

A joyous priest's life story

THE CHILD WON'T LIVE

W.T. Southerwood; Stella Maris Books, Launceston, Tasmania, 2008; \$35
Reviewed by Barbara Flynn

SEVENTY years after a doctor announced to an alarmed parent, *The Child Won't Live*, the remarkable memoirs are publicly available of the Australian-born priest whose life began with that pronouncement.

Fr Terry Southerwood, parish priest, now aged 70, and recently involved in pastoral and administrative duties at deanery level in Tasmania, initially prepared his memoirs for an audience of family and friends, significantly to "celebrate what God has done in and through my vocation of priest".

In a social climate where life is sometimes denied to the unborn Southerwood's life story has a powerful message.

Invitations, affirmative comments and interest from brother priests, family members and members of the Australasian Religious Press Association and the Catholic Press Association of Australia and New Zealand brought Southerwood's memoirs into the public domain.

For the biography not to have reached the reading public would have deprived many people an opportunity to enter into the joys, sorrows, contradictions, tensions, rejections and challenges inherent in a priest's life-journey as year by year he lived "the divine invitation to share God's love in a special and unique way". (Southerwood, p506.)

Meticulous in detail, this biography provides windows into Catholic schooling of the past, pre-Vatican II seminary formation of priests, the euphoria of change with accompanying doubts, challenges and break-throughs, travel and appreciation of the Catholic presence worldwide, and nostalgic recounts on life.

From a very uncertain beginning, Terry Southerwood's life "has borne much fruit".

Students of social and domestic comment will not be disappointed in the first four chapters of Southerwood's biography.

In these he explores family life and values, and Catholic schooling of the period and the experiences and exploits of young men in training for priesthood as well as the conduct of some professors in the pre-Vatican II seminary context.

As a highly skilled and competent journalist, he engages the reader effectively.

Nevertheless, it is helpful to remind oneself during the reading that the storytelling style of narrative was not initially for scrutiny in the public domain.

Contemporaries of Fr Southerwood in the Australia Church might cringe as he discusses the social and cultural idiosyncratic behaviours of the time, often through humorous insights and comical anecdotes, but always with reverence and respect for the Church, which nurtured his priesthood vocation.

Ordained in 1962 and encouraged enthusiastically by the late Archbishop Guildford Young of Hobart, Fr Southerwood embraced the radical liturgical changes brought about by Vatican II.

Additionally, his passion to communicate led him to involvement in religious journalism and the radio and television media.

His contribution to religious publications, newspapers and journals earned an invitation to accompany Archbishop Young to Rome for specific writing assignments.

Southerwood describes his immersion at parish level in the development of movements for the empowerment of the laity.

He bravely but sensitively contested some hard-nosed issues that he saw as thwarting the spirit of Vatican II.

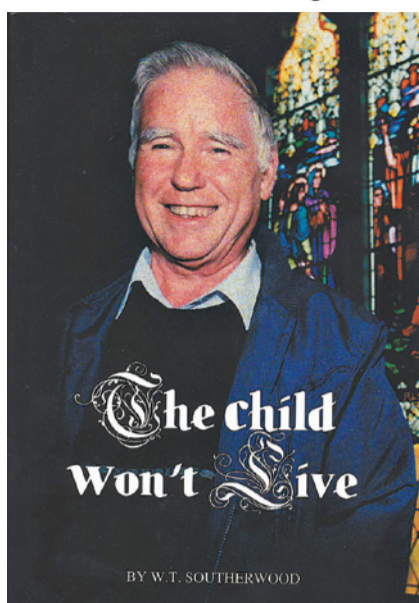
Chapters 5 to 8 are rich in the challenges of priesthood in the "halcyon years of post-Vatican" when the landscape of Church life was painted with kaleidoscopic interpretations.

Southerwood, in reflection, describes "living through times of flowering promise, mingled with wintry periods of discontent ... as a modern Catholic I realised I was entering a future which heralded the unknown and unpredictable".

Chapters 5 to 9 provide compelling reading.

Involvement as a contributor to both Catholic and ecumenical developments among the Christian Churches brought tensions, misunderstandings, rejections challenges and triumphs which Southerwood views in retrospect with appreciation.

