

"It is difficult to deal with the certain self-righteousness of some Christian people who don't have the capacity to have a forgiving or compassionate response," says Father Peter Norden (at St Ignatius Church in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond).



GODFELLA

He is a friend and confidant to Melbourne's most notorious mobsters, but some say Father Peter Norden's forgiveness goes too far, writes *Cameron Stewart*.

PHOTOGRAPHY ANDY BAKER

Father Peter Norden has become wary of late-night phone calls. They usually come within minutes of the gunshots. When the blood is still warm, the bodies still fresh. It is the wives who call – panicked, hysterical and unable to fathom their fate: gangland wife to gangland widow.

On these nights, Norden grabs his Bible, jumps into his car and speeds into the dark Melbourne night to give the last rites over the bloodied remains of slain gangsters. But this is more than a grisly priestly duty – it is deeply personal. This Jesuit priest – alone among Australia's clergy – has the dubious distinction of being friends with some of the biggest mobsters in Melbourne's bloody gangland war.

In the past few years he has been asked to give the last rites to two of the city's biggest gangsters, who also happened to be good friends – Graham "The Munster" Kinniburgh, who was gunned down outside his Kew home in December 2003, and Mario Condello, whose bullet-ridden body was found in the garage of his Brighton home in February this year.

"Both of their wives phoned me within half an hour of their deaths," says the still youthful, 56-year-old Norden. "Their immediate response was that they phoned the police, phoned their lawyer and then phoned their priest."

"These are people who have been involved in a hard life, but they are also people who have a wife and children, and your main concern at that stage is to be supportive of the family who have been victims of crime."

But Norden's close connections with Melbourne's underworld identities and his willingness to forge friendships among them is dividing opinion and raising questions. His critics say he goes too far in cosying up to the bad guys. Andrew Bolt, conservative columnist for the *Herald Sun*, says Norden is a "PR disaster for the Catholic Church", adding: "I'd like him to speak more truth to sinners, as did Christ."

But Norden says gangsters are no less deserving of spiritual guidance and comfort than anyone else in the community. "I get abusive letters from the general public and from church people who think the church should just be dealing with so-called respectable churchgoers," he says. "But as I said at Mario Condello's funeral, anyone who suggests that friends of Mario's should not be welcome in this church has a complete misunderstanding of the long history of the Catholic Church and of basic Christian values."

Norden is an unlikely conduit for controversy. Softly spoken, highly lucid and with a gentle demeanour, he spends most of his time researching issues of poverty and social alienation in his role as policy director of Jesuit Social Services in Melbourne.

His pet project in recent years has been to help map the concentration of poverty in Australia by postcode. He has also become a vocal campaigner against the death penalty, after becoming involved in the recent death penalty case in Singapore involving convicted Australian drug trafficker Nguyen Tuong Van.

Bob Maguire, a veteran priest from South Melbourne, concedes that Norden is "living dangerously" but says he is not doing anything wrong. Says Maguire: "You've got to represent both sides – goodies and baddies. You can't have a 'goodies-only' church and call it the Catholic Church."

This is just as well because, as the body count grows in Melbourne's gangland war, many of the city's mobsters are taking a belated interest in religion and the afterlife.

NORDEN BELIEVES PEOPLE ARE MORE INCLINED to embrace spirituality after hardship. Maguire is a little more direct: "They say in war that there are no atheists in the foxholes – maybe there aren't too many atheists [in the underworld]."

Mario Condello was one of several of the city's mobsters who belatedly found God after

a foiled attempt on his life in 2004. On that occasion, police arrested two gunmen as they lay in wait for him at Brighton Cemetery, near his house in the bayside suburb.

The near miss shook Condello, who summoned Norden to his house for a visit. The priest told the pale-faced Condello that he had been given a rare second chance to rearrange his priorities and start his life afresh.

"It [the near miss] was a shock for all of the family," says Norden. "The advice I gave him was to examine his values, examine what was important in his life and don't do anything which would cause you to lose the things you most value." Norden was telling Condello to get out of the game.

