

Fr John Thomas Magill SSS (1931 – 2017)



Born	25 February 1931, Te Aroha, New Zealand
First Profession	2 July 1956, Bowral, NSW
Ordained Priest	13 May 1958, Te Aroha, New Zealand
Died	13 October 2017, Mission Bay, New Zealand
Burial Place	Ohaupo Cemetery, Ohaupo, New Zealand

Fr John Magill was born at Te Aroha, New Zealand on 25 February 1931, the son of farmer Patrick Magill and his wife Margaret (née Casey). He was baptised on 10 March 1931 at St Joseph's Church, Te Aroha and confirmed on 3 November 1940, also at St Joseph's.

His primary education was undertaken in Te Aroha at the local government school and at the Convent of Mercy (St Joseph's School). He later studied at Sacred Heart College, Auckland (1945-1949), where he reached matriculation (university entrance) standard.

From 1950 to 1954, John studied for the priesthood at New Zealand's national seminary, Holy Cross College (now Holy Cross Seminary), which was then located at Mosgiel near Dunedin.

Early in his studies for the diocesan priesthood at Mosgiel, John discovered the eucharistic spirituality of Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868) who had founded the Blessed Sacrament Congregation in France in 1856. Through studying the life of Eymard, John came to believe that his life as a priest, like Eymard's, should be dedicated to 'the service of the Eucharist'.

When John shared his thoughts of a eucharistic vocation with one of his teachers at Holy Cross College in 1952, enquiries were made on his behalf with the Blessed Sacrament Congregation in Australia. The Congregation had been represented in Australia since 1929, but never established a religious community in New Zealand.

By early 1955, John had the blessing of his superiors and was ready to travel to Australia to enter the novitiate of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation at Bowral, New South Wales.

On 14 April 1955 he arrived at Bowral as an aspirant for religious life. Testimonials endorsing his suitability were provided by Archbishop James Liston of Auckland, by the rector of Holy Cross College (Fr J.J. O'Neill CM), and by his parish priest at Te Aroha (Fr W. Sheely).

He was made a postulant on 24 May 1955 and he became a novice on 29 June 1955, when he was clothed in the habit of the Congregation and took the religious name of Brother Eugene. He made his first profession of vows in religious life at the Congregation's novitiate, 'Mount Eymard', in Bowral on 2 July 1956.

At the end of his novitiate in July 1957 he moved to the Seminary of Christ the King at Lower Plenty in Melbourne. With credit for his earlier studies for the priesthood in Theology and Philosophy at Mosgiel, his period of training at the Congregation's seminary was much shorter than most.

On 13 May 1958 he was ordained to the priesthood at Te Aroha. He then returned to Australia for post-ordination training at Lower Plenty and later at the Congregation's

Church of the Blessed Sacrament (now St Peter Julian's Church) at Haymarket in Sydney.

After six months at Haymarket (November 1958 - April 1959), he was transferred to the Melbourne community at busy St Francis' Church, where he remained until October 1965. Early in this period, on 2 July 1959, he made his final (perpetual) profession of vows as a member of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation.

As a young priest at St Francis' in the early 1960s, John Magill became well known to many as the dynamic director of the Catholic Youth Adoration (CYA) society in Melbourne. CYA was the Congregation's eucharistic apostolate for teenagers, who pledged to attend a monthly holy hour of prayer which included adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as well as inspirational talks and devotions related to their spiritual needs. There was also a social element attached to attendance at meetings and occasional excursions.

Under John's leadership, St Francis' Church was invariably full of young people at the monthly CYA holy hours. In an article published in *The Monstrance* magazine in June 1960, he observed that 2,500 members were enrolled. Many of these members were directly recruited by John, who tirelessly travelled to secondary schools throughout Melbourne to promote the spiritual benefits of CYA and to encourage teenagers to join. He also established a network of CYA student leaders in schools.

In November 1960, he founded the Eymard Society at St Francis' to maintain some of the spiritual and other values of CYA in a form that was more suitable for young adults over the age of 19 (when CYA membership ceased).

The early 1960s must have been an extremely busy period for John Magill. His CYA work required at least twelve hours work each week and the Eymard Society involved four hours each week. In addition to celebrating daily masses at St Francis', and his ministry of reconciliation or confession (which he later said occupied thirty-five hours a week), all members of the Congregation were obliged to spend three hours each day in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. He held a regular primary school chaplaincy. He conducted five two-day retreats each year for CYA leaders plus occasional other retreats for schools and religious orders. He was also the 'Vocations Contact' for all enquirers who asked at St Francis' Church about joining the Congregation.

