

# brotherhood action

Registered for posting as a Periodical — Category "A"

The Journal of the Brotherhood of St Laurence

Price: 10 cents

JUNE, 1974

## FATHER TUCKER — an appreciation

The overwhelming impression of Father Tucker is of a person who was out in front, creative, purposeful, refusing to be discouraged by enormous difficulties and convinced that what he was doing was right, that anything was possible.

It was often a lonely position because he was out of step with the priorities and conventions of his time. He exposed false values and double standards.

His convictions were that if people were housed in appalling conditions, then it was clearly wrong to spend large sums of money on the Shrine, Olympic Games or a Royal Ball. If building materials were in short supply, how could there be any justification for allocating them to picture theatres or for luxury homes?

He believed if one didn't like communism, then the obvious course was to remove the injustices which gave it a rationale. If life went on comfortably and securely for most Australians, it was clearly wrong to conscript and send young men overseas to fight foreign wars.

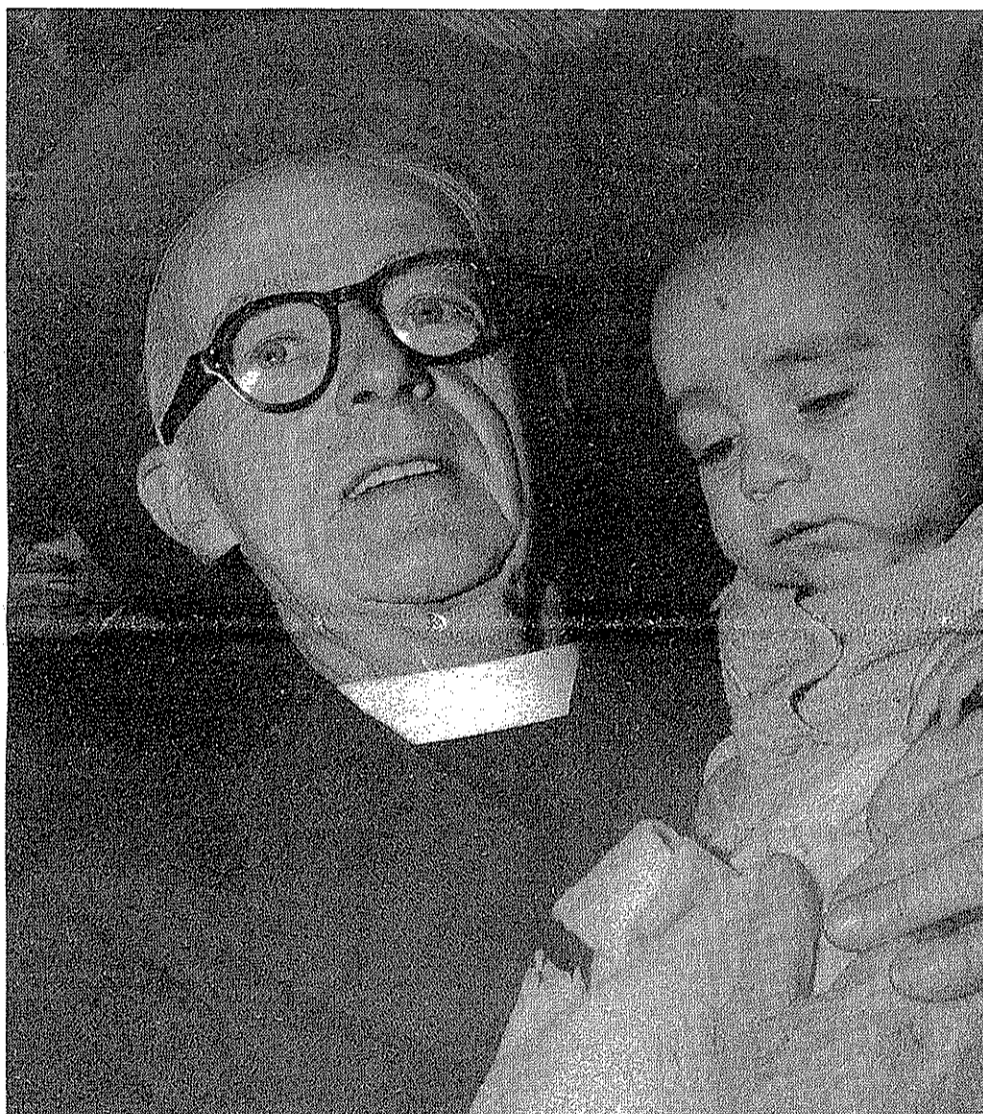
He acted on his belief that if one-third of the world's people were hungry then something had to be done. And so he formed a small group of people who started the Food For Peace Campaign and later Community Aid Abroad.

