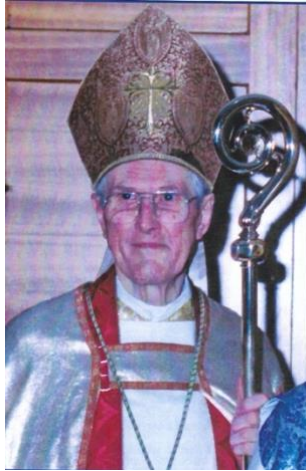


Interview with The Rt Rev Christopher Bannister



Bp Christopher Bannister (photo from *Communion* magazine, The Liberal Catholic Church in Australia, Annunciation 2009.)

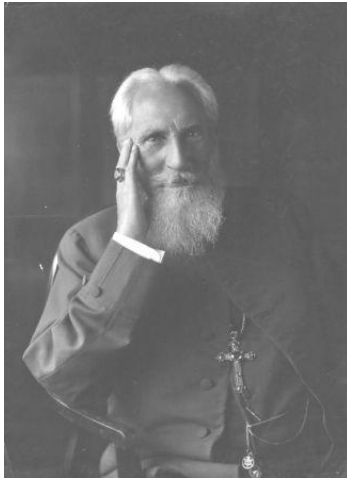
(Francis Christopher Bannister, born on 17 July 1910, was Regionary Bishop of the Australian Province of The Liberal Catholic Church from 1975 to 1983, having been consecrated to the Episcopate on 16 July 1972 by Bishop Sten von Krusenstierna. He passed away on 23 December 2008. This interview was conducted by Pedro Oliveira in October 2008 at Bishop Christopher's home in Berwick, Melbourne, with Mr Brian Parry in attendance.)

PO: We have the privilege of being at the home of Bishop Christopher Bannister and we are going to have a conversation with him about his reminiscences of Bishop Charles Webster Leadbeater, his influence on the work of the Liberal Catholic Church and whatever other comments Bishop Christopher would like to offer.

Thank you very much, Bishop Christopher.

PO: What are your memories of Bishop Leadbeater and of your interaction with him?

CB: The first time I came into close contact with him was a little before my twelfth birthday, at Easter in 1922. I started going to St Alban's Church, because it was the first time I had become old enough for the service to have some meaning for me. After about the fourth or the fifth visit, I noticed at the end of the service Dr J. J. van der Leeuw, who was one of the priests, leaving the sanctuary before the last procession. He came around the walls of the church, and I wondered why he did that, but I found that he had done so to waylay me on the way out. He then took me in to introduce me to Bishop Leadbeater, who suggested that I should come and serve in the sanctuary the next Sunday. That is how my relationship with both the church and with him commenced. Shortly after that, Dr van der Leeuw invited me to The Manor [in



Bishop Leadbeater

Mosman] after the church service, and this became a regular event every Sunday. I went with the others to The Manor for lunch, and then back to the evening service and then home from there. I owe a great debt to Bishop Leadbeater in one sense, because by that age I was very close to becoming an atheist. I felt that all religion hinged on the Bible, and there were so many things I had found in the Bible that I could simply not accept. Without saying so in so many words and without my telling him of my feelings, he somehow gave me an outlook which helped me to unfold a spiritual perspective, if we can use that word, which not depend on the Bible.

PO: What kind of person was he in your perception?

CB: He was, as you say, a very Victorian gentleman. He spoke very precisely indeed, and he was meticulous about accuracy. He didn't like slang or abbreviations or anything like that. As an illustration of this, my name being Christopher I was at that stage called Chris, and he said 'Oh, that must be Christopher' and he always called me Christopher. On another occasion he was having a conversation with somebody who missed something he said, and responded, 'I beg your pardon'. He said, 'Oh, you probably mean what did I say.'

PO: So he was very precise, even in language.

CB: Very precise in his language. What was much more important to him than the flow of the language was the precise accuracy of what he was saying. I went to church with my parents on that Easter in 1922 because Dr Besant had come over to Sydney for TS work. She had started a series of sermons during the Eucharist of the Liberal Catholic Church and she of course was a real orator in that the words absolutely flowed. I have read somewhere that in her imagination, as she talked, there were several alternate sentences coming before her mind for the next thing that she was going to say. Bishop Leadbeater, on the other hand, was much more interested, I might say passionately interested, in the precision of what he was saying rather than the way in which it actually sounded.

