

I come here and speak to you today
As a person -
who has turned to the sanctuary of the Varroville Carmelite Retreat Centre
on many occasions over the years.
I have stayed there to gain some peace and tranquillity,
as my life has been a troubled one –
I suffer from chronic mental illness;
My life has been badly affected since childhood
By being in a dysfunctional family,
Affected by domestic violence and
with a family member, who, as a child, was sexually abused by a Catholic Priest.
I can tick a number of the boxes
of troubles that plague many people in our Australian community.
I speak on behalf of the traumatized people,
who attend the Varroville Carmelite Retreat Centre,
and those who may benefit from it in the future
if it is able to continue its offering of a special, beautiful, spiritual sanctuary.

Over the years I have mostly driven to the Retreat Centre
Travelling down the busy M5,
Then moving on through industrial areas and suburbia
Until I finally reach that last patch of road on St Andrew's Road,
Which is different -
Where the road is narrower and quiet, and lined by gum trees.
I know I have nearly reached my destination,
An oasis in my life, the Varroville Carmelite Retreat Centre.
As I turn into the Retreat Centre's driveway,
I enter a different world – one offering me time in a calm, quiet, reassuring space.

When I heard about the proposal to put a cemetery
across the road from the Varroville Carmelite Retreat Centre
I was horrified.
It meant something specific -
That with a cemetery in place on St Andrew's Road
Things would be very different as I drove that last patch of St Andrew's Road
The feeling of moving increasingly towards a very positive place
Would be removed.
I would, in fact, be confronted by the dilemma -
A particular image persisted in my mind:
I would be confronted by a choice:

Do I turn right into the cemetery – in the direction of death
- succumbing to the temptation to end my life, to end the suffering;

Or do I turn left, to resist that temptation – to struggle on.

Suicide is not just about the act of death
Just as cancer is not confined to an event of someone dying from cancer.
Suicide encompasses, the minutes, hours, days or even years
When someone lives
with overwhelming mental illness **and/or**
overwhelmed by troubles life has thrown at them
they are in pain, struggling to survive,
it takes effort to resist the urge to give in to death.
That inner conflict: to go on struggling to live, or die
Is, in itself, a terrible mental torment.
At times when these people may feel vulnerable,
it is important that they are safe and feel valued
without having '*Notifications*' that death is there, as an option.

I invariably, feel vulnerable as I drive down St Andrew's Road
towards the Retreat Centre,
and if there was a cemetery right there,
It would make me feel worse; depression would deepen.
I would also feel angry that in our community -
there could be such insensitivity, such ignorance and lack of understanding -
to the preciousness of life as fostered in a Retreat Centre,
and this being violated by a cemetery being plonked right on top of it.

Today I will **firstly** describe something of my experiences at the Retreat Centre;
And why it is so important that it should be able to continue to exist –
Unimpeded by a cemetery on its doorstep;
And **secondly**, on the likely impact, if the proposed cemetery proceeds.

Initially, I want to say that I recognize you, the IPCN Panel,
are challenged in this case,
With a particularly difficult task.
This is **an exceptional Proposal** for a change in the use of particular land.
Not a change of certain scenic, quiet, rural land
Into a high-rise development or a motorway, for example.
This is a Proposal to develop a *cemetery*
At a certain location,
Which necessitates serious consideration of the biggest issue in life,
that of DEATH -
and whether it is, or is not, appropriate
to place a **burial site** at this particular location
– alongside a very special facility, **a Retreat Centre?**

What's so special about a Retreat Centre?

It is a place where lots of different people go, alone, or in various groups –
To escape the rat race of everyday life.
To pray, to play, and reflect on life,

In a tranquil, beautiful, spacious, non-threatening, spiritual setting.

In my particular case,
I have gone to the Retreat Centre -
often,
as a very troubled person,

It is a place where I can live quietly and ponder and pray for a while.
I know that, when I go there as a single, private retreatant,
My time is my own -
I go for **walks each day** –
Sometimes up the hills – to the second bench seat,
from which I can see all the way through to the buildings of the CBD.
I love being there to watch the **sun set** in the bush.

When I go on those long walks, I am not alone
I feel close to God
And that brings me peace and relief.

I also appreciate **the cows** whom I talk to:
“Hello, Mrs Cow” I say, *“How’s things going today?”*
And I loved it when one of them came over to me and sniffed me.

I also often **walk along St Andrew’s Road** –
- either, for one of my daily walks,
or as I walk up the road to the Nun’s Monastery for Mass there.

I love that road, with the gum trees,
walking past the cows mooing loudly,
and then up the road, with the bend ahead,
- unable to see into the distance,
just like my life, not knowing what is ahead;
then, trudging up the steep hill
- like going through the very tough times of life;
and I keep going.

