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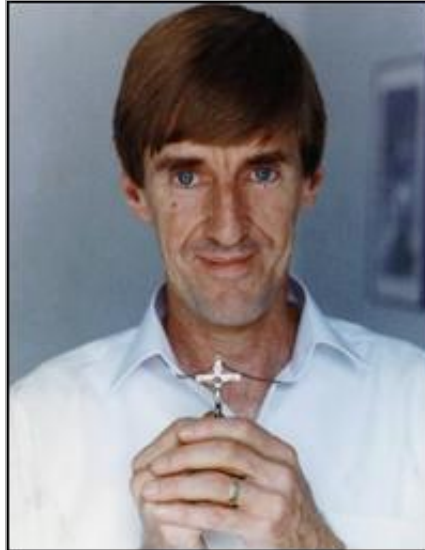
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Priest and predator

October 11, 2003

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Former Catholic cleric Michael Glennon was worshipped by his flocks but he preyed on their most vulnerable members, reports Dan Silkstone.



Michael Glennon in 1991.

See it fall, this brittle, yellowed leaf of history - freed from a crowded library file after almost 30 years.

It's an unlikely introduction to one of Melbourne's most infamous pedophiles, a good-news story of a lost and found puppy returned to a grateful, popular priest.

"I was heartbroken when he got out," Father Michael Charles Glennon told *The Age* in 1974 about his mischievous labrador. "The kids adore Robbie. I was dreading having to explain to hundreds of Moonee Ponds children that Robbie was missing."

Now witness this faded clipping from 1979 in which a karate-kicking Glennon is hailed as "a new breed of church worker" as he promotes his Peaceful Hand Youth Foundation, a Christian karate movement that he boasts has 5000 members.

"A lot of kids come here for the wrong reason - to learn how to fight better - but they end up learning a lot about life," he says.

Michael Glennon has always had the gift of self-promotion. It has served him well on a 30-year journey into infamy during which he has repeatedly desecrated the most sacred of trusts. Many of the children who knew him learned life lessons they should never have.

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Glennon, one of Australia's worst pedophiles, was yesterday found guilty by a County Court jury of 23 child sex charges against three victims - the fifth time he has been convicted of such charges since 1978.

After the decision, Judge Roland Williams lifted suppression orders dating back to the late 1990s, allowing for the reporting of two previous trials, in 1999 and in August this year.

It's customary to see such a fall in biblical terms - an apple tasted, a momentary bowing to temptation. But Glennon was a master manipulator who used his knowledge of martial arts and Aboriginal culture to win the trust of his young charges.

To the adults and children who looked up to him, "Father Michael" seemed like God's own action hero. Young and charismatic, a black belt in karate and a talented footballer, he played guitar and spoke often of his love for the calling.

For some, most famously broadcaster Derryn Hinch, Glennon's story has been one of neglect by a Catholic hierarchy that withdrew his right to preach in 1979 and forced him to resign from the priesthood in 1984 but could not stop his abuses. Church representatives maintained they could do no more. To publicly shame Glennon, they said, would be to legally defame him.

But Glennon is also something else, a throwback to a time when the priesthood was the repository of blind trust before parents learned to look sideways with suspicion.

It will probably never be known how many children Glennon molested. A victim testified during a 1986 committal that Glennon once told him he had lost count of how many people he had raped.

Yesterday Glennon was found guilty for offences committed between 1986 and 1991 - a period in which his reputation was well known.

Though sacked from the clergy, he was practising as a renegade priest, ministering from his Thornbury home to a flock of poor and Aboriginal families. He also continued to run karate camps for thousands of local youths at his "Karaglen" property in rural Victoria.

So why did Glennon's followers love and trust him so completely, in the face of the disturbing and convincing evidence?

Throughout both trials prosecutor Rosemary Carlin marvelled that parents unquestioningly allowed their children to sleep in Glennon's bed and accompany him on overnight trips - long after he had been charged with sexual offences.

They had nothing to fear from him. He was their priest.

You could see this, just weeks ago, in the testimony of a woman whose nephew was one of three victims in the recent trial.

She told the court she saw her nephew in bed with Glennon at Karaglen one night in 1986 when she walked through his room on the way to the bathroom. Asked by Judge Williams if she trusted Father Michael she had no hesitation: "Of course I did. I'm a Catholic aren't I? I mean, you go by the cloth," she said. "Who else do you trust in this world? ...He came around to our houses and we used to sing and we used to talk all hours of the night and enjoy each other's company because he was just good to talk to... I thought this world was good when you talked to a priest." Similar tales have been repeated throughout a series of legal battles, appeals, retrials and High Court decisions.

Carlin spoke of a man adored by his flock, a leader with unbridled charisma and persuasive authority. "They think the world of Glennon," she told the court. "He is their priest, their friend, their confidant... he has shown them he has a profound understanding and respect for the Aboriginal culture."

It was hard to reconcile that figurehead with the withdrawn Michael Glennon who sat mute throughout two trials.

Until you saw the tape, that is.

Last month, during the final trial, the jury was shown video footage of an open-air communion Mass Glennon held at Karaglen in 1989.

There among the native birds and leaning eucalypts - dotted throughout the smiling full-voiced congregation - were the faces of three boys Glennon systematically abused.

One of them, aged 12, wears the gold robes of an altar boy - his arms working hard to hold aloft a large cross as he leads a procession of youngsters to make their first communion.

A portable stereo blares How Great Thou Art to accompany their solemn forward march.

And then Glennon stands, transformed before his flock. Confident, forceful and articulate he delivers in his broad accent a sermon that, with hindsight, is hauntingly appropriate.