PO: How was he as a ceremonialist, as a celebrant?

CB: Very good, very good indeed. At that time he and Bishop Mazel took it in turns to celebrate every Sunday. All the celebrations then were very good, because Bishop Leadbeater insisted on that. The priests used to friendly criticise one another after the service each morning if somebody had done something which the others didn't think was quite right. This was discussed and sorted out, and the standard of the ceremonial was very good indeed. However, the very best ceremonialist in the whole of my experience in the Liberal Catholic Church, the best

of them all, was Bishop Wedgwood, who incidentally later on was the one before whom I celebrated my first Eucharist. So I have moulded my celebration on the way he did it, which basically was a harmonious blending of the actions, the words and the music.

PO: So you did have some interaction with Bishop Wedgwood as well?

CB: Yes, when I went to England in 1936. I stayed in London for a couple of years and I used to go out to Tekels Park quite frequently for a weekend, as a number of us did, and Bishop Wedgwood lived there. After dinner at night everyone would sit around and we would discuss all sorts of things. Bishop Wedgwood had a very keen sense of humour.

PO: Coming back to Sydney and to the Pro-Cathedral of St Alban's, what was the average congregation in those days, when Bishop Leadbeater was there?

CB: There would be a hundred communicants and there were some others probably who didn't take communion. On festival days it was quite a bit greater, and there was of course a very large proportion of young people too, including teenagers and younger. A server who carried the incense, would have been about eight years old.

PO: Some of the most influential books by Bishop Leadbeater were written when he was at The Manor.

CB; Yes, I think I remember 'The Masters and the Path' was just going to publication then.

PO: Were you living at The Manor at that time?

CB: No, I just went there on Sundays. Sometimes during the school holidays I would go there for perhaps a week, and stay there with Dr van der Leeuw.

PO: What are your recollections of the problems that started in 1922, with the opposition within Sydney Lodge to both Bishop Leadbeater and the Church? How do you see them in hindsight?

CB: I think there were mistakes on both sides. On that Easter in 1922 I attended one of the sessions of the TS. They attracted a lot of interest. Dr Besant came over especially to chair the Convention at that time. Those who were against the church were complaining bitterly that men who had previously been plain theosophists and lectured for the TS as "mister" so and so, now insisted that they be billed as Reverend so and so. There were strong objections to this, particularly as Madame Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* had, shall we say, been very critical of the Christian Church. I felt myself, even at that age, that this was a bit stupid. What does

it matter what they were called, as long as what they said was right. The feelings did run very high, and as you know the Society at that time split in two. Oh yes, there would have been this division to some extent anyway, but I feel looking back that with a bit of tolerance both sides could have lived together quite well.

PO: What was the impact of Krishnamurti on the Liberal Catholic Church at that time?

CB: When I came into the church, it was before the Krishnamurti split. But the church membership was somewhere about ninety-five percent theosophical, and the sermons in the church were theosophical to a considerable degree. The idea of Krishnamurti as the World Teacher was taught in both places. Dr Besant had said, writing I think in *The Theosophist*, that the Church, the Co-masonic Order and the Theosophical Society were the three prongs of the Masters' work in the world, and most Theosophists belonged to all three. So that the link between them was far closer than it is today. The result was that when Krishnamurti renounced his role as World Teacher, the congregations in the church went down tremendously. I guess, from memory, somewhere about fifty percent.

PO: It was a huge drop.

CB: A huge drop, yes. included some of the clergy. It had its effect also on the Theosophical Society, I will guess by roughly about the same percentage.

PO: Worldwide, the statistics for the period show, in less than three years after 1929, the Theosophical Society lost 10,000 members. So it was an outstanding phenomenon.

CB: It was all based on the clairvoyance of Bishop Leadbeater and Annie Besant. They told everybody that this was going to happen, and there is no doubt about it that a great number of people at that time were very ego inflated, if I can use that term.

