

# Cutting down Luther's Pine

**John Molony**

I am delighted to talk at this conference and to do so in the company of Morag and Tony makes me happy. Morag because she so elegantly and warmly launched my book, *Luther's Pine*, which I assume prompted the invitation to me to speak today, and Tony because he is a top goer and especially for the underdogs among whom I have always mentally ranked myself.

I claim to be an underdog because for several years I was known as a defector from the Catholic priesthood. That term of contempt, 'defector', often dismayed me. Recovery from its application is neither easy nor speedy. Coined among the Soviets and applied to those who fled from the foul embrace of those regimes, it implied that the defectors had left the good for the bad. I became a cleric, aged 20, and I returned to being a layman aged 36. I was, and am, happy and proud to be a simple layman. I did not leave the priesthood. One cannot do so, even in eternity.

Because I was aware how much many other priests around the world had suffered in similar circumstances, I wanted to explain how my transition from cleric to layman took place. This meant that I would have to tell the story of how a kid from the Victorian Mallee, a child of the Great Depression, ended up in Rome, where he became a priest. I was fortunate in that the National Library, to which I owe a great debt, held my so-called 'papers'. Among them there were the 300 or more weekly letters that I wrote to my mother while I was overseas. After her death, my sister discovered that Mother had carefully preserved them in a biscuit tin.

In the end, I wrote the story starting from my birth in 1927 to my ordination as a priest in 1950 and found that I had written over 100,000 words. That seemed more than enough so I stopped and showed the manuscript to Ian Templeman, who generously found it to be a worthy one. Pandanus Books published it in 2005. I thought that 'Under Luther's Pine' would be nearly as good a title as *Under Milkwood*, but Ian opted for a straight *Luther's Pine*. In the grounds of the college where I lived for six years in Rome there was an ancient pine, so ancient that it was leaning like the Tower

of Pisa and had to be supported by scaffolding. As a young monk visiting Rome in 1510, Martin Luther was said to have stood under the same pine, looked down at the old St Peter's and the Vatican 300 metres away and prayed that he would not be corrupted by the morals of the Roman clergy. I often did likewise. I can't say whether it worked for Martin.

Many people told me that they had read and enjoyed my *Pine*. I was puzzled when some of them asked me what I meant by the title. It seemed to say something about our reading habits. Is it possible that the flood of words that pour incessantly from the screens of our desk and lap-tops makes it almost impossible to truly take in the text? In any event, rather than reproach my readers by pointing out that the title was fully explained in the text, I advised them to ask my publisher, who had selected it. Curiously, the reviews were good except for one in the Melbourne *Age*, which dismissed the work as trite and upbraided me because I had not dealt with pederasty. It would have been idle to explain to the reviewer that I was writing the life of a young man who had never heard of pederasty but who would confront it when, and if, he got far enough into his life to be able to treat it with the seriousness it unhappily deserves. A review in the *Australian* delighted me, especially when the author claimed that, in his own childhood, he had as great a love for willy-wagtails as my own. Forgive my facetiousness. It was a splendid review. However, another review was troubling because, while treating me with gentle respect, the author said that my book was shot through with an almost ineffable sadness. I will return to that point in a moment.

Writing *Luther's Pine* was a happy, if at times scarifying, experience. I was happy because I was living again with, and writing about, a child, a boy and a young man whom I increasingly grew to know and even at times respect. I only learnt to love the child. The child remained mysterious even in some of the things I remembered of him, like the time his parents found him unconscious under a tank stand because he, though forbidden to do so by his mother, was thinking about eternity; the boy who proposed, aged six, to a girl of the same age, who wisely refused the match; the young man who listened with fascination as his father recited by heart (why do we say 'by

heart'?) the whole of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, even though Dad was a beer lover who never drank wine, which he called, probably rightly in the Mallee, 'plonk'.

The child was rapidly, almost terrifyingly so, hidden shyly behind the veil of the boy and then of the young man, but it was to him I always returned in memory. Perhaps that is part of the 'ineffable sadness' because the child was lost forever and he took with him the great simplicity of my life. The Italians have a word that I only ever heard used in Umbria. '*Scorciatoia*' roughly means a bypath, but it is one that you would only take when the true path is too hard. Henceforth compromise, uncertainty, insecurity, even doubt and the search for truth itself have been obstacles scattered on the *scorciatoie* of my life.

Somehow I always knew that I would have to confront the inescapable suffering that lies at the core of making a choice between the highways of life, but I was not aware that the sadness became evident in *Luther's Pine*. There is no way in which an autobiographer can avoid weaving back into his early years the shadows that have clouded his later life, just as there is no way in which a man can cease to exercise his priesthood without suffering and causing others to suffer. My lost priesthood became a priesthood to the lost. Among them there were homosexuals suffering in misery, drunkards, failures of all kinds including in marriage, the lonely in heart, those fleeing from persecution and broken priests seeking solace. They were the lost who came to share my lost priesthood.

Over many of them I still grieve, but I will only dwell for a moment on one. He was a first-year student of high promise who, towards the end of the year, began to miss tutorials and then to stop submitting his essays. I spoke to him and found that he came from a home without books and in which no one had ever been at a university, where there were five other children and no space for him to study, in which no pocket money was ever available and that, lacking transport of his own, he lived too far from the university to come to the library at night. He had not lost motivation. He had lost hope. Despite my plea for perseverance, he withdrew before the final exams. A year later, I pulled up at a petrol station where my lost student served me. To my anxious inquiry, he responded with a hollow laugh and said he was 'Okay'. No student later ever filled the emptiness in my heart which his loss had drained of fulfilment—his and mine.

In the end, the vital question the autobiographer must ask is whether his life is worth recording. He may think it is. His publisher may even agree with him, but his readers will promptly give an answer. In my case, the matter has been clouded by the horror of the fallen priests who have so deeply besmirched the sacredness of their calling and for whom Benedict repeatedly, and publicly, expressed his shame in the United States a few days ago. Yet there have been thousands of worthy priests, mostly forgotten, some of whom I name with honour and pride: the mighty Spaniards Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier, the Englishmen Edmund Campion and John Henry Newman, the Italian and the Pole Giuseppe Roncalli and Karol Wojtyla, better known in our time as John XXIII and John Paul II, our own though English-born John Bede Polding and one other whom they buried as their former archbishop on 15 April last in Melbourne. I stood and mourned at Frank Little's tomb because he was my beloved mate from boyhood.

Autobiography lays open a life but, unless it does more, it risks sterility. It must also open the heart, which throbs with both love and sorrow. Who knows but that the bypaths we follow in life are all signposted with 'ineffable sadness'?