Vocation Story of Gerard Conlan OMI

After finishing Year 12, I studied for four years and completed a Bachelor of Engineering (Mining) degree at the West Australian School of Mines, Kalgoorlie (wasm.curtin.edu.au). I enjoyed university and developed a lot in my physical and emotional maturity (although some might question the joining of "mature" and "WASM student" in those days!). I think all of us from 1980 to 1982 owe a great debt of gratitude to Noel Massey and the board of management of Agricola College, where most of us residing in the beginning.

My family lived on a farm and I had to board at Mazenod College, Lesmurdie, WA, for the last three years of my secondary education (www.mazenod.wa.edu.au). Originally, I grew up on a large wheat/sheep farm at Binya, NSW, near Griffith. I am the second of four children (older brother and two younger sisters), with a large extended family scattered all over Australia. From 1974 until 1976, I boarded at Chevalier College, Bowral, NSW (www.chevalier.nsw.edu.au). In 1976 my family sold the farm and moved to WA to start farming again at Gairdner River (150km east of Albany).

The mining industry is hard work, but it is so rewarding and has so many opportunities to diversify and face new challenges all the time. I worked for a number of companies in WA, NSW, Vic and NT for 15 years (the last two years as a consultant with several, short-term, overseas contracts).

I would like to express a big thank you to *Western Mining Corporation* for my formative years in mining… I guess they got their pound of flesh, but the experience I gained set me up for life, and has always helped me appreciate the opportunities I received in the future. I was sad when the accountants seemed to take over WMC – it has never been the same since.

I had no idea I would be a mining engineer. In Year 12, a *Careers Guidance Counsellor* interviewed each boy. He asked me: "what do you want to do?" I replied: "Buggered if I know." So he said: "what do you like doing?" I replied: "I like drawing/drafting; I like fitter and turner work (and woodwork); I like building a transistor radio; I like farm work – sort of (bloody sheep drive you mad!) – but I get asthma from the grain dust." The counsellor paused for a moment and said: "You should be a Mining Engineer, they do a bit of everything." I knew what mining was (ha,ha), because we always got "mining" cards in the Cornflakes box as kids (Esso, etc.) So, I said: "where do we do that?" "Kalgoorlie," he says. So, with a few more details and a few forms filled in, that's where I went in 1980.

In February, 1980, aged 18, I rocked up to Agricola College with my parents and met Noel Massey, the Administrator (that man should be canonised a Saint!). He gave us a little pep talk and warned against certain "behaviours". To which my mother replied: "There's no need to worry about Gerard, he is very good and never caused any problems at boarding school." Noel, replied: "Oh, Mother… I can assure you it will be different here!" Then we all laughed!

I was not the sharpest tool in the shed – scoring an average of 50 something in Yr 12 exams – but I managed to smarten up and move into the 60's with a lot of hard work, at WASM. One had to be a bit crafty getting through mineralogy, though, and thank God *tippex* doesn't remove all evidence of the rock type on some of the mineralogy slides. We had a lot of survey subjects which made me smart enough to be trained up in surveying proper by the underground chainy (survey assistant) in some of the mines (especially the Granites Gold Mine in the NT). Fluid mechanics was studied in the classroom and practiced at the Vic Tavern. The only subject I had to redo was STATICS, which was probably wise because after the second time I actually understood it! Well done Neils Hanson (our lecturer), for persevering with us. I remember in electrical engineering the lecturer called me an idiot after I tried to answer a question about the rule of current flow and voltage direction, and ended up having the whole class descend into laughter. But I was pleased to be the cause of the same lecturer saying: "I myself and thinking, this Barry Upton fellow is very smart!" Geoff Eyres was also singled out for high praise after solving a problem that the lecturer was struggling with. I also remember being surprised and feeling a bit chuffed to receive a prize in mine design in my 4th year – but there were only three of us to choose from! Getting a night packer job on a Friday night was a double bonus, because it meant you were earning money and not spending money it.

In my first year, the Dean (Prof. Odwyn Jones) was very kind and organised a job for me at Nepean Nickel Mine near Coolgardie where I worked underground as a labourer for three weeks to get a bit of bread for Second Semester. After that we somehow managed to get enough bread for beer, books and clothing (in that order), through the Christmas holiday work in the mines that we did each year.

