."

It is no coincidence that 1967 was the first year of the St Edmund's College annual magazine.

Br Don's photographic skills with his ability to capture the moment on top of the huge task of compiling a whole series of records and data ensured a bril-

liant magazine which would become a benchmark for other admiring colleges.

The annual feature over a long period of "Ed Mundy's Diary" provides an important chronicle of one aspect of Canberra's social history.

Last year marked the end of Br Don's time in Canberra as he retired to Charingfield Hostel in Waverley and completed the full circle of his life as a Christian Brother in Sydney where it began.

He has fond memories of his time in Canberra at St Edmund's but also joining the Art Club in Canberra and making many good friends in the art world.

He remembers well his first exhibition at the Canberra Theatre Gallery and many subsequent ones in the St Edmund's College Hall and, most fondly, those in his own gallery.

I have many recollections of people lining up on opening nights keen to get first pick of the beautiful paintings on offer. It should be noted that the proceeds of his paintings went to help less fortunate students have an education at St Edmund's.

Br Don is grateful to his Provincial, Br McGlade, for allowing him at the end of 1974 to have some time in Italy and Spain, not only visiting some famous galleries but also doing some painting himself. Some of that was on display in the recent retrospective.

The cars people drive often say something about the owners. Many people will remember the little Austin A30 which Br Don drove for a long time. In fact, it had had a long life before his brother, Laurie, gave it to him.

It enabled him to travel to places like Goulburn, Tuross, Tumut and Young where he produced some beautiful paintings.

When it could go on no longer, it was replaced by the old red van which was always a sign that Br Don was working inside the gallery.

There are no pretensions about Br Don Gallagher, but his humility does not hide his wonderful gifts of which Canberra was the beneficiary for almost half of its history.

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