

Balancing Business, Family and a Catholic Life

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My Catholicism didn't come to me, as it were, through my mother's milk.

Mum is an Anglican.

From a long and proud family tradition of Anglicanism, in fact.

Her father Donald, a London estate agent, and her mother Norah were active lay readers in their local parish. Norah was also a regular speaker for the Mothers Union, an Anglican religious society for women. Mum's sister Tricia is married to an Anglican priest, John Hall-Matthews - a vivacious, gentle man, the former Dean of Wolverhampton Cathedral, whose own brother Tony was the Anglican Bishop of Carpentaria here in the top end of Australia. His other brother Tom is an Anglican priest in the Brisbane diocese and the father of twelve children besides.

That a nice girl like Julia Field ended up hitched to an intense, wiry, balding and worse, Catholic, Irish peasant like John Kirk was no doubt a source of significant consternation to her proudly Church of England family and friends. To add insult to injury the rules at the time meant that the main altar in the Catholic church could not be used for a "mixed marriage".

A side altar was offered as a token gesture of approval.

Moreover, mum agreed to have the children raised as Catholics.
Six sons as it turned out.

I'm the fourth of them. Not the brightest nor the best looking, but I do have the funnest job. We'll come to that in a minute....

I'm grateful for the blessing of a Catholic cultural background. Catholic schooling, sacramental life, weekly mass attendance... As a child I certainly had a sense of the spiritual. My father would say prayers with us at night and of course take us to mass every weekend. An enduring image I have is of dad kneeling in prayer after communion each Saturday night. I remember him getting off his knees only when the notices began. It seemed a very long time to be praying to me as a young child swinging my legs in the pew beside him. Good modelling, I'd say now. As an adult I find that prayer comes to me quite easily. Perhaps dad's good example has helped in that regard.

I would say though that for most of my early years my Catholic faith was primarily an intellectual conviction. An acceptance of a series of propositions about God and the world and my place in the midst of it all. Nothing wrong with that of course. The intellect was a highly prized commodity in my family. Both parents Cambridge PhD's and dad an eminent research scientist with the CSIRO. (It turns out he is to this day a world authority on what light does in water. If you should feel like honing your knowledge of this important area of physics, JTO Kirk's "Light and Photosynthesis in Aquatic Ecosystems" is the standard text.)

It's just that while I had form of the faith, I lacked the "inner power" of it. I was active enough in the Church. A regular mass attender. A spirited contributor to discussions in R.E. classes at school. I even started my own Christian radio program on the local community radio station where I interviewed Christians who were active in areas of peace and social justice about what they were doing and why.

To cut a long story short my journey of faith took a decisive turn when I attended a five day Catholic youth retreat two months before my sixteenth birthday. Something happened to me there that changed my life. While it is not my intention here to go into detail about what was for me an extraordinary and deeply personal religious experience, I do want to say that I had an encounter with the person of Jesus. In a moment in time there on that retreat I found myself in the presence of perfect love, personally and powerfully directed towards me. It was a profound and immensely healing experience. The "deep gut" conviction that it is indeed Love that is the centre of the universe has stayed with me ever since, despite the numerous trials, temptations and tumults the intervening twenty three years have thrown at me.

I was struck by these words of Benedict XVI in his recent encyclical On Christian Love: *"Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."* That has certainly been my experience. An encounter with the person of Jesus has given my life a decisive direction. The decisions I have made in my life have been made in the light of the knowledge that there is more to the universe than meets the eye. I am answerable for my decisions, how I conduct myself in my relationships, where I put my energy, how I build a business... My whole life is lived in reference to the deep truth I discovered so personally as a fifteen year old: There is a loving God. He loves *me*. And indeed, everyone!

At the age of eighteen I joined a Catholic lay community, The Disciples of Jesus. At forty I am still a proud member of this wonderful, motley group of committed Christians. There is nothing like living as an active member of a Christian community to ground your spiritual enthusiasm and bring about genuine personal growth. A lived faith – that's the idea.

At the age of nineteen I began to study theology: A year of Catholic doctrine in the first instance, followed by a degree in theology with majors in New Testament and Theology. Studying ancient Greek for four years enabled me to read the New Testament in its original language. This enhanced my love for the scriptures, with the theology of the apostle Paul becoming a particular interest of mine.

A young man with a degree in Theology up my sleeve: it seemed to more than one observer that I was a prime candidate for priesthood. Of course I considered it, but in truth I never felt that call. Besides which, I was dead keen on being a dad and had already met the love of my life, the beautiful Lara Hughes, who in a moment of weakness two days before New Year's day 1990 agreed to become my bride. We married in 1990, (a great year for red wine all around the world as it turned out), and have been doing our best to live out the vocation of Christian family life ever since.

A degree in Theology and a new bride. It became apparent that I needed a job! A Diploma of Education followed in 1991 and in 1992 I found myself teaching religious education full-time at Xavier College in Melbourne. I have often commented that whatever skills I might have as a communicator were well-honed in the five years I taught RE to adolescents at that fine Catholic institution. I often joke that anyone who can teach religion to year nine boys after lunch on a Friday can command the attention of any audience, anywhere, anytime...

