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A quandary – fatherhood or priesthood?

Father Adam Kirkeby. Photo: John Borren.

On the eve of Easter, The Weekend Sun's Hunter Wells follows one man's personal journey down a path of faith into the Catholic priesthood. During the next two editions there is the calling, the agonising on the pillow at night, the 'shall I?' the 'shan't I?' and the ultimate joy and peace.



He is human. Because when I asked Father Adam Kirkeby what the bold 'IHS' lettering on his vestment represented, the Catholic priest muttered and fumbled, he couldn't quite remember. Of course he knew, but he had to scramble for his mobile and Google it.

A man of God in God's own house and he fluffed his lines. The calm, the quiet, the solemnity of the Parish of St Thomas Aquinas, was rocked by laughter. But it was okay.

'IHS' is a Christogram – the 'I' is for Jesus, Latin for Jesus. So 'Iesus Hominum Salvator' or 'Jesus, Saviour of Mankind'.

Earlier when this crusty old southern Presbyterian reporter rapped on the rectory door at St Aquinas's, good real estate sitting high on the intersection of Elizabeth St and Cameron Rd, he was a bit apprehensive. I come from a staunch Dunedin family which, in the day, did not talk to the neighbours simply because they were Catholic. And we relished beating up on the Catholic boys at rugby. But today, none of that Protestant prejudice of old, none of that bigotry and suspicion.

Father Adam Kirkeby beckons us in.

"EVERYONE is welcome in this house," he declares.

Even crusty old southern Presbyterians.

"Yes, Father Kirkeby would chat with The Weekend Sun," the church office had told me earlier, when I asked for an interview.

"He would do it for Jesus."

But the canny good Father also sensed a good marketing opportunity.

"Sometimes all people see is scandal, challenges and the church in negative light. It's understandable if people want to run a hundred miles."

Another side

But, he says, it's not like that. "Just not true! The church is the love of my life and I just want people to see there is another side to things."

And he's a fine advertisement for the 'other side' of things, of the church and the priesthood. He's a kind of celebrity endorsement in a dog collar. Personable, profound and young, just 38, and with blue eyes that would out-blue ol' blue eyes, Frank Sinatra, himself.

"I'm not sure you should say this about a Roman Catholic priest," observed one woman in the office. "But he's pretty easy on the eye."

Yes, he admits, he gets quite a bit of that. You can sense his mother beaming with pride but the priest just bats it away with humility.

"Everything we have is from God in my view."

Even good looks.

"And it's Him I want to serve."

And that 'want' started as a boy.

"When I was very young, I would play priests, use soft toys as a congregation."

Then came his grandmother's missionary magazines – stories of priests in Africa, carrying water for miles, helping people, taking Christ to that land.

“Inspiring!”

And there were role models. Stories of saints and famous Christians of old.

“Truly inspiring.”

A seed was sown. By 12 he was thinking about the priesthood.

“A deep sense of being called and a longing to serve God and people.”

They're profound thoughts for a 12-year-old.

“Yes, and unless you have experienced them they would be hard to understand.”

Here was a young man fueled by faith and ‘roddkal’ – Danish red pickle cabbage – and ‘brigadeiro’ – Danish pork sausages. His Dad's Danish, a plumber who became a lawyer, and “not strictly a catholic”. And his grandfather was an agricultural advisor for the pork industry.

“He pinched Danish ideas and brought them to New Zealand.”

And he was a trailblazer, a radical thinker, way ahead of his time.

“Back in the 1960s my grandfather pushed for sow crates to be outlawed. He reckoned in NZ we would never have quality pork with animals living in such stressed out conditions.”

But he was banging his Danish head. Sixty-odd years later sow crates are still a bone of contention, although due to be phased out by 2025.



Father Adam Kirkeby.
Photo: John Borren.

And along the way the priest's family name has been interestingly Anglicised. He goes by Kirkeby, pronounced Kirk-a-bee. It's a curiously appropriate name for the priest because 'kirke' in Danish is a church, pronounced kee-agga and 'by', pronounced 'bee' is a town. So church town pronounced 'kee-agga-be' has evolved into 'Kirk-a-bee.'

Meanwhile a young Kirkeby was torn – should he or shouldn't he.

"I lay in bed at night and agonised – most definitely."

One reason why his thinking was sometimes "definitely no, I don't want this" was because he thought he might like to marry, have a family. I suspect he would have been good in that world too – trustworthy, dependable, loyal, caring, hands-on. But, as he says, the faith was a full commitment.

Celibacy was an issue for Adam Kirkeby, but not a huge one.

"I know it sounds silly, but I do regard celibacy as a gift, to be devoted to God."

It begs the question – did he ever have a girlfriend? You sense this question might be a step too far. But yes, he did. And no, it was never anything serious, and no, it wasn't sexual.

"I am very much of the belief that should be reserved for marriage."

End of matter.

But not end of story. Next week: "You will be thinking I am some sort of weirdo."

We share some loves, likes and even some loathings of the Catholic priest.