The strength of WASM has always been that our graduates are practical. This is because we always did weekly study – sometimes daily – at the local hotels where the real miners held seminars on mining problems and how they were resolved. These seminars often went long into the evenings leaving us feeling a bit light headed with all the knowledge gained. We owe Prof. Odwyn Jones (plus his colleagues and the Chamber of Mines people), a huge debt of gratitude for his untiring efforts to keep WASM in Kalgoorlie, where the boys soon left and only the real men (and a few women) stayed. It would be remiss of me not to mention Mr Fred Watson (RIP, 1994), Interim Head of Mining Department (*Interim,* because he didn't have the required letters after his name). This man taught us more about mining than all the other lecturers in the School combined… maybe one day they will dedicate a building or other part of the School to his memory. (*Anne, have they done it already?*)

Over our years of study we were often blessed with occasional guest lecturers from the Mining Industry, like Phil Lockyer, who interrupted their busy schedules to drop and teach us practical aspects to compliment the books and theory. I've never forgotten Phil's practical tips on decline design and the blue plastic flexible stick to help visualise the decline or ramp design.

During Fourth year (1983), I was encouraged to apply for a travelling scholarship to visit the mining operations and equipment manufacturers in Sweden. With a bit of help tidying up my application by the personal assistant to the Dean of the School (Mrs Rosa Lewis – what a great lady she was and is!), I was successful along with a metallurgist student whose name I forget at this moment. It was a fantastic trip and made me appreciate the heat of Australia after landing in *Kiruna* at -40 degrees Celsius and people clapping as our Fokker 50 landed safely!

Fourth year was a great year starting with a mining project in an operating mine. I was fortunate, and grateful, to get teamed up with Martin Reed (Underground Manager) at Mt Charlotte underground mine doing a detailed mine ventilation survey and analysis, using a computer program which had some problems but we received some kind assistance from the author working at UCLA (USA). Unfortunately (or fortunately), my 3 months became 7 months, so I was working full time and studying full time. But the end result was well received even though it nearly killed me!

Brian Eaton, through Martin Reed got me started up at Windarra Nickel Mine to do a ventilation study, before I started my underground practical time in earnest as a machine miner at Lancefield Gold Mine nearby. Then, Alan Coles brought me back to Perseverance Shaft on the Golden Mile, Boulder, and a couple of years later lured me over to Bendigo. After that it was up to the Granites Gold Mine in the NT and Mt McClure Gold Mine back in WA.

The journey to becoming a religious and a priest began in 1986 aged 25 years after a Sunday homily on vocations at Mass in Kalgoorlie. After a few weeks I decided I wasn't good enough to be a priest and kept working. Then in 1991, I took 6 months off work and spent three months working in a mission in Cilacap, Indonesia (Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate or **OMI** for short). This was a time of introspection (that's a fancy word meaning to look inward) and seeking direction in life, and coming to terms with the death of my best friend two years earlier (Gilbert Savy died in an underground accident near Southern Cross. We were best mates since boarding school in Perth).

During my time in Indonesia, I experienced a sense of wonder at the great disparity of material wealth between our two countries, while at the same time the sense of joy, faith and hope shown by the Indonesian people was more than in Australia. I lived with Fr Charlie Burrows OMI who was very inspiring not just for

all the entrepreneurial building/business work, but also for the care and concern he showed for the people in his area. His door was always open, despite his busy schedule. He was captured well in a documentary film called "*A Chancer Priest*" by the British company, Anglia Television Limited (for ITV) in 1990/91 (shown on ABC in the 1990's). I also enjoyed the company of other Oblates throughout Java. They have since made a second documentary about him.

After three months I came home, my boundaries definitely stretched, and thinking of priesthood once again. But again, I felt I was not good enough, or holy enough to be a priest (I swear too much, drank too much and I like girls). So for another three years I worked in the mining industry, getting bugged by this idea of being a priest. I decided life at Mt McClure Gold Mine was just too busy/fast to have time to think properly – I was Mine Superintendent managing the surface and underground operations. So I accepted a job with the young consultancy firm GMS (Global Mining Services), run by Mr Alex Black. Alex is a great bloke and really helped all the professionals at GMS to develop their full potential while having a good time. I thought this would be a more leisurely pace of life but, after 6 months, I was almost as busy as I had been at Mt McClure!

Anyway, after two years flitting around the world and Australia, on someone else's bankcard, I came to St Mary's, the Oblate Seminary in Melbourne, for the 1996 annual *Vocations Weekend*. This was a very positive experience and I went home to make the difficult decision to leave mining and give the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate a go. Once I had made the decision, however, there was a great relief and I looked forward to the following year (1997) to begin another stage of my life's journey.

Four years after joining I completed a pastoral year at Oblate parishes overseas. The first four years were a time of intense growth and struggle to develop a deeper understanding of my vocation, who I am and what I think God wanted me to do. Living in community with a variety of nationalities and ages has certainly caused some changes in my life—for the better, I think! In many ways I think married couples probably go through the same journey of learning to give, more than take, to think of the whole community rather than individual schedules.

The pastoral year was an important time for me to reflect on my initial calling and match the theory with the real world. The first 6 months was in the Philippines (Manila) and the second 6 months was in London. Both experiences were fantastic, although London took the longest to feel at home in, and I didn't want to return to the seminary!