Many people held similar views to Father Tucker but they did not have his overwhelming and simple conviction that words without deeds were the ultimate in hypocrisy; that "right" would always triumph over "wrong"; that "men of good will" could always change social circumstances.

If a law was wrong and every possible orthodox way of changing it had been tried, one non-violently resisted the police who were evicting an unemployed family, or one sat on a draughty verandah for five weeks to protest against a regulation that prevented an 85 year old amputee woman from returning to her home after a long period in hospital. This incident was the famed "verandah vigil".

Thirty years ago, writing about the "verandah vigil", Father Tucker expressed beliefs about the individual, law and society that younger people in recent years have acted on in other kinds of protests. He wrote, "We could have turned away from a widow in affliction with unctuous words of sorrow that the law was against her, the Government would not help her, and we could not bring the Church into disrepute by acting irregularly. But we chose for better or worse to stand by her. For her sake and for the sake of thousands of others suffering hardship under our patchwork of hasty housing legislation and regulations, we have come here to work and wait."

"We have broken the law to appeal to public opinion. In a democracy that is the final authority, Law and Government and Property should be the servants and not the masters of the people. We are now willing to wait patiently for the people of Australia to make up their minds and speak. To break the law is never right in the eyes of the law. But we stand before God and say it is a moral obligation to break some laws when every ordinary channel of redress and reform has been tried without success. You can throw us



Father Tucker... early Brotherhood days

out of mind and into gaol — you cannot throw aside the housing problems of a nation."

### Social Reform

Father Tucker had no social work training and little interest in political ideology, but views he held about welfare and social change are only now coming to the surface in welfare philosophy.

He believed that services must be created to help people in need. This was expressed through the Brotherhood's work with unemployed men and families in the '30s, the first club for elderly people, the children's health clinic, work with poor and problem families, and later welfare programs.

But he believed even more strongly that "fences at the top of the cliff are more effective than ambulances at the bottom." This inspired his many attempts to keep injustices in front of the community and governments, and to demand change in social conditions.

Father Tucker helped form a Fitzroy Citizens Housing Committee in the early 1940s, that exposed slum housing, landlord exploitation and Council neglect. He used the BSL Notes and regular radio programs to campaign for better housing, higher pensions and penal reform.

Later, with others, social action films were made, research reports published, public meetings organised and relentless pressure maintained on the public and authorities through skilful use of the media.

He became particularly concerned with elderly people and community attitudes to them. He was critical of the view that the aged should be tucked away out of sight and either neglected or cared for excessively.

At Carrum Downs, he pioneered the idea that activities and participation in community life were as important as housing and security.

As he became more deeply involved with the victims of the economic depression, when one-third of the work force was unemployed, he realised that wrong was with the system and not the people, and his personal commitment moved from welfare to social reform and social action.

In today's more tolerant climate his attitude to the divisions of the Church and to personal and public morality may not seem exceptional, but they were 30 and 40 years ago.

The Brotherhood that began as a small group of Anglicans with closely shared religious beliefs, soon welcomed Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, people of the Jewish faith, and agnostics to the staff.

He was tolerant of what were regarded as personal sins but intolerant of the collective immorality which caused slums, unemployment, exploitation and inadequate health, social security and welfare services.

An individualist, he was reluctant to join organisations for fear of being co-opted or compromised.

He was a favorite with press men who were always looking for provocative, imaginative comment. He liked the limelight and responded to it because it was a way of advancing his cause for others.

### Influence

The influences in his life are well described in his autobiography "Thanks Be" and Isobel Carter's story of the Brotherhood "God and Three Shillings".

The comfortable effects of a middle class childhood in South Yarra and schooling at Melbourne Grammar were checked by the example of his father, Canon Tucker, whose commitment to helping the poor was strong, although more inspired by the "noblesse oblige" attitudes of the times than the need for social change.

After becoming a deacon, Gerard Tucker was appointed to Onslow in the far north-west of Australia, 500 miles from Roebourne where his vicar lived. This was a traumatic and extreme change of environment for a young man from a sheltered background and he regarded the experience as one of failure. He refused permission to join the army as a chaplain, and finally persuaded a reluctant Bishop to allow him to enlist as a private in an ambulance unit.

