

Faith and Wine
Brother John May SJ
Jesuit Winemaker Emeritus, Sevenhill Cellars, Clare Valley
in a Joint Forum with Amy Banson
8 December 2006

Faith can be described as trust, religious belief, creed, loyalty but especially a persons relationship with God.

Wine, of course, is the fermented juice of grapes.

John Lawrence May came into this world on the 10th of August 1929 in Sydney. My Mother was of Irish background, my Dad of German descent. When I was five year of age the depression was at its peak. Dad lost his job as an engineer. He obtained work as a fitter and turner, working for the Sydney County Council. My parents had strong faith and trust in the Lord. We children were taught to say our morning and evening prayers, which included trimming prayers such as those for our cousins, uncles and aunts. We were poor. We knew how to save and we were well looked after as Mother was a good provider and well supported by Dad. We did without a lot of things and we made our own fun with cousins who lived close by.

As a boy I worked during school holidays, delivering bread or ice in order to have pocket money. My education was with the Josephite and Mercy Sisters and the Christian Brothers. I was weak in Latin and French. I changed schools in order to learn woodwork, metalwork and technical drawing. Since then, I never looked back! In my last year at school the war in the Pacific ended on the 15th of August, the Feast of the Assumption.

In 1946 I took a job with a building firm as an apprentice carpenter and joiner, working in multi-storey buildings. The next three years were ones of searching. I enjoyed dancing and singing and spent twelve months having voice training. I decided to return to school to try for my Leaving Certificate as I had left school earlier at the end of Third Year or Year Nine. I did well at the Technical College. After three years in the building industry I felt the Lord was calling me to lead the life of a Jesuit Brother. In February 1949 I went to Loyola College, Watsonia, near Melbourne to begin my novitiate. After two and half years I took my First Vows. I remained at Loyola for fourteen years doing various work and learning new skills by doing courses at the R.M.I.T. (the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology). Some of the courses were in welding, painting, interior decorating and mechanics.

Loyola College in those days was run like a monastic institution. Saint Ignatius, our founder, did not intend Jesuit formation to be like that. Before the Council of Trent, in the 1550's, religious Sisters, Brothers and Priests stayed in their convents and monasteries. After Trent the new Religious Orders such as the Ursulines, the Jesuits, the Loreto Sisters were apostolic in their purpose. However, their religious formation was influenced by the formation of the older Orders which was monastic. This really continued until the Second Vatican Council. Since Vatican Two religious formation has undergone changes which are more in keeping with the apostolic nature of most Religious Orders and Congregations.

In my early days as a Jesuit Brother I held the lowest rank in the house. For example, when leaving the dining room a novice preceded Brothers who had been in religious life for fifty years. This is where faith comes into one's life. Our Lord Himself became a servant for us and by His example we learn. After all each of us is created in the image and likeness of God, as we are told in the first chapter of Genesis. All Christians are called to imitate the servant role of Christ.

In 1963 I was sent to St Aloysius Residence and Winery in South Australia to be an offsider to Br. John Hanlon who was not well. It was a hard and lonely time for me, coming from a house of over a hundred people to one with five Jesuits and to a place one hundred and thirty kilometres from Adelaide. It was my trust and belief that this move was God's Will for me through my vow of obedience, which is not always easy to accept. The prayer "Dearest Lord, teach me to be generous" was often on my lips.

I spent seven years at Sevenhill in the Clare Valley pruning vines, ploughing the soil and building, especially using my welding skills and of course learning about winemaking. Br. John Hanlon whom I had come to assist died suddenly and I became the winemaker overnight. In that first year Sevenhill Cellars won a Gold Medal in Perth for the Cabernet Sauvignon. I still maintain that the Lord made the wine that year. I was his assistant. Since that time we have won many medals for our wines.

From 1972 to 2002 the wine industry had many profitable years and some down years. At the present moment we are experiencing difficult times. It is definitely a buyer's market. In my first year as winemaker we picked eighty tons. By 1990, 500 tonnes. You might say that the winery was going more commercial but in a comparatively small way. For your information and interest let me quote from the label on our bottles: "Proceeds from our wines support Australian Jesuits in their work of charity and compassion in Australia and Asia and also in the training of novices, brothers and student priests."

