

Trauma, darkness, tragedy... and grace

■ Michael Cook

IN HIS 60 years as a priest Fr Jim Boland OAM has seen the worst traumas and the darkest corners of the human heart as a chaplain for the NSW Police Force. Murders. Mass murders. Natural disasters. Suicides. Domestic violence. Road deaths.

The gore and tragedy and exhaustion and danger must have been worse for the officers. "They never forget what they have seen," says Fr Boland, as he is known in the police. "They never forget." But he was there for them as a friend, a confidante, and a spiritual guide.

He also learned from the men and women he worked with. They were models of friendship, loyalty and dedication, he says. Even in his retirement on the Central Coast he is still in touch with many of them. "The happy times over the years far outweigh the sad times," he says.

He has celebrated marriages of officers and their family members, baptised their children, and conducted funerals, visited the sick and injured and walked with many through terminal illnesses. It was a privilege, says Fr Boland.

How many in all? He laughs. "I don't know ... hundreds of them."

"Over the years there has also been a number of police suicides, many I knew many I classed as friends," he says. "Conducting these requiems and funerals was emotionally taxing."

How did he handle these difficult moments?

It's grace, Fr Boland told *The Catholic Weekly*. "They used to call it actual grace." God gives you the strength to soldier on at the time. "Otherwise, you couldn't do it. Sometimes it's prudent to know when to remove yourself from situations and to learn from times when you could have done better."

Personal toughness helps. In 1972, he ruptured a disk in training with a parish football team. He had a couple of back operations and has been taking painkillers ever since.

It was around that time, after speaking with police who had just dealt with a horrific murder that he felt a need for police to have support, especially after traumatic incidents. The officers were severely traumatised by the crime, and he saw that they were not receiving any counselling.

This led to Fr Boland initiating the founding of the NSW Police chaplaincy. "I remember Cardinal Freeman ringing up one morning, saying: 'Jim, coppers are coming to knock at your door! But they're not there to arrest you. I have appointed you as their Chaplain!'"

As a means of further understanding the criminal justice system and policing Fr Boland also obtained a master's degree in criminology.



Fr Jim Boland OAM receives his papal award from Archbishop Fisher.

PHOTO: GIOVANNI PORTELLI

"Policing is one vocation where members have the opportunity to carry out corporal works of mercy daily," he says. "Many police are devout – Catholics and other denominations. Their faith flows through in their service to others. Some officers may act on humanitarian bases, while others have spiritual values."

"I will always remember talking to a policeman who had just attended a nasty accident involving a severely injured child. He said: 'I have no religion, Father, but I traced the sign of the cross on the little girl's forehead. Was that all right Father?'"

"Or some time ago, outside the church before a funeral, I encountered one of the toughest policemen of that era quietly walking up and down quietly saying the Rosary."

Eventually, in 1986, Fr Boland was appointed as the first paid full-time uniformed police chaplain. Later on, he received an OAM and two NSW Police Commissioner's Commendations.

He earned them – he helped his police colleagues at some of NSW's most tragic moments.

At the crash of a small commuter plane at Sydney Airport in 1980 in which the pilot and all 13 passengers

died. They included a policeman, his wife and his infant child. Fr Boland conducted the triple funeral. At the Grafton bus crash in which 21 people died. The police flew him up from Sydney to be with the officers who were at the scene.

At the Strathfield massacre in 1991 when a disturbed loner stabbed and shot to death seven people and killed himself. At the Thredbo landslide in 1997 when two ski lodges were destroyed and 18 people died. At the Waterfall train derailment in 2003 in which seven people died.

At the 1990 massacre in Surry Hills when a deranged man went on a rampage with a pump action shotgun in a housing commission complex and killed five people after his neighbour called him a "dole bludger". Fr Boland stayed on the scene all night to stay with an elderly couple upstairs who couldn't leave the building until the bodies were removed. And then the police asked him to walk through the crime scene with a witness who had to identify the bodies.

Queen Elizabeth II had her *annus horribilis* in 1992, a year of racy scandals, fire, and humiliating exposés. Did Fr Boland ever have an *an-*

nus horribilis in his long career as a chaplain? He's a bit perplexed by the question. He says: "You're given the strength at the time and you do what you've got to do and get on with it."

You might imagine that Fr Boland's experiences would make a great script for a dark film about the anguish of men and the silence of God. In Hollywood, the final scene would fade out with the priest wistfully gazing out a window over the skyscrapers of Sin City, tormented by a crisis of faith ...

Not at all. No way. Fr Boland admits that he has been privately devastated by the pain of the men and women he has helped. "For example, you've been at a hospital where a child has died after the

life support system has been turned off, you're with the parents. And then you're driving home and it gets to you. You break down."

But tragedies like these didn't shake his faith. "That question doesn't come up," he says.

Earlier this year Fr Boland, who was ordained in 1965, attended the Vianney Dinner, an archdiocesan event celebrating priests who have served over decades of ministry. Along with seven of his confrères, Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP presented him with a commendation from Pope Francis, the *Augustae Crucis Insigne Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* or Cross of Honour congratulating him on his 60 years as a priest.

When did he retire?

Actually, he hasn't. He is still an honorary chaplain and still counsels retired police by phone and email, the aches and pains of 83 years notwithstanding.

The Catholic Weekly was impertinent enough to pose a provocative question: was it worth it? Are you happy with your vocation?

He laughs. "You've only got one go at it, right? You wouldn't do it unless you thought it was worthwhile," he says. "Did I make the situation better by being there? I'd like to think that sometimes I did."

What message does he have for newly ordained priests? "I suggest that, when a challenge or opportunity arises, they say: 'Here I am Lord' and go from there."

SYDNEY'S JUBILEE CLERGY 2025

25 YEARS

Rev Gabriel BALLAWIG
Rev Michael SMITH
Rev Peter KRIGOVSKY
Rev Dominic DINH
Rev Ruben MANDIN MI
Rev Mr Frank ZACKA
Rev Mr Louis AZZOPARDI

40 YEARS

Rev Peter SMITH
Rev John CROTHERS
Rev William MILSTED
Rev Alfred YAP

50 YEARS

Rev Mihai ANGHEL
Rev Paul HILDER

Rev Paul Van CHI CHU
Rev Peter McMURRICH sm
Rev Brian VALE SSC
Rev Paul Oxley SSC

60 YEARS

Rev Robert STEPHENS
Rev James BOLAND
Rev Mgr Francis COOREY
Rev Hugh THOMAS CSsR
Rev Clem HILL
Rev Harry MOORE SM
Rev Neville BYRNE SM
Rev Tom RYAN SM

70 YEARS

Bishop David CREMIN
Rev Patrick KEENAN CSsR