At the Retreat Centre,
Everyone respects my private space and silence.
But at times, I seek out a talk with one of the Priests
I can speak of whatever bothers me.
I am not made to feel irrelevant, stigmatized, misunderstood, or inadequate
I feel heard and understood.
I experience compassion which is healing for me.

And I appreciate an occasional hug from one of the kitchen staff.

I know that there is absolutely no pressure on me to attend Chapel
Or do anything in particular.
But I find attending the **Divine Office prayer**, up to four times a day -
Invaluable, in giving me a routine; and
Being present with others – while alone –
Rhythmically praying the Psalms.

At the Retreat Centre it really comes home to me
That a loving God is always with me
And that God knows and understands me and my troubles
better than anyone else.
I can contemplate on anything,
including feelings that it would be a relief for me to die and go to a merciful God.
As people so often say with Cancer sufferers -
"It was a relief for her to go; she had suffered enough." Or
Thinking of those people who jumped from the World Trade Centre
when it was on fire,
No one criticized them for being selfish -
– they faced the frightful impact of the planes exploding.

In my life I have faced the impact of relationships exploding
and the blackness of depression
Can't I end what has been so much suffering?

Repeatedly I have faced that question safely -
And in the **protective environment of the Retreat Centre**
and with spiritual guidance from one of the Priests,
I have then mustered the strength to go on.

I know the importance of medical treatment for **mental illness** and disorders
- one in five in the population affected.
I have undergone psychiatric treatment for many years,
including medication, ECT, cognitive behaviour therapy and psychotherapy;
I know – and the Retreat Centre Manager knows -
– that for me – or anyone else in my position –
The solitude of the Retreat Centre is no place to be, if feeling **too close to the edge.**
But when a stay there is feasible,
It helps significantly to **push me back from the edge.**
I am NOT saying:
that time at the Retreat Centre is a substitute for proper psychiatric care,
but I AM saying,
that proper **psychiatric care is no substitute** for time spent,
in the emotionally safe, soothing environment of the Retreat Centre.

I have lived through the diagnosis of **advanced, aggressive cancer** –
With possibly only months to live.

But I underwent treatment, which was no picnic,
And survived.

But for me, the cancer encounter
Was not as bad
As what I have experienced from generations of dysfunctional family.
I get dragged down into wishing for death,
so that there is just God and me;
and we have many tough conversations
about whether I have to go on.

I have so many times sat in the **Carmelite Retreat Centre Chapel**
And looked out on the **top of the trees and the sky** –
There I learnt **to look up** -
Instead of being concentrated on the weeds in the ground.

When I return home, I walk almost every day and
And as I walk along my road
I look up to the top of the trees - and the sky –
And in my mind -
I return to the special, secure, comforting place of the Chapel
And the grounds around the Retreat Centre.

I am assured that I can go on –
That I can grow stronger.

So, you may accurately perceive -
That I value enormously,
the oasis that the Carmelite Retreat Centre offers me.
So much so,
That my psychiatrist has many times suggested,
“Perhaps it is time for a visit to the monastery.”

In fact, I have been accepted as a *“disabled person”*
into the National Disability Insurance Scheme,
And I have included time at the Retreat Centre in my **NDIS Planning Application** –
Others have done this, for example,
attending Patrea King's, Quest for Life Retreat Centre, at Bundanoon
which is not for me, as I seek out the Carmelite place of prayer.

Moreover, I want to say that I am acutely aware
That my life is not dominated by my mental illness
That the worries and pains of my life, are complex.
My time at the Retreat Centre frees me from the tight hold of those complexities
Giving me time to reconsider my life
In a positive environment where I can do that.

I understand that individuals and groups of any denomination, or no religious commitment at all - are welcome to stay at the Retreat Centre, as long as they respect the space of others there; and, the Centre organizes things appropriately, so the needs of visitors do not clash. There can be a variety of *'get away'* spiritual experiences.

I have been fortunate to stay at the Retreat Centre for extended periods of time – sometimes in the separate dwelling of the Hermitage.

During my stays I have come across all sorts of visitors –

- Marriage Encounter Groups, seeking to enrich their marriages;
- Young men - in the final preparation stage for Ordination to the Priesthood;
- Ministers from other Churches, including the Melkites and the Church of Christ;
- Individuals who seek out a place for rejuvenation; finding some inner peace; in the expansive space of the Retreat Centre grounds;
- a young man in the process of undergoing a sex change to becoming female;
- a group of Anglican women from Sydney's Northern Beaches who were enjoying a spiritual Women's Weekend away, with lots of laughter;
- I have loved watching children having a lolly hunt, around the grounds, as part of a *'Families Day'* for a non-English speaking background Church: a Korean Catholic community;
- There have also been many school children groups – Time to take stock of their young lives – in this secure, spiritual space.

