

Con Keogh

Visionary of our times

If anyone were to be singled out as having a key role in the evolution of GROW it would be Con Keogh. A co-founder and International Director it was to a large extent this man's gifts and dedication that has nurtured and drawn together the pooled efforts of our leaders around the world. Con's own story contains many insights that are reflected in the philosophy of GROW. Con was a diocesan priest permanently on loan from the Catholic Church. He had to keep his vows, say mass daily and report to his bishop once a year.

Con was born in Molden in the state of Victoria in 1921 fourth son in a family of 6 boys and one girl. His family, were second generation Australian s with Irish roots on both sides. His maternal grandparents had eloped from Dublin, and he has roots in Tipperary and Offaly. Con's mother died when he was 13 leaving his father to try and meet the needs of a growing family.



The Young Keogh Family

At the age of seventeen he was offered a scholarship in Engineering. He turned it down and entered the seminary in Springwood. At the age of eighteen he travelled to Rome for his studies. Here he proved a brilliant student

gaining a double doctorate in Divinity and Philosophy and with a fluency in 8 languages.

Con returned to Australia after the war, a young Socrates, armed with knowledge and wisdom which he would use in his native home. He began to teach in the seminary. He also became caught up in social issues of the time. Unknown to him while he had been away his younger brother Aidan had become seriously mentally ill. He had had several hospitalisations and had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. There was, (so Con felt) an expectation that 'Connie' would somehow be able to 'sort Aidan out' with all his study and great knowledge and religious training. Con tried but found he couldn't even understand what was happening inside his brother or what it meant to be mentally ill.

That was all to change. One evening Con was driving a car- load of religious back from some seminar. He began to speak gibberish and became extremely agitated. The alarmed nuns alerted Con's colleagues and he was admitted to a private nursing home for religious run by the Brothers of St. John of God. By now he was hallucinating and extremely disturbed. The brothers found him very difficult to manage. It seemed to Con that the staff was out to get him. The more disturbed he became the more it was necessary for him to be calmed down. The more he was approached the harder he struggled. In one such struggle, in which he put four nurses and himself through a plate glass window, the brother superior ordered that he be sedated. While trying to hold Con still the needle meant for him went into the leg of the brother superior who was laid out flat for 24 hours. When he came round Con was ordered into the State mental hospital at Paramater.

Mental hospitals in those days were very scary

places. There was little if any treatment as we know it today. Electric shocks were liberally administered without anesthetic or anti convulsants. Con was given many rounds. It was a regime of fear. To quieten patients, nurses would come up from behind and tie a towel around the neck of someone who was acting out. The towel would then be twisted until the patient passed out from lack of air. The padded cell and the straight jacket were the order of the day. Con experienced all these treatments many times over a period of 8 months.

While he was in hospital Largactil became available and Con was one of the first batch of patients to be prescribed it. Largactil is one of the major tranquillizers and this began to quieten him down. One day, in solitary confinement, he received a visit from his local parish priest Monseigneur Tom Wallace. Con began telling the priest about the plot among the nurses to torture him, that the doctor was St. Francis Xavier and other patients were St Peter and Judas. Tom Wallace lost his patience with Con. He bodily pinned him to the ground and he shouted "You are MAD you bugger MAD. This isn't HELL it's HOSPITAL, those aren't DEVILS they are NURSES trying to help you. You are mad and until you accept that fact you deserve to be here and you will stay here."

Con recalled how these words spoken with such ferocious warmth and spontaneity were able to cut through his delusional state for the first time and as he said himself the relief was enormous. He felt he had been promoted from Hell to Hospital and the latter was an infinitely better place to be.

Con was released back into the community after almost a year. His problems were only beginning. His self-esteem was in tatters. This

man who had lectured in the seminary and been the darling of intellectual Sidney was now afraid to meet people. Through the shock treatment his memory was gone, he had forgotten how to say Mass, how to drive a car, how to cross the street, many of the things we all take for granted.

He was given a curates job in some small suburb. It was a job he found hard to do because his confidence had evaporated. He wanted to hide away. Instead of priestly work he was given jobs like digging a hole for a septic tank. He decided he had to tell his congregation what had happened to him and how insecure he felt.



One Sunday he did just that from the altar. The response was one of warmth and admiration. Eventually a friend of his brother, a man called Joe persuaded Con to come along to meetings of Alcoholics

Anonymous. At these meetings Con was to experience the spiritual healing that comes from heart to heart sharing of down to earth people who have experienced personal and social breakdown . He remained in AA for two years and there met a group of people who like himself did not have a drink problem but were desperately in need of a programme of direction and of support and personal renewal.

He was thus a member of the first Grow group (or Recovery as it was then called), which met at Hurstville, Sydney, on April 27, 1957. The wisdom they gained in helping each other to overcome life's challenges and recover from mental illness was carefully recorded and forms the basis of the unique Grow program. The model they developed was exceptionally innovative, supporting personal power, control and self determination to people with a mental

illness at a time when the notion of recovery from mental illness was shunned.

In an interview with The Catholic Weekly Keogh said

"We started with 20 people and we found it a tremendous help in being able to get back into ordinary life," he said. "Week by week we were telling each other how we were changing. We would sit around and speak about our experiences together. Eventually we realised we didn't have to keep coming to the group; we were staying well. After the meetings, which went for about two hours, I would start to write down things that came out of the group. At first we called ourselves Recovery, because we believed that even the sickest people could get well and stay well."

Keogh served as an assistant priest at Darlinghurst, Summer Hill, Lithgow and Manly and was chaplain at Long Bay jail for three years. But from 1968, he devoted himself full-time to GROW, which spread throughout Australia and overseas. He kept the movement non-denominational because he did not want a barrier to anyone seeking help. That brought him into conflict with the cardinal Norman Gilroy, who believed God should be at the centre of the movement, but everyone who dealt with Keogh knew he was a priest and that his faith had helped him in his own recovery and his direction in life.

As the organisation matured, GROW members learnt of Recovery International, an organisation also created to help people with serious mental illness, and integrated pieces of its will-training methods. Keogh was on a constant round of overseas travel, writing, teaching and speaking engagements. In 1996, following a triple bypass, he started to cut back,

and he retired in 2002, but he still spoke at leadership conferences.

Grow continues to be a consumer based organisation with participants of the program involved in all facets of Governance, from Regional and Programme teams, up to our national Board.

Con Keogh remained a prominent leader of Grow in Australia and advocate for people with mental illness for over 40 years. He was instrumental in taking Grow's Program to the USA, New Zealand and Ireland.



President Mary Robinson and Fr. Keogh

In 2004, Fr Con was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia for service to the community in Australia and overseas through Grow. Grow's motto is Truth, Character, Friendship. "Friendship just lifts the burden off people," said Fr Con. "Through friendships you are socialised and re-integrated into society." The Grow philosophy is very strong on people taking their share of responsibility for their downward spiral and also their own personal growth."



Fr. Con Keogh awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia for service to the community

By 2005, there were 800 GROW groups worldwide, including networks in Australia, New Zealand, America and Ireland.



Con Keogh died on November 24, 2011. He is survived by two sisters-in-law, Daisy Keogh and Betty Keogh, three nephews and four nieces.