Since 1972 I have enjoyed my involvement with the Clare Valley community. I played tennis and tabletennis. For fourteen years I acted with a local group of players at nearby Auburn, partly for enjoyment and partly to raise money for local charities. Also I helped Clare Valley religious production such as “putting Christ back into Christmas and Easter.” I have also been much involved with the Clare Valley Winemakers Association and Vine Improvement, Land Care. I was a founding member of the Clare Valley Tourist Association. From the perspective of my faith, I am known as Brother John May in the winemaking community and this, for me, is a witness to my Christianity and to my commitment as a Jesuit Brother. Until recently all the winemakers at Sevenhill have been Jesuit Brothers. I was the seventh in one hundred and fifty years. Because I am a Brother I am regularly asked to say grace before major dinners and luncheons for the Clare Valley Winemakers and also at functions in Adelaide.

At the present time I conduct tours at Sevenhill at least twice a week and often enough four times. The tours of the property are of spiritual and historical nature taking in the underground cellar, the various shrines on the property and the well-known church of St Aloysius which is quite a landmark. For me this is a public witness to my Christian faith and religious belief. In doing this I believe I bring Christ to people. In the first year of the tours more than a thousand people walked with me.

The Sevenhill complex is well known in South Australia. It comprises the Church, the Winery, the Jesuit Residence and Retreat House. We are on the “must visit” of the tourist lists. The Winery is the oldest in the Clare Valley and the only one conducted by a Religious Order in Australia, and which has a religious involved in its operations.

At this point I would like to talk about St Thomas More and St Ignatius Loyola. Both men were inspired by God – with one difference. Ignatius died in bed, Thomas on the executioner’s block, defending the law of God. St Thomas More was born in 1478 and Ignatius in 1491. Both were contemporaries of Columbus, Luther, Calvin, Vasco da Gama. It was a tumultuous time in the world and the Church. Thomas as a young man worked as a servant in the household of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Ignatius, after his remarkable time at Manresa in Spain, worked in hospitals serving the sick. Their Christ-like charity could be seen in their care for the needy and poor in society. Both were “men for others” an often quoted phrase of Father Pedro Arrupe. Jesuits, especially in their post Vatican Two General Congregations, are expected to show a preferential option for the poor. Thomas, like Ignatius, was a man of prayer and penance and simplicity of lifestyle. Thomas, as Lord Chancellor, when difficult decisions had to be made, would go to confession and receive Communion, looking for spiritual guidance. Ignatius did likewise. He is especially famous for teaching the need for discernment, always with prayer seeking enlightenment through the Holy Spirit.

This is at the core of his spirituality. Both saints took as their model Jesus who spent nights in prayer before the major decisions and events of His life. For example before choosing the apostles and before His Passion in the Garden of Olives. Thomas was a man engaged in politics. Ignatius in seeking approval for his Order was involved in a sense in Church politics. Today, many Jesuits around the world are involved in matters of faith and justice. For example, in Australia, Fr Frank Brennan is well known for the work he has done for indigenous people and in other areas. Fr Brennan's most recent books is entitled "Stolen Wages of Aborigines". Another of his books is: "Acting on conscience. How can we responsibly mix Law, Religion and Politics?" And the new edition of his book "Tampering with Asylum Seekers" was launched last month by the Honourable Kevin Rudd M.P.

As a Religious Brother and as a Winemaker being involved with people and the Tourist Industry I have received several awards and acknowledgements. The main ones are :

- . Life Member of the Wine Federation of Australia
- . the Harry Dowling Award for the outstanding contribution by an Individual in Regional Tourism
- . The South Australian Great Award for contribution to tourism.

Last month the Sevenhill Winery received the award as the Best Tourism Winery in South Australia.

The management of the winery has been handed over to a younger man and my work at present is to make myself useful around the winery. I prepare morning and afternoon tea for the staff, collect the mail, do banking and shopping and conduct the tours mentioned earlier. I am involved with the South Australian Tourist Commission, conducting regular interviews with journalists. And I am the Public Relations Office for Sevenhill Cellars.

Also, on the home front, I am involved in hospitality in welcoming the steady stream of people who come to our retreat house. All of this is tied in with my religious life, the driving force of my being. As advised by St Ignatius, I try to "seek and find God in all things and people".

"We are made in the image and likeness of God."

Finally, a thought to take away:

God made man
Frail as a bubble.
God made love
Love made trouble.
God made the vine,
Was it a sin
That man made wine
To drown your trouble in?

Drink wine in moderation.