**In the meantime another great romance was brewing:
I had fallen in love with wine.**

Clonakilla winery is my family business, established by my father John Kirk in 1971. Developing a vineyard and winery business was originally a weekend distraction for my dad. He developed an interest in wine when he was a lad. His parents owned the Hydro Hotel in Lisdoonvarna, County Clare, and at the tender age of fourteen dad was given the responsibility of stocking the hotel cellars. In order to make the right purchasing decisions he read up on the wines of Champagne, Burgundy, Bordeaux and the Rhone Valley. He soon became smitten with the idea of wine. His personal knowledge of the subject was greatly expanded through his years of study at Cambridge university and later as a lecturer in biochemistry at Oxford University and the university town of Aberystwyth in Wales (where I was born). In 1968 he took up an offer to come to Australia to take a research position with the CSIRO Division of Plant Industry in Canberra.

To his surprise, despite the suitability of the environment, there was no wine industry in the cool Southern Tablelands of NSW around Canberra. To remedy this situation, in 1971 he bought a 44 acre farm near the village of Murrumbateman, 40 kilometres north of Canberra. The soil consisted of sandy granitic loams over a friable clay subsoil and, with a climate not dissimilar to the Bordeaux region and Northern Rhone valley in France, he held high hopes for its wine producing potential. He proceeded to plant a vineyard which he named Clonakilla ('meadow of the church') after his grandfather's farm in County Clare.

Dad produced the Canberra District's first commercial vintage in 1976: a Riesling and a Cabernet Shiraz. A bore was sunk in 1978 and larger plantings became feasible. From 1978 to the present the vineyard has gradually expanded with Shiraz, Viognier, Riesling and the Cabernet family, now making up the bulk of the vineyard. There are 24 acres under vine now with more plantings planned for the future. But back to the story...

Growing up in a wine-making family means that wine was a normal, everyday part of our family culture. Wine was always on the table at dinner time and dad encouraged us to have a taste. Truth be told, it never really interested me until I left home myself in 1986, moving into a community household with three other young blokes. There it became our habit on sharing meals together on Saturday nights to drink a bottle of wine. I found that dad had been right all along: A good wine drunk with a good meal is a great thing! Moreover, I found that I had a pretty good palate. I could pinpoint and describe the different components that made up the wine in the glass in front of me. It became a fascination for me. That grape juice could be transformed through the process of fermentation into a perfumed, complex, enticing liquid that could live and improve over decades seemed nothing short of miraculous.

By the time I had moved to Melbourne in 1990 I was well and truly smitten with the wine bug. I read books, magazines, everything I could get my hands on to do with wine. I went to tastings every Saturday morning at the various wine retailers around Melbourne. To support myself as I finished my Theology degree I worked for a City wine merchant through 1990. There I not only learned a good deal more about wine, I learned about the business of wine: how it is bought and sold, what factors lead customers to buy some labels and not others. A very good grounding for someone with an interest in getting into the business of making and selling wine, as it turned out.

In 1991 I traveled to the Rhone Valley in France where I tasted some great Shiraz based wines in the famous vineyards of Cote Rotie and Hermitage. The highlight of the trip was being in the cellars of famous Rhone Valley producer Marcel Guigal, tasting out of barrel his rare 1988 single vineyard Cote Roties: La Landonne, La Mouline and La Turque. These wines were a revelation. Here were Shiraz and Shiraz Viognier blends that had extraordinary perfume, complex layers of flavour, wonderful concentration and rounded, silky tannins. They were stunning wines. The best I had ever tasted. I wondered at the time if Shiraz wines with the depth and finesse of these Cote Roties could be produced in Australia. And as an aspiring winemaker I knew that if I were ever able to produce wines with anything like that complexity I would be a very happy man. I was extremely

fortunate that my dad had planted some Viognier at Clonakilla in the mid eighties, originally with a view to making a straight white Viognier. When I returned from France I told dad of my experiences in Cote Rotie and suggested we have a go at an Australian Shiraz Viognier blend. So from the 1992 vintage onwards we set about making a Shiraz Viognier blend from our Murrumbateman vineyard.

It was also at this time that I began my five year stint teaching Religious Education at Xavier. One of the blessings of that job was the school holidays. When the holidays rolled around Lara and I would trundle up the Hume and I would become engrossed in the winemaking enterprise. Sure enough, as much as I was enjoying teaching at Xavier, it became my dream to move back to Canberra and have a go of winemaking as a career. It took Lara a little longer to grasp the vision. We were well settled in Melbourne and our beautiful first baby Madeleine had been born. Lara eventually threw her support behind my grand plans and we packed up our things and moved back to the family farm at the end of 1996. I took up the role of winemaker and General Manager at Clonakilla and set about achieving my goal: making Clonakilla one of the top small wineries in the country within five years.

To cut a long story short, it is a goal we achieved. The Clonakilla Shiraz Viognier is now widely regarded as one of the top Shiraz wines in the country.