Condello convinced himself that he had survived only because God was not ready for him yet. From that day, he offered regular prayers to the Almighty. When he was eventually gunned down in the garage of his Brighton home in February, the convicted conman was found with rosary beads on him.

"You don't get gunned down outside your house at 11pm carrying rosary beads by chance," says Norden. "He was obviously thinking about things a lot more."

Condello was a member of the so-called Carlton Crew in Melbourne's underworld war – the old Sicilian-style Mafia whose dwindling membership is overwhelmingly Catholic. They like to conduct their illicit business in style, wearing designer suits, dark glasses and thick gold rings, and are said to favour religious motifs for spiritual protection.

The other side in the gangland war consists of a more godless crowd from the city's gritty outer western suburbs. But even this group, known as the New Guard, has moved closer to God as the body count grows higher. One of their leaders, hitman Andrew "Benji" Veniamin, had rosary beads on him when he was shot dead in a tussle with Dominic "Mick" Gatto in a Carlton pizza shop in March 2004. ▷

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NORDEN'S LINKS WITH GANGLAND MOBSTERS are as accidental as they are deliberate. The Melbourne-born Jesuit from a working class Hawthorn family cut his teeth as a chaplain inside the bleak bluestone walls of the city's notorious Pentridge Prison. It was only his second job after being ordained in 1981 and the appalling conditions inside Pentridge shocked Norden to the core. The experience forged a lasting sympathy for the plight of inmates and a willingness to forgive the worst elements of criminal behaviour.

"In the prison, you saw it all from an angle that others don't have the opportunity of seeing," he says. In particular, he remains haunted by the day he had to give last rites to the five prisoners killed in the fire that swept through the Jika Jika maximum security section in 1987. "One by one I lifted the blankets off the bodies," he recalls. "And as I was kneeling over them, I looked up at the razor wire and realised this was a system so destructive of human life."

In the prison Norden met an extraordinary cast of high-profile criminals who soon accepted him as their friend and confidant. He met the safe-cracker Graham Kinniburgh, the conman Mario Condello, the celebrity crook Mark "Chopper" Read and many members of the infamous Pettingill/Allen crime family, who ruled Melbourne's back streets during the brutal Painters and Dockers era.

Norden's ability to befriend these men was such that one prison official suspected he had swapped sides and was importing heroin into the prison. Norden heard of this slur and confronted the official. "I said I am used to dealing with men and if you have something to say about me I want you to say it to my face," recalls Norden. "But he just went to water after that."

But the crooks trusted Norden and, when they eventually became free men, many made overtures of social friendship which were accepted. Norden says this was not improper, but part of his pastoral duties. "As a priest, you are not like a barrister - you can move more closely into the lives of people without dropping your professionalism," he says. "I have attended baptism parties, 21st birthday celebrations, and feel I am not compromising my position."

That gangsters seek his spiritual advice is a "mark of respect and trust", he says. "I would see Kinniburgh in a local restaurant and he would invite me to join him for a glass of wine, but I would do the same with the same invitation from a judge or a politician."

Norden's links with Melbourne crime figures precede the current gangland war. In the late 1980s, he buried three of the Allen/Pettingill clan, including Dennis Allen, who was suspected of up to 13 murders. He would stand on the pulpit giving eulogies to these slain gangsters in front of the family matriarch, Kath Pettingill - aka "Granny Evil" - who watched the proceedings through her one good eye, the other having been shot out by a stray bullet.

"I knew some of [the family] from working in boys' homes, and a few of them were in and out of prison while I was a chaplain there," says Norden.

In prison, he also got to know Chopper Read, whom he describes as "an intelligent and well-read fellow". "I met him in a pub in North Fitzroy once," says Norden. "And I was amazed because he knew all about the suppression of the Jesuits at the end of the 18th century. You should never underestimate people."