"Everybody here, priest included, is and has been a most wicked, wilful sinner," he tells the congregation.

They are smiling, laughing, squinting into the sun.

"Have a look around just before us and remember that we are

all equally sinful."

A bird warbles, an infant grizzles. "We're all going to be judged, every one of us... Put the mirror up, have a good look at your own face because we are all going to be judged."

But the man dozens of families trusted steadfastly refuses to face the mirror. He has consistently maintained his innocence, accused his victims of lying and pleaded not guilty on all but one occasion.

One of 10 children, Michael Glennon was born in Preston and raised around Melbourne's working-class northern suburbs, surrounded by a mixture of Irish Catholics, European migrants and Aboriginal families.

Glennon was admitted to the priesthood in 1971 and three years later was appointed assistant priest at St Monica's in Moonee Ponds. Around this time he launched the youth foundation that would come to represent both his life's work and his terrible legacy.

Taking over a 16-hectare swathe of bushland near Lancefield, Glennon founded Karaglen. Initially a bunch of huddled tents and scrubby wilderness, it grew to become a collection of huts and a hall attached to Glennon's private bedroom. Hundreds of children would visit the karate camps he regularly held at the site; arriving with sleeping bags and sometimes leaving with unspeakable secrets.

By 1977 Glennon had moved to St Gabriel's church in Reservoir. A year later he moved on, as suspicions arose that Father Michael might be not quite righteous. The following year the first allegation surfaced when a 10-year-old girl said he had sexually assaulted her in his car at Karaglen. Glennon was convicted of indecent assault and sent to jail, serving seven months of a two-year sentence.

Just weeks after his release he asked a 16-year-old female student to sleep in his hut at Karaglen and molested her under a quilt. A public prosecutor would tell the court at his 1991 trial that the girl revered Glennon. Neither she nor anyone else saw anything suspicious about his request that she join him for the night.

After further allegations, against boys this time, in 1984 Glennon was forced from the priesthood. In late 1985 he was charged with more offences against children.

His world was falling apart but Father Michael had vocal support from his followers and an unexpected boost from a man who would be forever associated with his crimes - 3AW radio personality Derryn Hinch.

In November 1985 Hinch named Glennon on air as a convicted pedophile.

By then Glennon was facing a number of sex charges against boys and girls at Karaglen from the mid 1970s up to 1983. With a trial pending, Hinch's comments were prejudicial to potential jurors. Hinch was charged with contempt of court.

The focus soon switched to the man they called "The human headline". An unrepentant Hinch was convicted and served 12 days at Morwell prison.

Meanwhile, the prosecution of Glennon proceeded in fits and starts with the defence claiming that publicity surrounding Hinch's conviction made a fair trial impossible.

Eventually, in 1991, Glennon was convicted of five charges and acquitted of 12 but successfully appealed that decision, arguing that publicity had prevented him receiving a fair trial.

It was Glennon's biggest win and prompted celebrations from his supporters and hubris from the man himself, who announced outside court: "I completely forgive Derryn Hinch for what he did."

Hinch, in response, was understandably gruff, telling *The Age*: "I do not want his forgiveness... my flesh crawls at his forgiveness."

The triumph was short-lived. A High Court appeal was launched and won by the prosecutor's office. Glennon was sent back to jail, this time for at least seven years.

In 1997, as his release neared, Glennon was charged with a swag of new sex offences - 65 counts against 15 male and female victims.

That trial began in 1999 but quickly struck trouble when the defence again claimed Glennon could not receive a fair trial. The charges were split into three trials, each suppressed so that jury members could not be prejudiced.

In May 1999, Glennon was convicted on all but five of 29 counts relating to the abuse of six children between 1974 and 1978. He was sentenced to eight-and-a-half years in prison.

The second trial began in September 1999 and, after another appeal and a retrial, was decided in August this year when Glennon was convicted of sex assaults against an Aboriginal boy in 1983.

The third of the split trials followed immediately and concluded yesterday. Three boys, now men, said Glennon had told them acts of masturbation and oral sex were "secret men's business". They said Glennon told them an indigenous spirit, known as the Kaidachi man, would come after them if they revealed their abuse.

One of the boys, now a damaged man with a history of drug abuse, said Glennon had scared him with ghost stories before inviting him into his bed. Two victims said they loved Glennon so much that they sat among his supporters during the 1991 trial and wrote letters to him in prison. Carlin read from one of the letters, penned in 1991 by a 14-year-old victim.

"We shared so much together - laughed, cried, joked. There is no more of that because of the accusers," he wrote. "You were my life and soul. The thought of you not here causes me so much pain."

During the trial the same victim, now in his late 20s, could hardly look at his abuser. As he finished days of gruelling cross-examination he told Glennon he hoped the next time he would read about him would be in the obituaries. Asked why he had eventually come forward the man told the courtroom: "It helped me and my inner self, mate. You try and live with this shit in your head for years."

Glennon, though still wiry, has greyed and hollowed. He is starting to look like an old man. But the silver-tongued preacher still bubbles just below the surface. As the jury foreman recited the list of guilty verdicts yesterday Glennon gripped the rail in front of him and fixed an imploring stare at the 12 men and women. He shook his head and mouthed "No," "disgraceful" and "unbelievable".


Glennon will most likely be sentenced next week for both sets of convictions. If his past three months on trial are any guide, the supporters who once accompanied him to court and shared his confident claims of innocence will be nowhere to be seen. The fall from grace, begun long ago, is almost complete.

Dan Silkstone is the County Court reporter.

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