In 1961 he became a house consultor and in 1964 he was appointed the community leader at St Francis'. Aged in his early thirties, he was relatively young for such an important post. His administration in 1964-65 marked a softening of the traditional house leadership, towards a less austere kind of religious life that was in line with modern trends. He tried to reduce tension and he recognized the need to improve morale by giving the men more breaks from ministry.

His own ill health prompted a transfer to Bowral in 1965, where the Congregation's former novitiate had become a retreat house. Between 1965 and 1968, he conducted

numerous retreats at Bowral for schools, lay people, and members of religious orders. He also travelled to conduct retreats in isolated rural parishes. During this period, he was appointed 'National Director of Vocations' for the Blessed Sacrament Congregation in Australia. He also developed a growing interest in spiritual or pastoral counselling.

Late in 1968, he was posted to Haymarket to take up an appointment as community leader at St Peter Julian's Church. He became closely involved with the work of the St Vincent De Paul Society in Sydney, in particular with its missions to people in financial need, to isolated and lonely people, and to prisoners on remand.

In 1973, after two terms of leadership at Haymarket, he spent several months at the provincial house of studies in the Sydney suburb of Roseville before travelling to the United States to undertake tertiary studies in pastoral counselling and psychology at Iona College, New York.

On returning to Australia in April 1977, he was posted to the Haymarket community in Sydney. He welcomed the new experience of appointments as assistant-treasurer and later house treasurer, and he also served as a house consultor. Within twelve months, he was able to put his new qualifications to good use when he was rostered for pastoral counselling duties at St Peter Julian's Church on two days each week.

John's knowledge and breadth of skills were naturally sought by the Congregation's Australian provincial leadership. At the 1981 provincial chapter, he was elected a provincial consultor. In this capacity, John served as a key member of the Congregation's leadership team from March 1981 until March 1984.

Towards the end of his term, in 1983, the Australian provincial Fr Joe Geran appointed him parish priest at Kensington, Western Australia. The Congregation had first opened in Western Australia in the mid 1970s by establishing city-centre shrines at Bunbury and Perth. As part of arrangements made with the Archdiocese of Perth, the Congregation had also agreed to take over the pastoral care of the parish of Kensington in suburban Perth.

John's record as a community leader and his pastoral counselling work at Haymarket influenced Fr Joe Geran's decision to appoint him as parish priest at Kensington. His experience as a parish priest in the West was fulfilling, particularly where he was able to share the vitality of the Congregation's eucharistic mission with his parishioners. At times, however, he felt the isolation of the position from his own religious community and from the wider province members who were based in the eastern states of Australia.

Unfortunately, John's term as parish priest coincided with the onset of a severe shortage of priests in Perth. To forestall a 'priestless parish' crisis, the Archdiocese of Perth began a process of parish amalgamations. When Kensington was amalgamated with the nearby parish of Como in 1985, John found himself in charge of a much bigger parish with increased needs and demands. He regretted that his ability to share community life with his fellow religious deteriorated. The opportunities to employ his pastoral counselling skills with the people were also reduced due to greater constraints on his time.

In 1986, at the end of his term as parish priest, he remained in reasonable health but readily admitted to being 'physically tired'. He returned to the Haymarket community in Sydney late in 1986 as an ordinary community member. Over the next few years, it became clear that he was more than physically tired.

He admitted to being disenchanted with the regular provincial assemblies and 'talkfests', as he called them. Increasingly, he sought to rediscover the simple values and virtues of making a genuine personal commitment to the Congregation's Rule of Life.

Between November 1996 and February 1997, he was granted three months' leave of absence to return to New Zealand for an extended break. The leave enable him to take a much-needed holiday. He was able to catch up with his family and friends, and with many of the seminarians he had trained with at Mosgiel who were now priests.

In a letter to a confrere in February 1997, he wrote that New Zealand seemed 'a rather quiet and uncomplicated place after experiencing life in Sydney'. There was a hint that he was being drawn back home. The break had enabled him to visit three bishops who were old friends. All three bishops had offered him positions in their dioceses, to which he had politely declined.

Before leaving for New Zealand, John learned from some Josephite nuns he had been directing about their plans to work for a large community of poor and marginalised people at Claymore, near Campbelltown on the southwestern outskirts of Sydney. With the support of the Congregation, he was granted twelve months' leave to collaborate with the Josephites at Claymore.

Despite being 'frightened and distressed' by the poverty, unemployment, and broken families he witnessed at Claymore, John understood there was a great need for a priest to live among these people, many of whom were Catholics but had become alienated from the Church. He felt called to minister to their spiritual welfare and to support the work of the Sisters for their improvement. He told his provincial: 'This seemed to me to be what the Eucharist is about for me, breaking bread for the really poor and unwanted'.