But Norden's fraternising with Melbourne's underworld has delivered him some awkward moments. Some years ago, Norden was lunching with three nuns in a Carlton restaurant when gangster Alphonse Gangitano walked in and asked to speak to him about a personal matter. "He was asking my advice on how he should deal with a certain person he was concerned about,"

says Norden. Gangitano feared that another gangster was seeking to harm him. "I gave him [Gangitano] some advice, telling him he would be wise to take whatever precautions necessary to protect himself. Alphonse ended up going to Italy for two years."

But eventually Gangitano's enemies caught up with him. Known as the Robert De Niro of Lygon Street for his sharp dressing, Gangitano was gunned down in his underwear in the laundry of his Templestowe home in 1998. His murder rocked Melbourne's underworld to the core and sparked the latest gangland war, in which 30 people have been shot dead in a bitter tit-for-tat battle for control of the city's lucrative amphetamines market.

Another time, Norden found himself being tailed by members of a police task force after he had accompanied two criminals, Trevor Pettingill and Tim Neville, to dinner at a restaurant owned by AFL football personality Robert "Dipper" DiPierdomenico. Pettingill was later charged and acquitted of the cold-blooded ambush and murder of two police officers in Walsh Street, South Yarra. Recalls Norden: "Dipper said to me later, 'As soon as you and your crim mates left, the undercovers came in and wanted to know exactly what you were talking about.'"

DiPierdomenico remembers Norden often dropping in "with some of the well-known people in the Carlton area". "Every time he left, the criminal investigators would come in and ask questions," says Dipper. "I was thinking, 'This is like the real gangster world.'"

Norden also knew the ill-fated Moran clan, who lost their patriarch, Lewis Moran, and his sons Jason and Mark, in a hail of underworld bullets. When Norden's friend, Kinniburgh, was also gunned down outside his home in Kew in December 2003, Norden was moved to speak out more forcefully against the cycle of killings. "Real strength doesn't come from the barrel of a gun, but when men confront their difficulties and differences and get along with living with one another," he told mourners at Kinniburgh's funeral.

During the same eulogy, Norden courted controversy by effectively endorsing his friend's character by saying of the veteran safe-cracker: "I think St Peter would give him a good hearing."

When Norden presided over Condello's funeral in February, he told mourners: "You must not exact vengeance or bear a grudge. Never repay evil with evil. Never try to seek revenge."

Yet he also spoke of knowing another side to Condello and of how he "cherished" sharing a meal with his family in late January, only weeks before Mario was gunned down. In fact, Condello's family left frantic messages on Norden's phone only minutes after he was shot, asking him to drive to Brighton to give their patriarch his last rites.

But the priest was in central Victoria at the time and did not receive the messages until the next morning. "The next day I found about eight messages which came in between 10.30pm and 11.30pm from various people, including the family," says Norden. He raced straight to Melbourne to comfort the Condello family, even taking the family dog away for safekeeping during the media frenzy.

AT THE FUNERAL, NORDEN ENDED THE EULOGY by in effect asking the mourners if they would forgive Condello. "He was discovering a deeper dimension to his life," he said. "He was not too proud to ask for our prayers and he was conscious of the need for change. 'I am doing my best,' he would say. 'What do you think?'"

Norden's willingness to forgive all sins so freely, including those of mobsters, is not universally accepted, including by members of the church. Within the

church there is a variety of views on forgiveness – many believe it must be conditional on repentance, while others believe it should not be given freely to those who have committed dastardly crimes.

Norden disagrees with those who believe that forgiveness is conditional. On the wall of his office next to his parish church of St Ignatius in Richmond is a photo of Pope John Paul II offering his forgiveness to Mehmet Ali Agca, who tried to assassinate the Pontiff in 1981. “It is a key contemporary image,” he says, pointing to the picture. “Offering forgiveness is one of the hardest things. It challenges you; it takes you outside yourself.”

The confessions of mobsters raise more ethical issues for Norden. As a priest he is expected to honour the secrets of those who confide in him. But what if a gangster confesses to a murder or, worse yet, to planning one? Norden is unmoved, maintaining that you can’t reveal their confessions, regardless of how horrific they may be.

