BROTHER FINIAN ALLMAN

(1921 – 2015)
EULOGY BRO FINIAN ALLMAN (1921 – 2015)

“The life and death of each of us has its influence on others. If we live, we live for the Lord, if we die, we die for the Lord”. Words taken from Romans proclaimed in the Second Reading of this Mass.

A. If St Paul was addressing us today, I’m confident he would attest to the fidelity of Bro Finian in living out this injunction. Certainly, both his life and death had a profound influence on others.

William Allman was born in Sydney on 12th April 1921. The eldest of three boys, one of whom (Jack) survives him. His father, also named Bill, had served in the Australian Army in World War I while his mother – Mary Ellen Bernasconi – belonged to a family who ran hotels. So it was, young Bill grew up living in hotels, mainly in Orange where he attended De La Salle College. When not yet 15, he went to the Brothers’ Juniorate at Castle Hill taking the Religious Habit there in 1938 and given the names FINIAN ALFRED. For almost 77 years, he “lived for Christ his Lord” as a De La Salle Brother and proclaimed him to others. His “living for the Lord” included 60 years at Mentone.

While he had happy years teaching at De La Salle, Malvern, and Ashfield and Kingsgrove in Sydney, really, he became identified with St Bede’s and was a legend in his lifetime particularly among students from the 1940s – 80s. I count it a singular blessing that he was my Director and Principal when first appointed here as a young Brother and with whom I spent 28 years in three stints. Like many of you, I saw him in his heyday as a strong, athletic, rather fiery red-headed young man to a still highly determined, alert but frail old man using a walking frame to move around, attended to by carers and nurse for whose love the Brothers are especially grateful.
B. In his living and dying, Bro. Finian passed on a love of life and of people – a human wholeness in his efforts “to be all things to all people” and “to follow right paths”. It is this HUMANITY that Leo Gamble highlights in his “History of St Bede’s” for it was this quality which signalised and identified him as a Brother, friend, mentor, teacher or Principal.

Here are some examples. Each of you will have many of his or her own.

- The compassionate Finian riding his bike to comfort a family where the father could no longer work because of a heart condition in order to tell him and his wife not to worry about paying school fees.

- The ruddy-faced workman mowing the front oval or tending to the cricket pitch to the admiration of the Mentone Pub clients, one of whom wanted to employ him. Loving cricket, he was a proud Life Member of the Kingston Saints Cricket Club.

- The highly gifted and inspiring Latin and French teacher, sometimes falling asleep in class after lunch through exhaustion for, as Principal, he taught most of the day and had no Secretary or Business Manager for several years, despite the school enrolment soaring.

- The ever-generous 75 year old in the 1990’s wearing his distinctive black cape over his robe filling in for my Year 12 class when I was at meetings and happily being waylaid by them to spend much of the period telling them stories about
the school’s history instead of their doing assigned English work.

• what supportive friend of staff – teaching, clerical, domestic. His keen interest in their welfare also extended to their families. Simple courtesies were important to him such as a smile and personal hello, both remembered fondly by one teacher on her first day at St Bede’s.

• The champion and trumpeter of the Old Collegians. He remembered them; attended their functions, football games and funerals; carried on an extensive correspondence. As one former student emailed - “I still have cards and notes written to me at various stages of my life”.

• The prayerful, understanding and tolerant Director of the Community buying ice creams from Budds – a small shop on Beach Road - as a treat for the Brothers particularly on summer evenings. Mind you he was partial to chocolates and ice cream.

Overall, his qualities of compassion, his keen interest in people especially former students, his affirmation of staff, his encouraging youth to be men of faith and integrity particularly during his Religious Education classes, characterised him in his relations with people and endeared him to them.

Your presence here today in such large numbers and the generous response of Old Collegians to the Finian Foundation set up to assist needy students to gain a secondary education at St Bede’s are a fitting testament to his influence.
C. Taking on the mind of Christ, Finian did ordinary things extraordinarily well for essentially he was a man of deep faith and prayer as those of us privileged to live with him in community can attest. He lived in the presence of God, I’m sure. St. John Baptist De La Salle would be proud of him for his deep love and knowledge of Scripture, his loyalty to the Church and his special devotion to the Blessed Eucharist signalised by his lifelong fidelity to daily Mass.

Meditation and spiritual exercises each day were precious times for him and provided a firm base for his community and school life. His determined nature, attachment to routine and his fidelity to the teaching of the Gospel proclaiming it as God’s Word for our time characterised his everyday life. His faithful living out of his vocation underlined his being named Director of Novices for some years in the 1960’s.

The same qualities underlined his reason for attending Staff Briefings of a morning until mid-2014 and his daily performance of rehabilitation exercises until admitted to Cabrini on Christmas Eve.

D. Bro. Finian was an erudite and well-read man in certain fields. For example, Catholics during the Elizabethan era, particularly Jesuits martyred during those turbulent years of the late Sixteenth century. Saints of that time like Edmund Campion and Robert Southwell whom he admired for their daring heroism and learning were, in a sense, his regular companions. He treasured his small statue of St. Margaret Clitherow martyred in York in 1586 during the same persecution. His respect and
devotion for this young mother aged 30 and put to death by crushing were evident when he spoke about her to the boys.

A gifted linguist, he spoke French fluently and taught the subject with distinction. He read widely in French be it history, poetry, novels or modern renowned writers such as Jacques Maritain and André Gide. Some might be surprised to know he was quite an authority on the famous songstress – Edith Piaf (the Little Sparrow) knowing her most famous songs off by heart.

While his favourite writers in English were men and women of the late C19 and early C20 like Chesterton and Kipling, he built up his special collection of one noted modern author whom he loved to read – the distinguished Australian Catholic poet and writer Professor James McAuley.

Just a few nights before he died he recited, quite out of the blue, two verses of a short poem McAuley had written privately to Bob Santamaria – a champion of McAuley’s and Finian’s. He became frustrated when he could not remember the third verse. Certainly, neither Bro. Joe Gabel nor I, standing alongside his bed could help the poor dying man.

To conclude, McAuley and Finian were kindred spirits and even possessed the same chiselled features. Just before his lingering death from cancer in 1976, McCauley penned “EXPLICIT” printed at the back of your Mass booklet. One of his last poems. The poet’s sentiments reflect his struggles with his somewhat pessimistic view of modern society and his imminent death as a committed Catholic. Sentiments which Finian understood and identified with. For instance, the final verse:
“Welcome now to bread and wine:
Creature comfort, heavenly sign
Winter will grow dark and cold
Before the wattle turns to gold”

FOR FIN, THE GREEN WATTLE OF LIFE HAS TURNED TO THE GOLD OF THE RESURRECTION.

May you, dear friend and Brother, rest in peace with your Lord whom you proclaimed with such integrity and humanity.