PO: That is a very good expression.

CB: It felt high, you know. We, in distinction from the other ordinary human beings, know that the Lord is coming, and we are wise enough to accept him.

PO: And he is coming to *us*.

CB: He is coming to *us*. Some of us, perhaps superhuman beings, could be one of his disciples. This was the general feeling, I am sure of it, for a great number of them. It didn't affect me personally one iota, because I am a born doubting Thomas, if I can use that expression. I remember, clearly, that they built the Star Amphitheatre at Balmoral, in

Sydney, and I was there for the laying of the foundation stone, which Bishop Leadbeater did. Afterwards Krishnamurti, when he was in Sydney, gave a series of afternoon talks there. I went to one of them, and I remember distinctly thinking at the end of the talk, 'I wonder if you are the World Teacher', because what he said didn't appeal to me on that level at all. With a lot of things, you know, I was the same, I still am. But a lot of people had pinned all their hopes on this clairvoyant revelation and when it was proven to be wrong, they said, 'Well, probably everything else that was said is wrong too', and off they went.

PO: How did Bishop Leadbeater take the fact that Krishnamurti walked out, and refused to be considered the World Teacher?

CB: I have no recollection of anything he said in that regard. Those who stayed made all sorts of excuses, mainly that Krishnamurti was a naughty boy and had refused to fulfil the role that the Masters had planned for him. I think you know broadly speaking, without putting it in those words, that that was the general sort of feeling.

PO: In Australian language, they would say that he was a larrikin World Teacher...

CB: Something like that perhaps. But, a lot of them, nevertheless, including myself, read what he wrote, a great deal of which had considerable merit.

PO: I understand that after Krishnamurti dissolved the 'Order of the Star', Dr van der Leeuw became more critical regarding Theosophy and the Theosophical Society. Do you remember that?

CB: That could be so. He left Australia about that time and went to South Africa. He was always very interested in education. I saw him first at Morven Garden School, a Theosophical School which my brother and I attended at that time. He went to South Africa, I don't know why, and got involved in some education movement there. He was killed soon after, flying an aeroplane. From what I understand, he was critical of both Theosophy and the Liberal Catholic Church. Many people were.

PO: What is your opinion about Bishop Leadbeater's clairvoyance regarding church matters?

CB: We must answer that by taking his clairvoyance as a whole. I have come very definitely to believe that clairvoyants very often see what they expect to see; what subconsciously they think they ought to. There is no doubt that a great deal of what Bishop Leadbeater wrote is based on the opinions of somewhat unconventional scientists and others from the second half of the

nineteenth century. If you read for instance *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, which was jointly written by Annie Besant and Bishop Leadbeater, there are quite a number of things in that book which in the light of what we know now are absolutely ridiculous. For instance, the idea of people living on other planets in our solar system. When you consider what those planets are like it is quite impossible that it could ever have happened. Atlantis is another thing. Two tectonic plates move which gives a ridge between them. The method of taking soundings in those days was far slower and less accurate than now. Then they took some soundings which showed that part of the Atlantic wasn't as deep and somebody used their imagination and said, 'oh, probably a sunken continent', but if you look at the soundings of the Atlantic there is only a ridge where these two tectonic plates meet. There was a good article in *Theosophy in Australia* about it.

PO: By Dr Victor Gostin, from Adelaide.

CB: So to me this throws doubt on a lot of what clairvoyants say, including Bishop Leadbeater. It is probably almost impossible to tell that which is valid and that which isn't. I feel sure in my own mind, from my contact with him, that he was sincere in his belief that what he saw was true. But if you think of it the ordinary physical eye has gone through millions of years of evolution. I was reading about it the other day. A shark has been around for 400,000,000 years. Even so you can't rely on what people see with the ordinary eyes. Clairvoyance has only been developed very, very recently, and by very, very few people. On the other hand, there are evidences, where it is perfectly valid. One of them I read in a book I am very fond of, called *The Holographic Universe*, by Michael Talbot. A Dutch psychic is asked who will seat in a certain seat, in an American theatre over two weeks. Seats could not be forward booked ahead, yet he described the person accurately, even to clothing and a scar on the left toe, yet the person hadn't reached the stage of deciding to go to the theatre at all! And there are many other similar cases. Now for Bishop Leadbeater's clairvoyance with regard to the Eucharist I have to say that we just don't really know how valid it is. I think probably the celebrant and the people concerned need to have a bonding to begin with. I remember when I first celebrated at Tekels Park, and for some reason or other, I don't know, perhaps being an architect, instead of making that cupola at the Gloria, which I don't like very much.

