

a centenary of canberra's catholics

In the third in a series of portraits of significant Catholics of the national capital, 2009 Canberra Citizen of the Year Bishop Pat Power looks at one of the city's household names businessman Stan Cusack.

A pioneer businessman who 'caught the vision splendid'

Entering St Christopher's Cathedral through the side door and walking towards the sanctuary you will observe at the base of a stained glass window the inscription Pray for the soul of Stanley Cusack.

As a young priest of the parish in the 1960s, I frequently observed Stan kneeling not far from that spot at weekday Mass.

His deeply held Catholic faith and his loyalty to St Christopher's Parish manifested themselves in all kinds of ways.

Stan Cusack's origins were in Yass where he was elected Mayor in 1933 before moving to Canberra in 1935.

It was not surprising to find him in local government given that his father, J J Cusack, served as a Labor member in the NSW Parliament and was member for Eden-Monaro in the Federal Parliament.

One of Stan's duties as mayor of Yass was to welcome the Duke of Gloucester as he passed through the town.

Stan Cusack's work ethic was as widely acclaimed as was his devotion as a Catholic.

An historical paper lists him as blacksmith's assistant, taxi driver, pianist, upholsterer, builder, shopkeeper, landlord, funeral director, grazier, farmer, land developer. One should also add family man.

Stan married Alice May Dawes in St Augustine's Church, Yass, in 1928 and they were blessed with three children, John, David and Joan who were still teenagers when their mother died in 1947.

Having left school at 14 himself, Stan ensured his children had a good education at Mt Carmel, Yass, St Christopher's, Canberra, and St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, and he was conscientious in his role as mentor to them after their mother's death.

In 1952, Stan met his second wife, Mary Kniepp, and to the delight of the children, they married in 1954.

The Canberra and District Historical Society Newsletter of August 1971 states boldly that "Stan had caught the vision splendid of Canberra".

It goes on to say that he "had some firm principles, one of which was that Australians should buy and build, but not sell. Because he was not interested in quick profits and had the strength and patience to see his way through difficult times, his Canberra enterprises spread and prospered".

Having begun his furniture business at Manuka, where he had bought a block at the first land sales in 1927, "he extended to Queanbeyan and acquired



ABOVE:
Stan Cusack.

LEFT:
Stan Cusack enters St Christopher's on the wedding day of his niece Lynn Cusack, now O'Flynn. The Capitol Theatre is in the background.

properties at Kingston, Canberra City and Fyshwick until Manuka became less important."

Despite strong competition from multi-nationals, Cusacks is still firmly established in Kingston and Fyshwick.

During a large slice of Canberra's history, Stan Cusack's vision unfolded in a very human way as he built up a loyal clientele of customers and staff who appreciated his kind-

ness and fairness. Many Cusack employees, including a good number of "New Australians" remained in the family business for decades.

The family funeral business operating from Canberra Avenue, adjacent to the Hotel Kingston, has since changed hands a number of times and currently operates as Tobin Brothers Funerals. Stan's business instincts prompted him to

successfully invest in property in Western Australia, but that is a story in its own right. At a time when preparations are under way to develop the Cathedral precinct at Manuka, it should be noted that in 1958 Stan Cusack was president of a committee of parishioners which called for debentures to build the Haydon Catholic Centre which would provide a parish hall, meeting rooms, kitchen facilities and library space.

The Haydon Centre was duly opened in 1962 and proved to be a valuable meeting point for parish, diocesan and community events as well as over the years catering for youth activities, marriage guidance, natural family planning, pre-marriage courses, meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, and the beginnings of the Catholic Development Fund.

Stan was a long-time member of the Knights of the Southern Cross and was active in the purchase of land in Phillip to establish the first premises of the Canberra Southern Cross Club.

He was a personal friend of Archbishop Eris O'Brien who would often arrive unannounced at the family home and who called on Stan's business acumen to bid for land for future church purposes.

However, Stan Cusack's loyalties went beyond the Catholic Church. The Historical Society's Newsletter spoke of him as a genial man in his community associations.

"He made a host of friends among bowlers in particular, first in the Canberra Bowling Club and later in the development of the Canberra South Bowling Club of which he was the first president.

"He was a strong supporter of Eastlake Football Club and a well-known member of the Canberra Club and the Queanbeyan Leagues Club."

Arguably, Stan Cusack's greatest legacy to Canberra has been his family.

Ann Jaeger (nee Cusack) writing the Cusack family history reflects that "there would be no more family-oriented group than the Cusack clan."

She quotes Stan's second wife, Mary, speaking of her inherited family, "I have 19 grandchildren, and not a dud one amongst them." Stan would surely agree.