In very detailed description, Southerwood celebrates enjoyment of his pastoral commitments as priest, and the significant coming together of brother priests to share experiences,



dilemmas and spiritual insights and to grow in understanding of their vocation in the post Vatican II Church.

He obviously treasured his capabilities as a writer and as a respected contributor to religious journals and the secular media.

Notwithstanding his awareness of criticism and negativity from some spheres of social and Church life, in the context of his engagements, Southerwood articulates with optimism his experiences.

His chronologically orchestrated narrative covers topics such as overseas travel, disagreements at times with his archbishop, affirmations by and conversations with many of his contemporaries in the Australian Church, deaths of colleagues, departures and new assignments.

No one could deny that Southerwood's life is commandingly inspiring.

The Child Won't Live deserves recognition as a social and religious history of pastoral life in the post-Vatican II (1965-2008) Australian Church.

Fr Southerwood is foremost a joyous priest "who like all who have been baptised in the waters of Life and confirmed in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as an ordained minister, try to make more transparent in life the special graces conferred". (Southerwood, p.507.) Recommended reading.

Available from Fr Terrance Southerwood, 44 Margaret Street, Launceston, Tasmania. 7250

Artistic poetic work

DEAD DAD BYE/SOUL HEALING AFOOT

Paul Dobbyn (author and publisher); \$19.95
Reviewed by Terry Oberg

THIS is really two books in one. The poems following the title *Dead Dad Bye* are inspired by the death of the poet's father. Also included are pieces under the title of the other half of the book – *Soul Healing Afoot*. These detail the repercussions of that loss particularly as regards the future.

Paul has, as they say, "been around". His days as a salesman are represented as he releases "the soils of the living" through his vacuum cleaner demonstration. This is in contrast to an acolyte whose "mission is to solace the souls of the dying".

This dexterity with words is one of the many artistic features of these poems – not that he is just a punster, quick on the uptake.

His way with words is to intensify the passion of poetry that deals with life at its most harrowing. This collection traces a father-son relationship to its end. He alludes to his father in wartime in *Lieutenant Denis Dobbyn AIF*.

This reflection, based on his "father's wartime photographs", features rich, evocative imagery. The sufferings of battle caused "the breathless Owen Stanleys to shriek like butchered animals".

My Father's Operation typifies the poet's craftsmanship. Here we have 10 stanzas that play with words to express the paradoxical coupling of fun and agony as some delicate surgery is performed on a male patient who is reduced to a sick joke.

The semantic gymnastics that the poet performs with "centipede" are simultaneously funny, clever and effective in maintaining the contradictory tone.

At Last deals with the son's final visit before his dad dies. The final three lines summarise a generation of Australian masculinity and its self-consciousness especially concerning emotion.

The dying parent finally realises "that true affection was no weakness but stronger than the grave".

One of the longer works is the beautifully structured *Six Steps in a Father's Death*. Starting with the initial call from the hospital to the family's leaving that place after the death, the whole experience is relayed using all that is unique to poetry.

The slow rhythm of the heavily stressed greeting as the son enters the sick room sets the mood.

This is followed by an authentic monologue interspersed by meaningful figures of speech and the intricate use of sound patterns as simple as, "Our dad is dead".

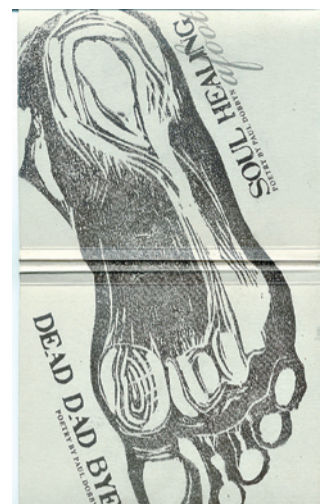
This is creative, disciplined verse written on the basis of experience combined with sensitivity that wrings the most from what has passed before.

This is personal and yet it resonates in anyone who has knelt at a bedside of a dying loved one.

The edition is pocket-sized and the impressive subject matter is augmented by Gemma O'Brien's starkly captivating line cuts.

These poems can be read for their artistry, meditative content, fun and topicality.

Copies are available from St Paul's Book Centre, Brisbane



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