The study at Catholic Theological College, Melbourne, was challenging, but very enlightening and freeing. A better understanding of the scriptures and teachings on morality has helped me to realise that God, as portrayed by the Christian faith, is really a God of love and mercy for all – but sometimes it's not presented well. We live in a secular society that sometimes writes the Church off as being irrelevant. That's a loss to the wider community. Sure, some members of the Church make BIG mistakes and hurt others, but that isn't the whole Church. This is true in all institutions and professions: teachers, family life, etc. We need to protect the Church (and clean it up), because in the future it will assist the community as it did in the past, when it started such things as universal education and health care. Before that, it was only the rich people that had education and health care.

When deciding to join the Oblates I was worried about what my friends and work colleagues would think. But I underestimated them. Many of them were supportive, a few were bemused and only one or two were negative. I make it a priority to keep in touch with my friends and work colleagues a few times each year, and their support and encouragement has assisted me to continue.

My on-going struggle of not feeling good enough to be a priest gives me greater compassion for the people I meet. My most useful assets are not my technical and practical skills, but my experiences in the ordinary struggles of life. My struggles with poverty, chastity, obedience and perseverance are no greater than other peoples' struggles: just different! God wants ordinary people to be priests, and I hope more come along.

After ordination in 2003, I spent almost three years at Tea Tree Gully parish, in Adelaide, as Assistant Parish Priest. The parish has three Primary and one Secondary Catholic school, and was the second largest parish in the Archdiocese of Adelaide, at that time. As my first posting it was a steep learning curve, offset by enthusiasm and forgiving parishioners! There was a big emphasis on youth ministry and schools, and I was asked to be the leader of a *Men's Spirituality* Project (assisted by *MenAlive*: www.menalive.org.au).

In July, 2006, I moved to Iona College, Brisbane, and took up a dual role of Chaplain in the senior school, and in ROSIES Oblate Youth Mission (a street outreach ministry). Iona College (www.iona.qld.edu.au), then, had 1,300 boys in Yr 5 to Yr 12 (but it has grown by about 400 by 2014). ROSIES, then, had more than 10 outreaches including a Youth Detention Centre, Prisons and Court Support, stretching from the Gold Coast up to the Sunshine Coast, with Cairns as an extra. From 400 volunteers, then, it now has 900 (2014) www.rosies.org.au. ROSIES is not about food or accommodation, but being "friends" on the street, so that people feel that someone cares.

At the end of 2008, I received a new *Obedience* as Chaplain to the University of Notre Dame, Australia (UNDA), Fremantle Campus. The Chaplaincy appointment was a gift in many ways as it took me "home" to West Australia. It was a blessed time as I renewed old friendships and made new ones. I also spent more time with my family, especially the younger nephews and niece. The ministry at UNDA was varied and rewarding. There was pastoral support, teaching theology, liturgies, funerals, visiting the sick, and providing input to raise religious awareness through art and activities. Living with the Oblate community at the Basilica of St Patrick, Fremantle, also kept me in touch with parish life. A lot of new friends were made and I was sad to leave as I prepared for my new mission in Kenya. During my time at UNDA, I also studied the required curriculum to obtain a Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary).

I commenced 2010 at Mazenod College, WA (my *alma mater*), to complete the teaching practicum. This was a "busy" and tiring time, but at the same time very rewarding. Teaching is a great blessing for priests who have no children of their own. Then it was time to pack up and say goodbye to Australia as I headed to the OMI Kenya mission on 26th April, 2010.

A language school in Tanzania on the shores of Lake Victoria awaited me in August, 2010 (for 4 months), and an intensive 3 week course in understanding African Culture during June, 2010. I was then appointed to Kionyo Parish as *Assistant Parish Priest* (near Meru, on the equator, in the foothills of Mt Kenya, at 2,000m ASL). In August, 2013, I was appointed *Parish Priest* and in June 2014, I was given the additional responsibility of OMI Kenya *Mission Treasurer*.

Kionyo Parish is a busy place with 10 Mass Centres (separate communities), 14 Government Schools and one Catholic Primary School just starting off. We have been appointed sponsors of all the Government Schools in our Parish (all schools are given a religious sponsor by the Government) to help reduce corruption, improve facilities and maintain a good moral and spiritual environment. This includes stepping in when issues of abuse arise, as there is a tendency for these issues to be covered up.

I am now working with our local Senator and MP to see how we can promote some mining investment and development in our area, to assist the local economy and create more employment opportunities. So my WASM connections are assisting in looking at education possibilities as well as my involvement in guest lecturing at the School of Mines in Kenya in the near future.

