

**Br Raphael McKenna SSS  
(Francis Cullen McKenna)  
1926 – 2019**



<i>Born</i>	20 February 1926
<i>Professed</i>	8 December 1951
<i>Died</i>	24 September 2019

**Francis Cullen McKenna** (Br Raphael in religion, ‘Raph’ to his confreres, and Frank to his family) was born on 20 February 1926 in the inner Melbourne suburb of Brunswick. The son of John McKenna and his wife Susan née Sexton, Raphael was baptised on 28 February 1926 at St Margaret Mary’s Church, Brunswick North, where he attended the parish primary school in the early 1930s.

His parents later sent him to board at Assumption College in Kilmore, a school distinguished for the number of priests it produced, that was also the breeding ground for probably more VFL and AFL footballers than any other school in Australia. When Raphael left Assumption to enter the workforce, he had a passion for sport, particularly football and cricket, and a love of God that would eventually result in the gift of his life.

The McKenna family has been a rich source of vocations to religious life. The family also produced one of Australia’s greatest footballers, the champion full-forward Peter McKenna, who kicked over 800 goals for Collingwood between 1965 and 1975.

Two of Raphael’s older cousins, Leonard (usually known as Len) and Gerald (Br Stephen) McKenna, were early vocations to the Blessed Sacrament Congregation at St Francis’ Church. Fr Len McKenna became the Congregation’s first provincial in Australia and served

many years of his life in India. Br Stephen was among the first group of province missionaries to Sri Lanka, where he tragically drowned in Colombo Harbour at the age of 38.

It was the influence of his older cousins, particularly Len, that first attracted Raphael to the Congregation. In 1937, when Len was about to enter, Archbishop Daniel Mannix laid the foundation stone of the present St Francis' monastery. The former Australian Prime Minister Jim Scullin was there, and Raphael was a wide-eyed 11-year-old boy jostling among the crowd of up to ten thousand people who came to witness the historic ceremony.

After leaving school, he worked as a newsagent's assistant in Caulfield, and at the age of 18 in 1944 he enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). He served during the remainder of the Second World War as an Aircraftman, Class 1 in various parts of Australia and briefly in Madang, Papua New Guinea.

During the postwar years, Raphael's family moved to Abbotsford, not far away from Victoria Park football ground. He found himself in the middle of Collingwood territory, but Raphael was a Richmond man and he remained steadfast in that faith throughout his life.

He was working as a newsagent in Abbotsford in the late 1940s when his cousin Len was superior at St Francis' Church and his younger cousin Gerald (Br Stephen) was undergoing his novitiate at the Congregation's novitiate facility in Bowral, New South Wales.

In May 1949, he became an aspirant for religious life in the Blessed Sacrament Congregation. He joined Gerald at the Bowral novitiate, where he was clothed with the habit of the Congregation on 8 December 1949. It was at that time he took the religious name of Raphael. Two years later, on 8 December 1951, Br Raphael McKenna made his first profession of vows as a lay-brother member of the Congregation.

He recalled that one of the most extraordinary sights he witnessed at Bowral was the visit of Dora Bartels, the Melbourne woman whose cure of a serious heart complaint in 1949 was ultimately accepted by the Catholic Church as an authentic miracle, and eventually led to the canonisation of the Congregation's founder St Peter Julian Eymard in 1962. Raphael was stunned to see Dora Bartels climbing the steps at Bowral. When he was the paperboy for the Bartels family in Caulfield South, she was always bedridden.

At the end of Raphael's novitiate in December 1951, he was posted to St Francis' Church in Melbourne, where he remained for the next six years. Over the next few decades, he served lengthy periods in Sydney and Melbourne, before eventually settling in Sydney at St Peter Julian's Church in Haymarket.

In his long religious life, Raphael served the Congregation in numerous roles. He worked as a porter, as assistant-treasurer and treasurer, and in a range of house duties which included appointments as guestmaster and refectorian. He also worked as a sacristan and, for a couple of years, he assisted with printing and production of *The Monstrance* magazine.

Raphael later reflected that he was best at being a porter, which was a job that he loved. He was a quiet, cheerful, and humble man who liked to help others. He was blessed with being happy in his vocation. In 1960, while working as porter at Haymarket, his superior observed 'he has filled this position very well, being considerate and kind to the people at the door'. It was noted he was making 'good progress' in his religious life and that he seemed to benefit

from ‘keeping busy’. Later reports described Raphael as a generous and good worker who made ‘continued progress in his spiritual life’. He was respectful to his superiors, faithful to the rule of the Congregation, and dutiful in his attendance to adoration and other spiritual responsibilities.

Raphael readily adjusted to the great upheavals brought by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. He understood the Catholic Church needed change and he liked the changes that the Council brought. He welcomed the call for the Congregation to rediscover the spirit of its founder St Peter Julian Eymard. He relished the greater individual independence that the reforms of the Council progressively brought to religious life.

At the age of 72 in 1998, Raphael joined the Congregation’s retirement community in the Sydney suburb of Chatswood. He continued to come into the city to assist at St Peter Julian’s Church, and was eventually obliged to return to Haymarket when the retirement community closed in 2006. He made regular holiday visits to Melbourne, where he would catch up with his family and the community at St Francis’ Church.

In December 2001, the golden jubilee of Raphael’s religious profession was celebrated at St Francis’ Church with Br William Bracken, who was first professed on the same day as Raphael at Bowral in 1951. In December 2011, Raphael celebrated the diamond jubilee of his profession at a special Mass held at St Francis’ Church and at another Mass celebrated in Sydney at St Peter Julian’s Church. Provincial Fr Graeme Duro thanked Raphael for his ‘many years of faithful and dedicated service’.

When the history of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation in Australia was being compiled some years ago, Raphael provided many personal insights and recollections of people and events. In his prime, Raphael had a prodigious memory and his accuracy was extraordinary, except that he was self-effacing when it came to his own remarkable life and achievements.

In October 2012, Raphael underwent surgery for cancer. His health deteriorated over the next few years, and in mid-2014 he returned to the St Francis’ community in Melbourne where ‘ageing in place’ support was available. While still relatively mobile at that time, he often opted to take the monastery stairs instead of the lift, despite his advanced age and vulnerability. But he became increasingly frail.

He moved into residential aged care at Mercy Place, Parkville in August 2016, where ‘a room with a view’ was available alongside his sister. Over the next few years, Raphael’s health further declined. He lost weight and mobility, and he was troubled by infections and a recurrence of cancer. The memory of his younger days began to fade.

At the age of 93, Br Raphael McKenna died peacefully at Mercy Place, Parkville on 24 September 2019, after 67 years of religious profession.

May he rest in peace.