



## TEACHERS NOTES

*SUBJECT AREAS: religious and comparative studies, faith education, church in the modern world, studies of society, gender studies, mens issues LEVEL: upper secondary, tertiary, general interest.*

*ONCE WERE MONKS could be a useful resource in Study of Religion (Secondary School Board Subject) and in senior units of work in Religious Education (Catholic Schools and Colleges), especially in the subjects "The Church in the Contemporary World" or "Commitment and Ministry" (Religious Education Guidelines, Archdiocese of Brisbane).*

Melbourne is home to a fascinating, eccentric, erudite and warring tribe of men. They are pious and bawdy, gregarious and solitary, indulgent and ascetic, radical and conservative, young and old. They are the men of the Blessed Sacrament Order at the St Francis Church and Monastery in the heart of Melbourne. Their lives are turned upside down when they are forced to move to a pub during renovations.

Many of the fathers and brothers are facing old age. They can no longer climb the stairs and it is hoped that new en-suite bathrooms will ease the problem. While most of the men relocate to the pub across the road, Father Ken Boland decides to stay on-site in a workers shed. Others seek alternative accommodation: historian Father Donald Cave moves to his old house in inner-city Melbourne; Father Gonzalo Munoz takes a job as live-in caretaker of a meditation centre; and Brother Gerard Develin must part with his pet budgie for the period of construction.

The renovation acts as a catalyst, prompting the men to question their faith and commitment

to the Catholic church. A number are even unsure whether they will return to the monastery once refurbishment is complete. Throughout the upheaval, church life goes on. Mass is still said and confessions are heard. A young member of the order, Brother Boris Pelaki, is ordained and a funeral is held for Brother Bernard Scanlan, who dies on his 102nd birthday.

The series follows Father Donald to Rome where he delivers his much-awaited book on the order's founder, and to Istanbul where he fulfils his life-long dream to visit Aya Sofya, once one of the greatest churches in Christendom. Back in Melbourne, Brother Gerard makes regular trips to the outskirts of the city to visit his budgie, now boarding with a friend.

ONCE WERE MONKS is the story of what happens when this tight-knit community is thrown into the outside world. It is about the problems of faith in the modern era, the forces of change and the pressures of tradition. Ultimately it is about a group of men who share in religious life with all its joys and sorrows.

## SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT DISCUSSION

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### Themes

- Attitudes—vocation, commitment, ministry
- Church in the modern world
- Community
- Dimensions of religion—especially doctrinal, social and communal, material

Episode 3 of ONCE WERE MONKS is recommended for relevance in Religious Education.

### Pre-viewing

- What do you know about religious communities?
- Who do you know or who have you met who is a member of a religious community?
- What sort of people do you think belong to such communities?
- Why would someone wish to join a religious order?
- What might be the advantages or disadvantages of belonging to a religious community?

### Post-viewing

- One of the members of the community felt that the making of the series was a worthwhile exercise and “particularly important for showing young people how we look and act” (see The Story Behind the Series). Do you agree?
- What did you learn about the religious community which was new or surprising? Or, did you not learn anything new?
- Father Boland says “We’re an open community and as a group we’re pretty blunt”. Do you agree?
- How would you answer some of the questions raised in the film about the church in the world? What do you see as relevant, or not relevant, about the lifestyle chosen by these men?

- Discuss the opinions and choice of Father Gonzalo who resolves not to return to the community but to stay at the meditation centre and maintain his growing interest in buddhism.
- Some of the men question long-held values and talk openly about their own conflicts with the orthodoxy of the church. “We can dissent without being disloyal,” says Father Donald. Discuss.
- The “younger generation” is represented by the gently spoken Brother Boris who prepares for ordination into the priesthood. What reasons does he give for this? What is his view of the disillusionment of the older men who are not returning to the Order?



## THE STORY BEHIND THE SERIES

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If the story was not wholly based on fact, the premise for *ONCE WERE MONKS* would seem more like situational drama. Produced under Film Australia's National Interest Program, this five-part documentary series observes what happens when a closely-knit religious order temporarily disperses following a decision to renovate the Monastery of St Francis where the community has lived for over 60 years. That the alternative accommodation for many of the brothers and fathers of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation turns out to be the pub opposite the monastery, provides the unlikely impetus for this absorbing story.

