FATHER TOM CUTS MARITIME LAW ADRIFT

FATHER TOM STEVENS COULD EASILY HAVE BEEN LOST TO THE 'HIGH SEAS' RATHER THAN AUSTRALIAN TURF CLUB'S HONORARY CATHOLIC CHAPLAIN

WORDS: **MARK BRASSEL** IMAGES: **AMIE BAINES (POPBOX MEDIA)**

> **I grew up at the track with my father and grandfather who were both bookmakers," Father Tom recalled.**

Father Tom Stevens is a familiar face around Sydney racetracks and has conducted the popular Racing Fraternity Mass in Royal Randwick's Winx Stand for the past nine autumns.

Having grown up in Chatswood on Sydney's Lower North Shore, Tom was the youngest of seven kids in a devoted Irish Catholic family fond of horse racing.

"I grew up at the track with my father and grandfather who were both bookmakers," Father Tom recalled.

"My dad Ron, fielded at the leger in his early twenties and thirties then got into different things like antiques.

"But it was a revolving door and then he ended up helping bookie Hec Gale. Dad was not that much into racing, but he loved doing the figures in bookmaking.

"I'd always followed racing and I was constantly around horse racing when I was young. I'm still there quite a bit now as a Racing Chaplain and I remain an Australian Turf Club Member.

"My grandfather Leo worked in the pub game in Parkes and was an SP bookie. He went to Sydney and was a rails bookmaker which was a big thing at the time.

"He did well, even owned the Oceanic Hotel at Coogee when it was in its prime. The Oceanic was one of Coogee's major landmarks for 60 years and closed in 1987."

But Father Tom Stevens was on a totally different path less than two decades ago.

He was a boarder at St Joseph's College (Joeys) in Hunters Hill where he showed great academic skills and, as they do at Joeys, played rugby union.

"As a kid our family would go to St Vinnies in Chatswood and help them fold blankets or restock, it made us all aware that other people were struggling," Tom remembered.

After college Tom took up Maritime Law: "As a boy I had always loved big ships and had a fascination with them, so that's probably what sparked my interest in Maritime Law.

"It is a niche area of Law, and I really enjoyed it being in Singapore for a couple of years.

"But I had been thinking of priesthood since I was a teenager and when I was about 30, I applied for seminary school."

That seven-year course began in Sydney and concluded in Rome.

"Going to Rome for the final three years of my study was a tremendous experience and I likened it to going to a Catholic Disneyland!" he said.

"I was ordained in Italy and met a lot of great people who inspired me and many had done so much for charities around the world."

Once he returned Tom was stationed at Liverpool's All Saints Church in 2016.

"I gave Chaplain support to Liverpool Police – a lot of these guys are in their early twenties; they're in general duties and have seen a lot of things most of us don't see and they need support."

Father Tom is now based at St Patrick's Catholic Church in Mortlake, just 10km west from Sydney's CBD, and is always kept busy with activities and charity and community offerings.

"We have festival nights during daylight saving, with food trucks and bands, as well as brunches raising money for the Cancer Council.

"Like several Catholic churches in Sydney we now live-streams Sunday services.

"These days families have work, household and sporting commitments on a Sunday. We need to react to the life changes."

And being the Australian Turf Club's Chaplain requires raceday attendance: "There's always plenty going on with injuries, and stablehands and jockeys requesting some support."

Father Tom replaced the legendary Brother Dan Stafford who retired in December 2020 as Chaplain for the Australian Racing Christian Chaplaincy.

"Brother Dan served for decades as ARCC's Chaplain to people at all levels of the industry and was much-loved."

One of Father Tom's many passions is registered charity 'The Anawim Society' which he founded.

"We try and make a difference in providing dignity to individuals and families and make new friends at our annual luncheon," he said.

"Our 'Table For All' has funded and hosted 95 dignified and nutritious meals for people who experience chronic isolation, hardship and food insecurity.

"We don't hand out meals from a distance or rush people through a line.

"Instead, we invite every guest to sit down, share a conversation, enjoy a warm meal, and feel genuinely seen in a welcoming, dignified environment. The idea is to connect and belong.

"I have tried to keep in touch with my old lawyer mates, just so they'll kick the tin!" *RNSW*

A TABLE FOR ALL

Date:	**Friday 28th August**
Venue:	**Bistro Rex, Potts Point**
Time:	**12pm for 12:30pm**
Tickets:	**$180 per person / Table of 10 $1,800**
Inclusions:	**Three-course meal, beer, wine & soft drinks**

"Every seat filled at our lunch means more seats filled at tables for people who need it most – we do hope you can join us."

To support The Anawim Society or learn more about its mission, **visit – anawim.org.au**

For details on St Patrick's services and community activities go to **stpatsmortlake.org.au**