Thanks WASM for the great kick-start to my life. Let the journey continue!
Gerard (Gerry) Conlan OMI,
(WASM 1980-1983)
September, 2014.
(I'm not all that comfortable putting letters after my name, but if you need to, here they are:

B. Eng (Mining), Dip. Mining (WASM),
Grad. Dip Edu (Sec), B. Theol., Masters of Theological Studies,
Member WASMGA, Former Member AusIMM, Former Member SME of AIME.
Not sure if there are letters for First Class Mine Manager's Certificates.

In summary my work history is this:

Mine Site	Period Worked	Nature Of Work
Global Mining Services Consultancy	Dec, 1997 to Jan, 1998	**Associate Mining Engineer** Conducted underground mine scheduling design and training.
Global Mining Services Consultancy	Oct, 1994 to Jan, 1997	**Manager - Mining Engineering: Oct'95 – Jan'97.** **Senior Consultant - Mining Engineering: Oct'94 - Sep'95** Conducted open pit and underground mine design, trouble shooting, feasibility studies, relief management, ventilation modelling, mine budgeting, supervision of other consultants (≈25% overseas work)
Mt McClure Gold Mine Arimco Mining Pty Ltd 70km N.E. of Lienster W.A.	Oct, 1991 to Oct 1994	**Mine Superintendent:** Responsible for establishing a new mine site, including selection of staff, operating procedures. Supervision of O/Cut Contractors. Operation involved Oxide and Hard Rock pits with narrow vein ore. Carryout in house feasibility study for U/G extension of pit. Call for tenders (prepared tender document in-house), awarding contract. February 1994, assumed the position of Registered U/G Manager in addition to other duties: 16 direct staff + 80 indirect (contractors). ≈ expenditure = $2.5 million/month by 1994. ≈ strip ratio of Pits - 12:1 □ 17:1 U/G narrow veined, D/C operation, 15m sub-level intervals.
The Granites Gold Mine North Flinders Mines Tanami Desert Northern Territory	Oct, 1988 to April, 1991	**Deputy Mine Manager:** Statutory (legal) responsibilities of Deputy Mine Manager acting as Mine Manager in his absence (50% of my time on site due to Fly-in-out roster). Control and planning of underground mining. Open-cut supervision covering rostered breaks. Control of computer installations, computerized ventilation design. Mines rescue establishment, equipment purchase and training. Safety induction and preparation of mine safety manual. Underground contractor supervision and preparation of period contract figures.
Central Deborah Gold Mine Bendigo Mining NL Bendigo, VIC.	May, 1987 to Sept., 1988	**Mine Superintendent:** responsible for the supervision and organization of shaft dewatering and refurbishment program; U/G level rehabilitation. Hire/dismiss work crew; preparation of progress reports and the compilation of a feasibility study for the proposed, larger decline operation; and office computerization/software selection. (NB: left due to scaling down of operations)
Western Mining Corporation **Perseverance Shaft** Kalgoorlie Mining Associates Kalgoorlie, W.A.	Dec, 1985 to April, 1987	**Shaft Engineer:** responsible for general supervision, long hole stoping (narrow veined) design, drill and blasting operations; preparation of mining instructions for development and small scale stope development. Relief foreman; various other miscellaneous functions. In the last few months at K.M.A. promoted to **Planned Engineer:** Fimiston open pit and underground operations (2 open cuts & 3 shafts)
WMC **Mt. Windarra Nickel Mine & Lancefield Gold Mine** Laverton, W.A.	Feb, 1984 to May, 1984 + July, 1984 to Dec, 1985	**Hand Held Machine Miner:** (13 months) - level & plat development, slot stoping; operation of Eimco 12B & 25B rocker shovels; air scapper operation; gig rising hoist operator; leading hand in sub-level cave charge-up using Cat. 966D boggers (diesel). Detailed ventilation study including computerisation.
Western Mining Corporation **Mt Charlotte Gold Mine** Kalgoorlie, W.A.	Dec, 82 - July, 83 + Dec, 1983 & June, 1984	**General Labourer:** Crusher operator; braceman; shaft repairs; charge-up crew member for development and long hole stoping; secondary blasting; assisting jumbo operator; detailed ventilation study including computerisation.
WMC **Jan Shaft** Kambalda Nickel Op's	Dec, 1981 to Jan, 1982	Assisting miner, sand fill stoping and general underground labouring.
Ardlethan Tin Mine Ardlethan, N.S.W.	Dec, 1980 Jan, 1981	Vertical crater retreat charge up, general open cut and underground labouring.

Nepean Nickel Mine Coolgardie, W.A.	July, 1980	General underground labouring & breaking rocks by hand with sledge-hammer.
1961 to 1979	Prior to commencing in the mining industry I was brought up on a farm, participating in all activities of a grain and livestock operation. This continued to age 20.	