Woven into the story is a “cast” of engaging characters. Brother Gerard Develin, the amateur magician, is secure in his dual role of church photographer and organist, despite being visually impaired. Father Donald Cave, the intellectual of the community, is trying to finish writing his book on the founder of the Order. Father Ken Boland, whose witty quips punctuate the program, juggles his supervision of the renovations with his passion for caving and gliding. And Brother Bernard, frail yet alert, is looking forward to his 102nd birthday.

The move to the pub also becomes a catalyst for other journeys. As the disillusioned Father Gonzalo Munoz departs to explore different aspects of his spirituality—embracing buddhism and becoming caretaker at a meditation centre—the “younger generation”, represented by the gently spoken Brother Boris Pelaki, prepares for his ordination into the priesthood.

As a group, and as individuals, the men of St Francis are progressive and forthright, and their startling candour is one of the achievements of *ONCE WERE MONKS*. They question long-held values, wrestle with the tenets of their faith and talk openly about their own conflicts with the orthodoxy of the church. For many, the new conservatism emanating from Rome is seen as a betrayal of the radical changes of the 1960s. Father Gonzalo's criticism of the Vatican's stance

is indicative of the liberalism within the group. “We can dissent without being disloyal,” says Father Donald emphatically.

Founded by St Peter Julian Eymard in Paris in 1856, the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament was originally established as a closed and contemplative order whose mission was to pray for salvation 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. In 1929, the Order established a monastery in the heart of Melbourne and assumed responsibility for the historic church of St Francis, the oldest Catholic church in Victoria, which has stood on the corner of Lonsdale and Elizabeth Streets for over 150 years. Mary MacKillop, the woman most likely to become Australia's first saint, was baptized in the church in 1842. Ned Kelly's parents were married there and Arthur Calwell sought refuge in the church during the tumultuous ALP split in the 1950s. Calwell was welcomed at St Francis after having been forced from his own parish. Today, St Francis is Australia's busiest Catholic church with over 3000 people attending Mass every Sunday.

Until the 1970s, the community lived like monks amidst the hustle and bustle of an expanding CBD. But the world was already encroaching, with high-rise offices dwarfing the church. While the community had successfully resisted moves by property developers to acquire church land, they could no longer ignore the wear and tear on the monastery. Updating its facilities was accepted as a necessary step to improving the building's comfort for an ageing community, most of whom were over 50.

The monks' story proved irresistible for filmmaker Luigi Acquisto, whose introduction to St Francis began in 1981, during his student days at the University of Melbourne. Having developed a friendship with his then lecturer in existential philosophy, Father Donald Cave, Acquisto became a regular guest at Sunday dinners at the monastery. These convivial gatherings were eye-opening. “The priests were erudite, bawdy and witty, not to mention open, tolerant

and non-judgmental—nothing like the images to which we're accustomed," he says.

Some 15 years later, Acquisto had established a solid reputation as a successful documentary filmmaker and had formed his own production company, Abracadabra Films, with partner and series co-producer Stella Zammataro. The prospect of creating a human interest story about a religious community sparked their interest and they began working on a proposal.

Acquisto initially considered producing a traditional one-hour documentary but he needed a hook to interest the networks. That "hook" was provided when the priests decided to move to the pub during the monastery renovations. And if relocating creates upheaval under ordinary circumstances, imagine its impact on a religious order where communal living is an intrinsic part of each person's everyday routine, from sharing meals to singing prayers. As Father Donald remarks: "When certain things are done in common each day, splitting people up has big consequences for your life".

It also had consequences for the producers. "We reworked the proposal along the lines of a docu-soap. It was an ideal format," says Acquisto, "allowing us to introduce a greater range of characters and develop various story-lines". The project finally went into production as a five-part series in October 1998 when Film Australia agreed to produce *ONCE WERE MONKS* through its National Interest Program.