“As for breaching confidence, no, you can’t really,” he says. “The best thing you could do is try to deter them from doing something. Or you could say [to someone else] there is a dangerous situation here, but you can’t actually reveal the content of what was said.”

IN MOST CASES, NORDEN TRIES TO AVOID TALKING about “business”. He has said that in 20 years of knowing Condello he never spoke to him about his criminal activities. “Does the parish priest of Toorak talk to his practitioners about the morality of accepting multi-million-dollar salaries as CEOs of multinational companies?” he once asked.

Columnist Andrew Bolt was among those outraged by the defence, arguing in a highly critical column published in February that trafficking in drugs could hardly be compared to running a major company.

Norden rejects critics who say he has not spoken out loudly enough against Melbourne’s gangsters. He says he was uncomfortable when he read about the apparent promise of revenge from crime matriarch Judy Moran when she farewelled her slain son Jason with



“The role of judgment is not ours,” Norden replies to people who expect him to criticise gangsters as they lie in their coffins (above, Mario Condello’s funeral in February this year).

the chilling words: “All will be dealt with, my darling.”

“At the Condello funeral and even stronger at the Kinniburgh funeral, I spoke out against revenge,” he says. “I don’t think I could have been stronger in that.”

Bob Maguire, the veteran parish priest in South Melbourne, was once criticised for allowing his church to host the 2002 funeral of Victor Peirce, a vicious drug dealer and police killer. Not surprisingly, he sympathises with Norden. “People get confused in this country and think that they are somehow taking sides if they show respect for a dead criminal,” says Maguire. He says many priests are reluctant to host gangland funerals because they know it will bring their parish into question. He recalls one irate woman calling after Victor Peirce’s funeral and berating him for giving Catholicism a bad name. Says Maguire: “Catholicism has to be open to all – you can’t be half-open to all.”

Norden’s sympathy for the convicted extends well beyond the gangland wars. Last December, he held a mass for convicted Australian drug trafficker Nguyen Tuong Van at St Ignatius. The mass coincided with the young Australian’s execution by hanging in Singapore.

“We are here with saddened hearts, all sinners, and we don’t judge anyone,” Norden told the 700 people who had filled the church. While the question

of judgment hangs heavily over him, Norden says those people who expect him to criticise gangsters as they lie in their coffins do not understand the role of a priest at funerals.

“I have never done a funeral where I have sat in judgment of the person being buried,” he says. “You can raise questions, say that people have struggled, had dark times in their life, but some people want you to stand there and condemn the lot of them. You never do that at a funeral – the role of judgment is not ours.”

Norden says his critics lack both compassion and Christian values. “It is difficult to deal with the certain self-righteousness of some Christian people who don’t have the capacity to have a forgiving or compassionate response,” he says. “The most frightening part of working within the church is the negativity and harshness of people’s

judgment on others and it often comes from what they believe are Christian foundations.”

Rarely is that more obvious than in Melbourne’s gangland wars. The public has watched the cycle of bloodletting with amazement rather than concern. In the end, the common view is that the war is about gangsters killing gangsters. Compassion for the slain is difficult to find.

Norden has recently been giving spiritual advice to Mick Gatto. Gatto is the Last Don – the sole surviving senior godfather of the Carlton Crew and the man tipped by many as the most likely to die next. “I’ve had discussions with Mick,” he confirms, but he won’t divulge more than that.

Norden says he has no plans to retire to a safe parish with safe friends anytime soon. “People look and say, ‘He’s got a different perspective, he’s been conned by the crims,’” he says. “But when you have been working in this field for 30 years, you don’t easily get conned. If you are, you will only last a year or two – you won’t survive to see the next round.”

Staff writer Cameron Stewart’s previous story, “Fallen hero” (December 17-18, 2005), about the death of champion racehorse Mummify, recently took out the best sports story category in the annual Melbourne Press Club journalism awards.

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