

a centenary of canberra's catholics

A great champion of the vulnerable

In the 17th in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, Bishop Pat Power remembers a fellow priest and friend to many who came to settle in Canberra.

Ordained to the priesthood in St Christopher's, Canberra, in July 1954, Fr Tommy Wright enjoyed his first six years of priestly ministry in Goulburn, Braidwood and Temora and is still remembered in those parishes as an enthusiastic young priest.

The people of Braidwood recall his prowess in the local rugby league team. But his return to his home-town of Canberra in 1961 as the first full-time chaplain to Canberra Community Hospital saw a blossoming of his many talents.

Born in Canberra in November 1931, Tom's family lived in Leichhardt Street, Kingston, not far from his father Wally's place of employment, the Government Printing Office, and a 15-minute walk to St Christopher's School, Manuka, where Tom did all his primary schooling before winning a bursary to St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, in Sydney.

Among his classmates were future Governor-General William Deane and fellow priest Adrian Cork. While St Christopher's went through to the Leaving Certificate in those days, the Good Samaritan Sisters often coached the brighter students for scholarships to go to boarding school.

Nurses, doctors, patients and cleaning staff at Canberra Hospital witnessed the young priest's tireless dedication and Tom himself gained new insights into people especially in times of suffering and struggle.

It was around this time that he became a familiar figure around Capital Hill and Hillside hostels where he proved to be such a good friend to the "New Australians" battling to find their way in a new country and a new environment. He showed the same brotherly spirit to the migrant chaplains who "shared digs" with him at the Archbishop's House.

As a chaplain to the Young Christian Workers, he was very much at home with their method of "See, Judge and Act". He saw the need to stay close to people and to learn from them while ministering to them.

When I joined him as a newly ordained priest in 1966, he gave me example and advice which has stood me in good stead for my ministry as priest and bishop.

Many other priests of my generation share that same debt of gratitude to him. Most of us found it hard to keep up with him and Tommy was the first to admit that patience was not his strong suit. Fr Wright was administrator of St Patrick's

Parish, Braddon, from 1969 to 1979 in what was one of the most vibrant periods of the inner city parish's history. Its previous parish priest, Mgr Edward Favier, had set up good structures and in those years following the Second Vatican Council, there was energetic involvement of lay people.

While being an effective pastor in Braddon, Fr Wright continued to have his finger on the pulse of what was happening in the wider community. His local knowledge meant that he had a wide range of contacts which enabled him to have the best help available for those in need.

It was during this time that he became more involved on a part-time basis with Catholic Social Services which had begun under the leadership of Fr Barney Lynch. Mrs Ethel McGuire of ACT Welfare and Tommy proved to be a formidable pair in confronting many of the social issues facing the Canberra community. Prof Pat Pentony was also a much valued colleague and advisor.

When Archbishop Edward Clancy arrived in Canberra at the beginning of 1979, Fr Wright prevailed on him to raise the profile of Catholic Social Services by appointing him as the first full-time director.

In a 50-year history of Centacare, published in 2007, we read, "Fr Wright actively lobbied government and became a major driving force in expanding and increasing funding for the Catholic Social Services program. In the late 1970s, he was a pivotal figure in refugee resettlement, especially the Vietnamese resettlement movement... Fr Wright was a regular face at Old Parliament House during question time and made himself known to the more powerful figures in the ACT community." Many such people were keen to make themselves known to him because they recognised the experience and expertise he had in so many aspects of community life.

At the time of his death, his good friend, Graham Downie, listed in The Canberra Times some of the areas which benefited from this great champion of the vulnerable. "Organisations with which he served included the ACT Council of Social Service, the ACT Council of the Ageing, and the ACT Social Justice Taskforce. He was also spiritual director of St Vincent de Paul in Canberra for 25 years. At Braddon he was chairman of the City Health Centre. He was the first chairman of the Marymead board of management and a member of the ethics committee of the Australian Institute of Health



Fr Tommy Wright with Bishop Pat Power and Croatian chaplain Fr Mato Bonic.



Fr John Southwell, Catherine Crowe, Fr Barney Lynch, Katherine White and Fr Tommy Wright at the opening of the Wright Wing at Centacare in January 1992.

and Welfare." He confessed to Graham Downie that his time at Catholic Social Services was the most satisfying of his priestly life.

The Vietnamese community particularly hold him in great affection. He was often at the airport to welcome some of the refugees for whom he had inspired an impressive network of parish refugee resettlement programs. This enabled personal friendships to be established for the new arrivals and practical help which allowed the newcomers to become well integrated into Canberra and the Australian way of life. He proudly told

Graham Downie that within six weeks, 43 families had been settled in 22 of the Archdiocese's country parishes and every Canberra parish had settled two or three families. Most of those people have gone on to become excellent Australian citizens.

Although not on the same grand scale, he reached out in similar fashion to newcomers from Poland, El Salvador, Croatia and other nations.

When after a year-long battle with cancer, Fr Tom Wright died on 5 December, 1994, aged 63, Canberra lost one of its favourite sons who had mightily enhanced the status of our city.