

Fr Graeme Stuart Duro SSS (1947 – 2019)

Fr Graeme Duro was born in Benalla, Victoria on 14 June 1947, the second child and only son of Stuart Duro and his wife Kathleen née Coughlin. He was baptised at St Joseph's Church, Benalla on 6 July 1947 and made his First Holy Communion on 17 October 1954.

In the early 1950s, Graeme was educated by the Faithful Companions of Jesus (or 'FCJ Sisters') at St Joseph's Primary School in Benalla. From there, he attended Benalla High School where he distinguished himself as a school leader with exceptional sporting ability. He served as a house captain and school prefect. He was a member of the Students' Representative Council. And he excelled at sport, representing his school in cricket, football, and athletics.

Graeme was champion male athlete at Benalla High School in 1964, the year he completed the first phase of his secondary education to intermediate standard. He began paid employment in 1965, working initially as a clerk and later in sales at a local store. In his spare time, Graeme played football in the Ovens and Murray League, extremely well. He first played senior football for Benalla as a sixteen-year-old schoolboy in July 1963, initially at full back, later as a ruckman and also as a forward. Soon after his nineteenth birthday in 1966, Graeme captained Benalla against Corowa. Newspapers reported he was possibly the youngest player to lead any team in the Ovens and Murray League.

Between 1962 and 1964, ten of the twelve Victorian Football League (VFL) clubs at that time were attempting to recruit Graeme. All sorts of inducements and offers of paid employment were sent by these clubs to Graeme and his parents in a series of efforts to lure him from the bush to the 'big League'. He eventually accepted an attractive offer from the St Kilda Football Club in September 1964.

At seventeen, Graeme was named on St Kilda's list at the start of the 1965 VFL season. St Kilda was delighted to have finally signed Graeme, who moved to Melbourne and played the season in the reserves. St Kilda secretary Ian Drake later recalled that Graeme was tall, well-built, a good mark and kick, and had 'plenty of potential' at that time. But as sometimes happens with young lads from the country, the transition to life as a League footballer in the city, away from his family, was not easy for Graeme. His general health declined. He struggled to muster the speed his coach demanded, and he gradually lost interest in playing VFL football in Melbourne, which in those days was a poorly paid second job and not a career.

Soon after his twentieth birthday, in July 1967, Graeme joined the Victoria Police Force. His service record listed his height of over six feet, and his blue eyes, red hair, and fair complexion. With such distinctive features, it was not surprising that the traditional nickname 'Blue' was attached to Graeme for much of his life (although back in Benalla and as a young footballer his nickname was usually 'Dexter', after a comic book character).

Between 1967 and 1972, Constable Duro's 'beat' was the Melbourne metropolitan area, mostly in and around the South Melbourne police district. He loved his time in the Police Force and made many friends, and no doubt an enemy or two on the other side of the law. But by the age of twenty-three he was restless.

'I felt called to a life of prayer,' he said, 'a life of searching for God.'

In December 1970, Graeme moved into six months' residence at the Blessed Sacrament Congregation's pre-novitiate community, then located in a block of flats in North Melbourne. During the second half of 1971, he left the North Melbourne community, to return at the beginning of 1972 as a postulant with a stronger sense of his vocation to religious life. At that time, he resigned from Victoria Police.

In keeping with the radical philosophy of the North Melbourne community under Fr Donald Cave, members worked 'in the world' and were expected to donate their wages to their religious community. Graeme worked as a barman and cleaner at a hotel in West Melbourne. He also began further studies. In 1973, after classes at Taylor's College, he passed the Victorian Higher School Certificate examination which completed his secondary education and enabled his eventual entry to the priesthood.

When the Congregation ended the North Melbourne experiment in late 1973, Graeme moved to Chatswood in Sydney, where a new house of formation was established early in 1974 under Fr Anthony McSweeney and Fr James Dekker. On the completion of his novitiate, Graeme made his first profession of religious vows on 3 March 1975. He studied for the priesthood at St Paul's National Seminary in Kensington, NSW where he graduated with a Diploma in Religious Studies and a Diploma of Theology in March 1979.

He was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Bernard Stewart of Sandhurst at St Joseph's Church, Benalla on 19 August 1978. He celebrated his first mass at St Joseph's the following day.

His initial posting was to St Peter Julian's Church in Haymarket, Sydney in February 1979. Here, he completed his studies and developed a busy ministry involving the celebration of the Eucharist, reconciliation, counselling, and spiritual direction. He worked with the Eucharistic Fraternity at Haymarket, instructed converts, and he maintained regular chaplaincies to North Sydney Catholic Teachers College and the De La Salle brothers at Lakemba.

While Graeme loved chaplaincy work, his superiors had other ideas for exploiting his talents. The need for a priest to be highly trained in the formation of others was recognised at the 1981 provincial chapter, and Graeme was identified as a 'future formateur' at that time. In 1982-83, he was sent to study formation at the Institute of Religious Formation at St Louis University in the United States. On completion of the course, Graeme returned to Australia with the knowledge and confidence to produce a comprehensive formation document to guide the province.

He was immediately sent to the formation community at Chatswood, where he was appointed novice master in 1984 and superior in 1985. Two years later, the province leadership was ready to appoint Graeme superior of the largest community in the province at St Francis' Church in Melbourne. But Graeme was not sure he was ready for such a major and challenging appointment. Others had recognised his abilities before he did.

He accepted a transfer to Toowoomba in Queensland as novice master in September 1987. By that time, the novitiate was struggling to survive. Numbers of novices fell and, in a difficult period throughout the Australian province, Graeme also became unsettled. In mid-1989, he was granted leave to reconsider his vocation. After much soul-searching, including

several months at a rural spirituality centre, he decided to return to secular life.