PO: The Eucharistic edifice.

CB: Yes, I made a sort of spire, going up. Bishop Wedgwood commented on that afterwards, which suggests to me that the celebrant can have quite an effect on the edifice.

Brian Parry: It also suggests that Wedgwood was able to see something.

CB: He undoubtedly could. He was quite clairvoyant, no doubt about that. I remember on another occasion, Bishop Sykes (he was a priest at that stage) and I were present at one of these after dinner conversations at Tekels Park.

PO: Hugh Sykes, who later became Presiding Bishop of the LCC.

CB: That is right. We were there. We and Bishop Wedgwood were the only males, and on that occasion one of the ladies asked him about the idea a woman can't be a priest. He said: 'I couldn't tell you that; I haven't got that kind of clairvoyance', and everybody sort of sat back for a bit. He dropped his head a bit and then said: 'Oh yes I have.'

PO: Who said this?

CB: Bishop Wedgwood. But he didn't say any more. We were thinking, for instance, about the consecration of the bread and the wine. I have got a feeling, and I may be quite wrong, that if the person who takes it is sincere and believes they are taking it, then for them it is consecrated. Perhaps for a person who is not, maybe it is not consecrated for them, who know? There are a lot of these situations, and if you are really honest a great deal of this you just don't know. You can only form opinions, you can only judge by other things, and to me that is all that really matters. It is part of our experience in this particular life. For instance, my own opinions vary from the theosophical ones, but perhaps we won't go into that.

PO: We can, but I don't want to take too much of your time.

PO: What do you make of the accusations against the character of Bishop Leadbeater?

CB: When Gregory Tillett wrote this book [*The Elder Brother*, published in 1982], I went along to the public library in Sydney, and got from the archives there a great thick file of documents. There were two of them, and I read through all of those. What happened was this. In America, I forget the dates, but before he came to Sydney, there was a boy, it seems from these documents, who was very certain that Bishop Leadbeater had either condoned or recommended masturbation in the case of unmarried young boys. One of the boys a little later developed epilepsy, and the father was very annoyed at this. He blamed Bishop Leadbeater, and he, if I remember correctly, went to, what's that lady in America who started the alternative TS?

PO: Katherine Tingley, from the Point Loma Theosophical Society.

CB: I think that is the one. Anyway, she wanted to discredit the other Theosophical Society as far as possible. She took this up, and when Bishop Leadbeater came to

Sydney, she wrote, I think, to a Minister at the time, saying that he was a highly immoral man etc. The Minister appointed a committee or police to investigate this. They questioned a large number of theosophists who were closest to him. Some of whom were quite idiotic. I remember, I think, it was Mrs Kollerstrom, she said in the investigation, I forget the exact words, that Bishop Leadbeater was so high up in spiritual evolution that whatever he said was all right! That is not a thing to tell the police. Anyhow, after several months in the investigation, they finally wrote their report to the Minister, that they could find no evidence to prosecute him, but also no evidence of immorality or anything to that effect. The Minister wrote back and said, 'you better have another look at it'. Maybe he was a Roman Catholic, I don't know. But you know how the Public Service works. What he is really doing is telling them to change their mind and give a report to the contrary.

PO: So there was another investigation.

CB: Yes, but I don't know whether they investigated much, but they did another report. They went through the motions of another investigation and then they reported that, I forget the exact wording, but something to the effect that there was something in the accusations but there was no evidence whatsoever that they could use to prosecute him.

PO: What was the talk among the boys at The Manor? Was there an indication of any wrongdoing?