In his book, "As Private and Padre with the AIF", he described the horror and hardships of trench warfare. It is also apparent that in these years he developed an ability to get to know, and be accepted by people from different social and economic backgrounds.

### Adamstown

Father Tucker always maintained that his happiest times were as Vicar of Adamstown between 1920 and 1933. He enjoyed being a "father" to his parish people and for 30 years maintained a contact with many of those who had been young people in the Adamstown days.

But Adamstown was loved because it was there that, with Guy Cox and Michael Clarke, he realised an ideal. He formed the Brotherhood of St Laurence, which moved to Fitzroy, Melbourne, in 1933.

He was 45 years of age when he founded the Brotherhood.

Father Tucker influenced the views and the social attitudes of large numbers of people. He demonstrated to young idealists that it was possible to change, or at least to influence, the social systems and complacent attitudes.

He was a disturbing example to people in the Church and outside who knew he was right, but were not prepared to give up security or to support unconventional views.

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# PROVIDING FOR THE AGED POOR

## dealing with rising rents, property values, and people

When someone grows old in a neighborhood, rich and complex connections develop.

A neighborhood shop may provide more services than are paid for, local firms sometimes keep in touch with an ex-employee and neighbors lend a hand in many unobtrusive ways. More obviously, the church, social clubs and nearby relatives provide a good deal of support. But planners and private developers do not even rehouse people, let alone neighborhoods.

Many suggestions are made about the ideal living arrangements for older people.

Most old people live within the community. Only four per cent live in care provided by voluntary agencies like the Brotherhood. And it is a big step for old people to change from the type of house they are used to, even when the new accommodation seems so much more modern and convenient. Sometimes they never settle down happily.

Even a local move can be disturbing. If you are old, you don't have to move far to lose touch with your friends and neighbors. Whenever possible, it's preferable for the old person to stay put.

In inner suburban areas, three things are forcing old people and low-income people out of their familiar surroundings.

The first is the "gentrification" of the areas closest to the city. The wealthy are moving into Carlton, and Fitzroy where the poor have traditionally lived.

The second is galloping inflation which affects everyone, regardless of social or economic status. For most landlords, increases in interest rates alone have forced higher rents.

### property values

The third is the unprecedented rise in property values. Apartment houses are being sold for redevelopment because they just can't produce a large enough financial return in proportion to the potential capital value.

Two years ago a terrace house in Fitzroy, accommodating five or six people could have been bought for about \$20,000. If each person was charged \$8 a week, this would represent a return of at least 10 per cent on the capital outlay. At that time it would have been considered a reasonable proposition.

The same unit today would have increased in value by up to 100 per cent. To obtain a comparable return, rents now need to be \$12 to \$16. And many would suggest, in view of current interest rates, that even 10 per cent is no longer an acceptable margin.

So rising rents are often justifiable and unavoidable.

But not in some cases. For example, when the Australian Government recently announced a \$3 increase in the single aged pension, many pensioners who lived in rooms, especially in inner suburban areas, immediately received notices of an increase in rents. Others who were not immediately advised accepted it as inevitable.

Some landlords believe old people and invalids are fair game whenever an increase in pensions is announced. But luckily that type of landlord only represents a small percentage of the people operating in this field.

Even if the rents were not put up, the pension adjustment of \$3 was necessary just to catch up with inflation. The problems and hardships of old people completely dependent on the pension were not really resolved with that \$3 rise.

When old people are forced out of an environment or areas where there are strong cultural and community associations, the alternatives are formidable.

The first is to try and find lower rental accommodation in outer-suburban

areas. To most aged pensioners this is totally unacceptable.

To these people there are few choices left. They could use all, or the major part, of their small income on nearby accommodation at the expense of food and clothing. A logical side effect is malnutrition and a general deterioration in health.

They could take each night as it came, hoping someone would show some compassion.

They could give up the will to live and fade away in the sterile surroundings of a hospital.

It is unbelievable that in these days such a situation should be ignored.

### financial embarrassment

However, the Australian Government recently increased subsidies for Old Persons Homes and Hostels. This will help. The Brotherhood is planning to build two 40-bed hostels in Fitzroy and Clifton Hill. We are also trying to acquire another block of single room flats.