If Graeme had needed any reminder he was back in 'the world', he probably realised that soon after leaving, when he once again worked as a cleaner and barman in a hotel. After six months in that employment, he obtained work as a public servant in the Victorian Ministry of Housing. In time, he was seconded to the Office of the Minister for Health, Marie Tehan (1940-2004).

The Tehan family had a long association with the Blessed Sacrament Congregation. In the 1960s, Jim and Nancy Tehan had generously provided the Congregation with some of their prime farming land at Bonnie Doon, on the shores of Lake Eildon, to serve as holiday place for the Congregation's student priests. Marie was married to Jim and Nancy's eldest son, also named Jim, and Graeme had known Marie and other members of the Tehan family since his days as a novice in the early 1970s.

When Marie Tehan became the Victorian Minister for Health in 1992, she offered Graeme work in her office, initially as a parliamentary liaison officer and later as an executive officer. After several years on Marie Tehan's staff, he transferred to the Department of Human Services. In 1997, Graeme was working as a liaison officer in the Office of the Victorian Ombudsman when, after eight years out of the priesthood, he made the bold decision to return to community life and his former ministry as a priest.

Graeme's return was made easier because he had never been laicised. His decision to re-enter the Congregation meant turning his back on a successful career in government. It testified to the quality of his religious vocation and to an unusual strength of character.

He was not the prodigal son, although his welcome home from province leaders in May 1997 was arguably just as warm. To assist him to ease back into religious life, Graeme was initially posted to the province formation community at Box Hill. He undertook further studies at the nearby Yarra Theological Union (YTU), while assisting with ministry at St Francis'.

Graeme's 'second coming' allowed the Congregation to reap a share of the rich harvest of growth and experience he had gained in his eight years away. In July 1999 he was appointed community leader of the provincial administration community at Kew East. He was elected a provincial consultor at the February 1999 Australian provincial chapter and from early 2000 he was groomed to succeed the longstanding provincial treasurer Fr John Morton.

In mid-2000, Graeme was appointed to the province finance committee which oversaw the forward planning and financial management of the province. His finance training had to be paused in 2001-02, when the province had three postulants likely to progress to their novitiate. Formation was a high priority, resulting in Graeme being posted back to Box Hill as novice master in May 2001.

At the Australian provincial chapter in September 2002, as anticipated, Graeme was elected to the office of provincial treasurer. His capable leadership and work with professional lay staff, finance committee members, and individual house treasurers ensured that the Australian province was in a strong financial position at the end of his term. He readily accepted additional responsibilities during his tenure, including an appointment as coordinator of initial formation in 2005.

He could be relied on to ‘walk the walk’ wherever he was involved. It was typical of Graeme that, after much work to establish the St Francis' Choir Foundation in 2005, he accepted appointment as one of the inaugural trustees. He did not relinquish this position until August 2019. He also served on the executive councils of Catholic Religious Victoria and YTU.

At the 2006 provincial chapter, Graeme was elected Australian provincial leader by a large majority of delegates. In his two terms as provincial between 2006 and 2014, he presided over major renovations of the church and monastery at Haymarket. Non-viable properties were sold. The provincial administration was relocated. New initiatives were introduced in health and aged care. A significant loss of numbers of religious personnel due to age, ill health and death was partly addressed by greater engagement with the Congregation's provinces in Asia, including the establishment of a successful partnership with the Viet Nam province. At the same time, formation programs had to be unexpectedly revived when new men expressed interest in joining the Congregation.

Managing professional standards matters was the most difficult aspect of Graeme's provincialate. He accepted and carried most of the heavy burden involved in handling individual cases and the demands of government inquiries. If Graeme ever sensed his inadequacy to face a challenge, he never shirked his responsibility. On countless occasions, the Australian province was enriched by his wisdom and common sense, by his preparedness to work for others before himself, to speak his mind, and to lead when leadership was in short supply.

After his retirement as provincial in 2014, Graeme continued to offer his experience to the provincial leadership by accepting an appointment as province treasurer and later as director of students in 2016. His health by that time was not good, and he was eventually diagnosed with malignant melanoma after a series of operations to remove skin cancers.

Ill health prevented Graeme from continuing to play lawn bowls for the MCC Bowls Section, where he had passed the milestone of 200 pennant games in February 2013. Between 2002 and 2015-16, Graeme played 215 Saturday pennant games with MCC. He played in MCC's Division 1 Premiership Team in 2003-04 and was a member of the Club Championship Triples (2005 and 2009) and Pairs Championship (2007). MCC Bowls chair Manny Galanos recalled Graeme being such ‘a fierce competitor’ that ‘often it was difficult convincing our opponents that he was a man of the cloth.’ He also acknowledged the great friendships Graeme made at MCC and the assistance he gave to ‘many members in times of need.’

Through Graeme's life of faith and service, we glimpse the ‘gift of self’, the great mystery of Christ's life that the Congregation's founder St Peter Julian Eymard had begun to experience before his death. In November 2018, when cancer had already advanced to Graeme's armpits, lungs, liver and spleen, he accepted appointment as community leader at St Francis' Church. He was optimistic that immunotherapy might cure his cancer. It was not to be.

With no further treatment as an option, Graeme progressively relinquished his duties to others in 2019. After some months of reasonable health, he reached the final stages of his illness. He was admitted to St Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy where he died peacefully at the age of 72 on 14 November 2019, after forty-one years of priesthood and forty-four years of religious profession.

May he rest in peace.