CB: Nothing whatever. I am quite sure there wasn't anything of that sort at that time. It came out, I think it was in the papers I had, that I got from the Public Library, where it is said he had promised Dr Besant that he wouldn't teach it anymore.

PO: He wouldn't give the same advice again.

CB: No, no.

PO: What do you think about one of the accusations that Bishop Leadbeater used to bathe with the boys at The Manor?

CB: No, nonsense. He could not have done it.

PO: The reason I have asked you is because this is brought up again and again. In a recent biography that Brian (Parry) will review for *TinA*, the accusation that he was bathing with young boys at The Manor was brought up.

Brian Parry: We had explained it was dealt with in the sense that it had happened, but what was happening was not paedophilia. What I liked about it is that it was dealt with, but it was put into a different context. The most that you could say about the old man was that he was naive.

PO: But not a predator.

BP: Not a predator.

CB: The system at The Manor that they had was a common shower area with about five or six showers.

PO: In 1994, in one of my lecture tours in New Zealand, I spoke to Mat van Thiel. He lived at The Manor for three years and was Bishop Leadbeater's driver. He said that his door, the door to his room, was always open.

CB: When I first went to stay there, he told me that I could come in at any time I wanted to. He had a large library of books there. The first time I took this up, I knocked at the door. He told me: 'don't bother knocking, just walk in'. Bishop Leadbeater had a bathroom. On one occasion, a bath there. It is possible, I could imagine, that maybe due to shortage of time or something, perhaps he and one of the boys might have followed one another in the bathroom. That is maybe how the rumour started, I don't know. I am quite sure, and you know amongst the other boys there was never any talk about that sort of thing whatever.

PO: And you were a regular visitor to The Manor at that time.

CB: Every week I went there between services, and also on several occasions I stayed perhaps a week there during school holidays.

PO: This question concerns the Liberal Catholic Church. Bishop Leadbeater and his works did have an enormous influence on the church in the past. That influence seems to have waned now, as we know. Do you think that some of his legacy is still valid?

CB: I think some of it certainly is, yes. As I said, if you are really absolutely honest, you could not pick the valid ones and discard the invalid ones. In regard of what he wrote about the church, I don't know there is any way of proving or disproving what he said. I am inclined to think that most of it is pretty valid.

PO: If I can take one point as an example, he was convinced on the basis of his own investigations and, as you say, we cannot say if they are right or wrong. Some of them were proved wrong by science, like life on Mars, and humanity on Mars, but even in *Man: How and Whence and Whither* he says that in the future people would read their newspaper in a small box at home, which was connected to a central box in the city. This is what we know today as the Internet. He also said that Europe would be federated with a common Parliament, to which countries would send a representative. He probably was describing the European Union in his own language. He also wrote that he was convinced that the Holy Eucharist was part of a greater plan to pour spiritual help on the world. What do you think about that?

CB: It depends on your definition of the greater plan, I guess. I think it certainly does pour — if you can use that term — spiritual strength upon the world. I think whenever a number of people, at any time, meet together for spiritual reasons, in a way they are pouring spiritual strength upon the world. On the other hand, you can create elementals. The Roman Catholic Church worships the Lady Mary, for instance. I think an elemental is created from all these prayers and so on, but the way it outpours depends to a large extent on what is put into it. When she has supposedly spoken to people, what she says is pretty mundane, isn't it?

PO: Some of her so called manifestations, yes. There is a difference between spirituality and psychism, and people mistake one for the other. Brian has another question.

Brian Parry: Thinking back to Bishop Leadbeater and his views about the future, we know what you think about that. Have you been surprised at the lack of growth or even the decline of the Church and of Co-Masonry?