Even when these are built, our total accommodation in Fitzroy will only serve about 130 people.

With Government subsidies and the generous backing of the Voluntary Helpers Shop and the Ian Potter Foundation, these projects are in reach, providing building costs do not spiral. However, the operation expenditure will become a financial embarrassment, unless the Government reassesses the present maintenance subsidies.

To provide for the aged poor, our charges must be low enough to allow each resident to meet all living costs within the limited scope of the pension.

But the continuance of the service depends on the rents together with subsidies covering expenditure.

In the past the Brotherhood has often been involved in critical welfare issues even though huge debts were incurred. However, as the total annual expenditure is now well in excess of one million dollars (and increasing due to inflation) expansion of permanent services must be seriously questioned wherever a shortfall of funds is foreseen.

This situation is common to all voluntary organisations.

Although finance may be available to put up new accommodation, it is doubtful whether the problem will be reduced by the new subsidy levels.

### alternatives

A possible alternative or complementary scheme, would be for the Housing Commission of Victoria to buy and renovate some of the larger apartment houses which are frequently available.

Most of these places would need extra toilets and bathrooms, to reach a modest but adequate standard. Though this kind of alteration is expensive, the initial outlay would not be much more than the value of the land.

The Commission could arrange supervision and servicing through State, Municipal or voluntary organisations. With "back-up" service like home-help, meals-on-wheels and mobile nursing, people could be encouraged to retain their independence and dignity.

The abolition of the Means Test seems imminent and social security funds will be spread even thinner. So there seems little hope for people who are dependent solely on the pension unless low-cost housing is provided in geographic areas of need.



... "They could take each night as it came, hoping someone would show some compassion".

## FATHER TUCKER

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His commitment to celibacy must have been difficult because he was the opposite of a recluse. He loved children and family life, and took great interest in his nephews and nieces and the children and families of his friends.

He did not advocate celibacy for others but believed that the work of the Church would be strengthened if there were some people in it who did not have the distraction of family responsibility and could be fully committed to those who needed help and support.

Of course, Father Tucker was not always easy to be with or work with. Sometimes his determination could only be seen as obstinacy.

He was impatient with the detail of finance and administration although recognised the need for organisation. He had differences of opinion, and very occasionally deep disagreement, with some who worked closely with him — Frank Coaldrake, Geoffrey Sambell, myself and others. In some situations he refused to see, or to admit, the failings of people whom he had encouraged and relied on.

Who was right and who was wrong never mattered for long because there was always an underlying confidence in one another's motives.

The scenes that come to my mind are those of a friendly uncle with a bad speech impediment that he overcame almost completely; a fiery preacher putting immense emotion and indignation into stirring a comfortable middle class Sunday congregation out of apathy, and being satisfied if he could draw even one or two into some kind of activity and conviction.

A small, cold, fibro shack, the Vicarage in East Brunswick, reached by duckboards over mud, was for years home to Father Tucker and his Alsatian dog, Koko.

There are memories of trips to country shows in a utility towing a caravan

decorated with "SLUMS MUST GO" slogans, competing for rural interest with Tom Wittingslows carnivals and the best of the district's livestock.

In Fitzroy, Father Tucker lived in a two-roomed brick cottage behind 67 Brunswick Street, where the Brotherhood is today. It had no windows in the bedroom. In the small study, he was a cheerful entertaining host with biscuits and coffee, and talk about how society should be changed and how much more exciting and interesting life could be for young people who would join him.

In the 50s he lived at Carrum Downs and worked from a tiny shared office above the Brotherhood shop in the Royal Arcade. He would arrive with boxes of pot plants from his nursery, exchange jokes with the shop helpers, slowly climb the dangerous spiral staircase, dust the Arcade grit from his desk, and after tea and a biscuit, begin the day's work.

Letters had to be answered personally, no matter how small the donation or trivial the matter. The main business of the day would be planning and organising some campaign or meeting or working out how to use a news report to some good purpose.

He lived frugally and kept to the original Brotherhood rule of "keep and 10 shillings a week". The 10 shillings never adequately adjusted for inflation. The age pension brought him unprecedented personal income which he quietly gave away to help people or causes.

At the end of "As Private and Padre with the AIF" Father Tucker listed the names of the 700 soldiers "who were laid to rest by the writer of these letters". The tribute that he paid to them, would be the one he would like for himself —

"so he passed over and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side." — Pilgrim's Progress

by David Scott