Executive Producer Franco di Chiera explained Film Australia's involvement: "We sometimes forget that religious orders are part of Australian life, and when they're represented in the media they're frequently stereotyped. *ONCE WERE MONKS* shatters those preconceptions and reminds us that spirituality within the established churches is as diverse and complex as the society from which it emanates."

The scale of the project was a challenge for the production crew. "As an observational documentary, most of it was unscripted," says Acquisto. "We were following characters for nearly a year and had to be on the spot when things were happening." Zammataro remembers spending

almost seven days a week on location. "It was exhausting," she admits, "but it was incredible having access to such a unique community".

Patience meant that they were present for some of the documentary's more poignant, unplanned moments, something dramatically highlighted as they prepared to film Brother Bernard's 102nd birthday celebrations. The birthday cake had already been ordered, so the crew was caught off-guard by Bernard's death on the 11th day of the 11th month. It was, fittingly, Remembrance Day. "Everyone was saddened by Bernard's death," says Acquisto, "but it provided real resonance for the series, as death is such a profound issue for an ageing community."

While some events were unforeseen, enormous preparation preceded the filming of Brother Boris Pelaki's ordination—the first for the Order within Australia in almost five years. It was a rare opportunity and had to be sensitively handled to minimise intrusion into the ceremony. Three cameras were used to film the elaborate ritual, with one positioned in the roof for the moment when Brother Boris lies prostrate before the altar.

Apart from producing, Acquisto co-directed *ONCE WERE MONKS* with Andrew Sully, a former student of his from the Swinburne School of Film and Television. At first, Sully was brought on board to direct one episode while Acquisto was overseas filming Father Donald's journey to Rome and Istanbul. But given the scale of the project, he stayed on for the rest of the shoot and now shares a director's credit on all five episodes.

Acquisto found the experience rewarding. "We not only co-directed different days, but were often on set together. There was never any disagreement or conflict." This eased the strain of what proved a very tough shoot. "It was a lengthy process and we ended up shooting over 200 hours of footage," says Zammataro of the 18 months they spent in filming and post-production.

From this wealth of footage emerges an intimate and occasionally inspirational portrait of a group of men responding honestly and openly to the changes in their lives. To achieve this result,

Acquisto worked with a small crew, at times using only two people. “It allowed us to maintain a certain intimacy with the community—something a large crew would not have permitted,” he says.

And while Father Donald had reservations about the presence of the camera, he felt it was a worthwhile exercise and “particularly important for showing young people how we look and act”. “We didn’t know what we were letting ourselves in for,” adds Father Ken Boland, “but we’re an open community and as a group we’re pretty blunt.”

They may be blunt by inclination, but the extent to which they speak out on a range of sensitive issues is a strong measure of their trust in the production team. It is arguably the key to this revealing and engrossing series. So involved do you become in the lives of these fascinating characters, that by the end of the final episode you could well be asking: “How do you obtain an invitation to dinner at St Francis?”



These teachers notes were kindly prepared by Madeleine Buckley, Resource Consultant, Brisbane Catholic Education Centre  
Email: [m.buckley@bne.catholic.edu.au](mailto:m.buckley@bne.catholic.edu.au)

## ORDERING THE DVD

To order a copy of ONCE WERE MONKS, or to find out more about Film Australia programs and accompanying teachers notes, please contact:

**National Film and Sound Archive of Australia**

Sales and Distribution  
PO Box 397 Pyrmont NSW 2009  
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E: [sales@nfsa.gov.au](mailto:sales@nfsa.gov.au) | [www.nfsa.gov.au](http://www.nfsa.gov.au)

## ONCE WERE MONKS

5 x 26 minute episodes

*Executive Producer:* Franco di Chiera  
*Directors:* Luigi Acquisto, Andrew Sully  
*Producers:* Luigi Acquisto, Stella Zammataro  
*Writer:* Luigi Acquisto  
*Composer:* David Bridie  
*Cinematographer:* Valeriu Campan  
*Editor:* Wendy Chandler  
*Sound recordists:* Mark Tarpey, Glen Forster, Simon Bronson

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