CB: Not really. The Liberal Catholic Church is part of the Christian Church generally. The whole service is based on the Bible. Most of the liturgy consists of various extracts from the Bible put together in the way most liturgies are, and I think that has lost its credibility to a large extent with most of the thinking people. Some of them still might go to church, perhaps partly by habit, perhaps because they feel that in spite of that there is something behind it. I think that there have to be tremendous changes if we want to appeal to the younger sector of the population. As far as I can see, judging by Australia, pretty well our whole congregations are composed of very old people who have been in the church for years and years and years and are gradually dying off. I think neither the present form of the Eucharist or the teaching of the Church has any appeal to even a small sector of the younger generation. I mentioned before that the congregations at St Alban's in Sydney, in 1922, was a hundred or a hundred plus. The population of Australia was the around six million. The population now is very close to twenty million and our attendance is an insignificant percentage of that. In Melbourne, there is a congregation of five, perhaps ten, occasionally.

BP: You wonder, I am really coming back to Leadbeater all the time, whether it was really worth the effort?

CB: I think it is always worth the effort, even for those few people. I feel that our real existence lies in another superphysical world, you can call it the world of the Ego if you like, or whatever. I think that is where we have our real existence. Now for some reason, it is either imperative or highly desirable that we get experience of the physical world and so we come into incarnation. I doubt whether the whole person comes into incarnation. I think the real kernel of what we are exists in that other capacity and is conscious of what is happening there. I think also that it is necessary for them to get all the different types of human experience and they are sometimes led to have an incarnation that is very undesirable and very unpleasant all around. I am getting very much to doubt the idea of karma. We tend to make an image of

spiritual things on the basis of human experience and in human experience there is always punishment and reward. So the conventional Christian says, 'you know God is going to send you to heaven or hell', but we say, 'well no, but the Lords of Karma are going to sit there and say: by golly you are a bad boy', or 'you are going to have a nice time', that kind of thing. But I think it is necessary to get all these different experiences, and I don't think the bad ones necessarily come first.

PO: This must be the final question. What would be your advice for a bishop-elect in the Liberal Catholic Church.

CB: I have got to say, I just don't know. I have thought about this, I suppose, for the past twenty or thirty years. I have attended three General Episcopal Synods. I have got to say that I think most of our bishops are focused on the past. Anything that is not what Bishop Leadbeater said, 'oh, we can't possibly do it' But what the changes are, this, I just can't tell you, other than start a completely new religion. I think the Baha'is have got a lot to recommend them. They have a different door for each religion all over the world. Anyway, we are going through a phase I think, a religious phase as far as Christianity is concerned. But getting back to your question of whether it is worth it. I think it was; that is part of the experience. I think that book I read about a year ago says that we have planned our incarnation, and certain experiences in it, which would include in my case, for instance, being a boy amongst the other boys in the sanctuary, and there were, oh must have been twenty or thirty acolytes in services at each stage and they went right around the bottom steps of the sanctuary. There was a huge sanctuary, and there were about six or eight priests, two bishops, a deacon or two at times. That was quite an experience. I remember one Easter. As Bishop Leadbeater came out of the side door the procession went down the aisle of the church across the back, up the other aisle and through the sanctuary gates. On this occasion, they were going into the sanctuary just as Bishop Leadbeater came out of the side door and the procession filled the whole of the centre part of the church.

PO: I would like to thank you very much for this opportunity. It is a very special opportunity to be here with you. With your longevity you are also a bridge, because you have taken me back to a time in which I was not present, physically. I don't know where I was really!

CB: I hope I have not been too iconoclastic.

PO: No, no. I do invite iconoclasm; it is really important and if the Liberal Catholic Church cannot reinvent itself, it has no future, because as you said, we have lost a lot of people and a lot of strength, and we run the risk of becoming redundant as

an organisation. I personally think it is possible to avoid that risk, but that is a big challenge.

CB: This is a challenge. Mind you, we share this with the rest of Christianity, but being so small to start with, we have gone further along the way, but as far as I can gather even the Roman Catholics have not as many, particularly bearing in mind that the population is about three times as great or more than it was.

PO: Thank you very much, Bishop Christopher.



Bishop Christopher and his wife, Miriam (courtesy Mrs MaryAnne Haines).

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30-10-08

Dear Pedro,

Enclosed is the draft
of my interview re. Bishop Leadbeater,
with some minor corrections.

I do apologise for the
very long delay in returning this
to you, but my health has
not been very good of late. I
hope this will be satisfactory
for you etc.

With my very best wishes,

+ Christopher