In November 1997, he wrote to his provincial about the rewards and challenges of his experience at Claymore:

. . . the need for a priest here is quite overwhelming, with so many Catholics who have lost contact with the Church and whose lives are devastated with marriage break-ups, who have been violated in many ways, who suffer from a sense of helplessness and isolation and such deep hurts. Together with the Sisters here, I believe we have been able to bring some sense of dignity and meaning into their lives. I've been doing some counselling work with people who have suffered traumatic experiences; have instructed some teenagers in the faith, preparing them for first Communion; instructing a few adults desirous of becoming Catholics. But the deepest value is celebrating the Eucharist in homes for the family and their

friends. It has been a great opportunity to instruct, especially the children, in the meaning and value of the Eucharist.

Not wanting to abandon this important ministry, he asked for permission to continue the work for another twelve months. Despite the shortage of priests throughout the Congregation's Australian province, its leadership could not refuse his request, which reflected in so many respects the original mission of their founder St Peter Julian Eymard.

For John Magill, living and working at Claymore was, he said, 'the most authentic living I have done.' At Claymore, he changed others. And Claymore changed him.

On a visit to New Zealand in 1998 for the 40th anniversary of his ordination, he was asked by Bishop Denis Browne of Hamilton if he could help with their 'critical shortage of priests'. At the time, he gave no commitment, but on his return to Australia he made what he called an 'agonising decision' to respond.

In September 1998, the Blessed Sacrament Congregation's Australian provincial council unanimously endorsed John's request for three years' leave of absence to minister in the Diocese of Hamilton. As was often the case with such requests, the provincial leadership suspected that this request foreshadowed his eventual departure from the Congregation. It was even suggested to John that he might like to become incardinated into the Diocese of Hamilton. But he made it clear at that time that he did not want to leave the Blessed Sacrament Congregation.

He understood that his main mission in Hamilton would be to help alleviate the shortage of priests and to provide eucharistic catechesis. In 1999, when John moved into the Diocese of Hamilton, he initially worked in the parish of Waihi. Before long, he had introduced regular exposition of the Blessed Sacrament at three mass centres. Within twelve months, he was reported to have established seventeen hours of exposition each week, with about a hundred people making a weekly commitment of an hour of adoration. He had also responded to the bishop's request to assist with the formation of young priests and candidates for the priesthood.

In 2000, Bishop Browne appointed John to the parish of Opotiki. There were four churches in the parish, John wrote to the Congregation in Australia in December that year: 'Three are Maori communities – great people – and all are responding to the regular instruction and experience of the Eucharist'. Numbers had nearly doubled since his arrival.

'I feel so enriched,' he wrote.

He remained in ministry in New Zealand. He remained a member of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation, and his leave from the Australian province became ongoing. He received regular bulletins and other province news, and he reported his progress to the Australian provincial and to provincial chapters, although his contact was irregular.

In 2004, he was posted to Mount Maunganui parish. He continued to be active in the wider diocese. In December 2005, he wrote with some pleasure to his provincial that he had celebrated and preached at thirty-one of the thirty-seven churches in the diocese.

During the 'Year of the Eucharist' (2004-05), he was delighted to have held a number of '40-hour devotions' in parishes and a 'Day of Prayer' for priests in the Hamilton diocese. He also conducted a eucharistic retreat for permanent deacons in the Hamilton and Auckland dioceses. His life was enriched, he said, through his involvement with the training and assessment of permanent deacons and priests.

In July 2006 he celebrated the golden jubilee of his religious profession, and in May 2008 he commemorated the golden jubilee of his priestly ordination with a celebration in his home parish of Te Aroha.

By then, he had moved into semi-retirement at the Mary MacKillop Centre at Mission Bay, Auckland, where the Sisters of St Joseph ran a nursing home and retirement complex. Living in a unit adjacent to the chapel and nursing home, he ministered to the residents and assisted with local mass supplies. He was pleased to be able to continue contributing to the diocese with the preparation of candidates for the diaconate and priesthood.

His contact with the Congregation in Australia became less frequent in his later years. In December 2013, when he wrote to the provincial, his handwriting was becoming shaky and he admitted he was 'getting slower'. He began to lose weight and his health progressively deteriorated after that time.

At the age of eighty-six, on 13 October 2017, Fr John Magill SSS died peacefully in the care of the Sisters of St Joseph at Mission Bay, after sixty-one years of religious profession and fifty-nine years of priesthood.

May he rest in peace.

Damien Cash
17 October 2017