Here is a list of just some of the accolades the Shiraz Viognier has received:

- 1999 NSW Wine of the Year (1998 Shiraz Viognier)
- 2002 Penguin Wine Guide Australian Wine of the Year (2001 Shiraz Viognier)
- 2006 Wine of the Year (2005 Shiraz Viognier - Max Allen, Weekend Australian Magazine)
- One of Australia's top ten Shiraz (Gourmet Traveller Wine, June/July 2003).
- Ranked Outstanding, Langton's Classification of Australian Wine.
- One of only seven Shiraz to receive a perfect 1 rating in Jeremy Oliver's Australian Wine Annual.
- "an icon wine, one of the best in Australia" (James Halliday, Wine Atlas of Australia 2006).

In the ten years I have been here at Clonakilla full-time the winery has grown ten times in volume and much more again in value. We are now described by leading critics as "One of the leading small wineries in the country..." (Huon Hooke), and "One of the country's most important small vineyards" (Jeremy Oliver).

So I find myself a theologically trained, scripture loving RE teacher who now makes and sells wine. And is actually pretty good at it! Lara and I bought the fifty acre farm next to Clonakilla in 1998, planting a vineyard and an olive grove on the warm, north-east facing site. The babies have kept coming (five at last count) and we are now working on building a proper family homestead to live the rest of our lives in.

Being part of a family means a great deal to me.

We sometimes have to say things with the way we live our lives that should be, but perhaps isn't always, self-evident to our community: Family is the corner stone of society. Children are a blessing. Loving relationships are what makes us happy. God exists. People are more important than things.

I live next door to where I work doing a job that I love. I come home for lunch.

Being a husband and father is the greatest joy of my life, as well as being the means by which I'm brought face to face with myself in ways at times that I would rather not be. There is nothing like living with a bunch of sinners to remind you what a sinner you are yourself. And how much in need of grace.

In the Catholic view of things we understand marriage as a sacrament. That is to say that in some marvellous and mysterious way Christ is revealed in and through married love. Every sacrament brings us into direct relationship with the dying and rising of Jesus. In marriage we experience our humanity very really. The best and the worst of it. I have been amazed at my own capacity for pettiness, self-pity and at times sheer stinginess as it manifests itself in the common squabbles and power games that have dragged our marriage down at times. On the other hand I can say in all honesty that I have genuinely loved my wife and children in thought, word and action with a love bigger than I ever thought possible.

I know that marriage is a genuine path to holiness. Being confronted with my own weakness as I attempt to take up the call of love in a family causes me all the more to draw upon the love and grace of the One who called us together in the first place. I love the text in 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul, after pleading with the Lord three times to remove a "thorn in the flesh", some unspecified weakness in his life, is told by the Lord, "my grace is sufficient for you, my power is at best in weakness". "I will all the more make my weaknesses my special boast" says Paul, "So that the power of the Lord may stay over me."

For me, this is a key element of the grace of the sacrament of marriage: in attempting to love one another we are brought face to face with our fundamental human frailty, yet in the midst of that painful recognition we can call upon the One who not only understands our sufferings, but shares them.

SO...I'm a Catholic, a family man, a business man.

As a Catholic Christian engaged in a world of commerce I am very conscious of my responsibility to be a force for good rather than just self-interest and personal financial gain. It seems to me to be fundamentally important that I know who I am...of BEING who I am. Not taking on some less authentic persona, as if you can be one thing in your work life and another thing in your "religious" or spiritual life.

Of course it's more than being a good person. Every person of goodwill aspires to that. As a committed Catholic Christian I'm called to be a witness to faith, primarily by the way I conduct my life, what I do and choose not to do, but also, when it is appropriate, by my testimony.

As St. Francis of Assisi is reputed to have said: "Preach constantly, and when really necessary, use words." This is of course very challenging. All of us are aware of the gulf between what we hope to be and what we in fact are. My new year's resolution each year is "This year I'm going to become a Christian." Conversion for all of us appears to be an ongoing program, rather than the one hit wonder that we perhaps once thought it was.

C.S. Lewis once said "Every interaction you have with someone will move them closer to heaven or closer to hell." Well I want to be on heaven's team. In each interaction with every customer, retailer, restaurateur, journalist and colleague I have a responsibility to be a witness to goodness. A witness to the belief that faith in Jesus changes a life and sets it on a path to freedom.

If people can't see any virtue in who I am and how I live my life, how I treat others and how I conduct my business, then any words I have to say about the truth of God will seem empty.

In the gospels Jesus uses the parable of the Reign of God being a leaven in the midst, quietly working away for good. I know that is my call.

There is so much that is wonderful about our faith as Catholic Christians. Within our Church we have a long tradition of respect for the fundamental dignity of each human person. Of not using people as a means to an end. Of the goodness and dignity of creation. Of our lives being a gift. Of the eternal goodness of God. Of the redeeming life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

This is good news that the world needs to hear.

"No-one lights a lamp to put it under a tub", Jesus says. "They put it on a lampstand where it shines for everyone in the house." (Matt 5:14-15)

My hope is that as a committed Catholic family man with a passion for wine I can do my bit to make the world a little less dark.