I know that the Carmelite Friars' community is an ageing group of Priests, but I very much hope That the Retreat Centre can somehow continue its work, in serving people as it does, long into the future.

In the determination of this Proposal by the Proponent, You need to give serious consideration to the many visitors to the Carmelite Retreat Centre, Whether they come there seeking solace in a troubled life or merely *'time out'*.

As Part of the Catholic community of Sydney,
I would, in fact, look to the Proponent
to support this Catholic community Retreat Centre
ensuring its continued vital work into the future,
rather than put any hurdles in the way of its work for the community.

This Carmelite Retreat Centre has been established at Varroville for many decades
– the only one in NSW.
People come from all over Australia – and overseas –
to spend spiritual, tranquil time at the Retreat Centre.
With a background of centuries of **Carmelite spirituality and practices** –
And in its current form at Varroville,
It is a very simple, inclusive, contemplative prayer community place,
Determined to help people to live out their lives, in the face of all manner of troubles.

I respect those who have spoken of the desire
For graves for their loved ones in the local area.
That is something that can be addressed anywhere in south-west Sydney,
Or more specifically in the Campbelltown area.
I am only addressing, and intensely opposing,
This particular proposal,
At this particular location,
in the vicinity of the Carmelite Retreat Centre.

If this Proposal succeeds,
It would compel the **juxtaposition** of two specific, potentially incompatible forces –
One offering encouragement to go on living;
A powerful life-affirming; life-nourishing experience;
And the other, focusing on death.
Some may feel comfortable with this,
But many may not.
Death is commonly, the ultimate difficulty in life.
Death and the death of others can be highly problematical –
Some refuse to attend funerals or go anywhere near a cemetery.

The proposed Varroville cemetery
can be **euphemistically referred to** as “*Memorial Gardens*”
set out as parklands - with lovely gardens and picnic spots,
But it does not change what it is, a burial site.

The presence of a cemetery on St Andrew's Road, as proposed
is **NOT a neutral addition** to the landscape and it does not enhance the area
no matter how much you ‘**pretty it up**’.

The effect of a cemetery being located, as proposed,
could be to **change the very nature of the Retreat Centre**,

compromising it as a place of peace and life affirmation.
During a stay at the Retreat Centre
The cemetery could be a **constant irritant, a distraction,**
The presence nearby of a burial ground
and the **hearses and funeral corteges** coming and going.
I would feel distressed for those coming and going with the funerals –
with the grief of those affected by the death of a loved one,
– which would not assist me to go on struggling with the troubles in my life;
The opposite,
it would **undermine achieving that sense of peace I seek** at the Retreat Centre.

For me, personally,
I am absolutely aware of death being an ***inextricable*** part of life -
More aware of this probably than most.
I have gone a considerable way to facing death.
I pray to Christ dying on the Cross.
I experience the temptation for premature release from a troubled life.

But I am concerned here, not just about those vulnerable to suicide –
And we know the high rate of it in the Australian community;
But for all who would want to go
to the Varroville Retreat Centre for spiritual '*time out*',
but may feel they don't want to go there -
in the event that a cemetery is situated right across the road.
No amount of foliage can conceal, what people will know is there.

Apart from anything else,
As a Retreatant at the Carmelite Retreat Centre
I would also be distracted –
By this *particular* proposed cemetery.
For example, wondering why *the Catholic Church* would
At this time, of all times, over the last several years –
through all the years -
of the Royal Commission into Institutionalized Child Sexual Abuse,
which highlighted the massive number of Catholic Church victims,
and the appalling responses they encountered from the Catholic Church -
that during that period of the Royal Commission
the Catholic Church has been spending substantial amounts of money
on seeking to put a cemetery -
– **a burial option many of us could not even afford** –
– right across the road from a Carmelite Retreat Centre -
Impacting badly on that, and the historic, scenic rural area there at present?

For the Proponent to be successful in this proposal,
What is the message being sent to me and the likes of me,
Suffering from mental illness,

impacted by Domestic Violence and Church sexual abuse –
And for others, with many other traumatic experiences
Who seek the relief available at the Retreat Centre?

It is to feel disregarded;
and our need for comfort and support,
is to be dismissed – by the Catholic Church, of all people;
and by the NSW Government, permitting this cemetery to proceed.

I wish to emphasize that I speak here today **on my own initiative**
and it has not been easy to speak up.
I have done it only because I know the Carmelite Retreat Centre at Varroville
To be a very special place for me, and many others;
And I am so very desperate not to have its availability disrupted.

This is an opportunity for the NSW State government –
To give more than **lip service and the wearing of ribbons** –
To help people like me, desperately in need of spending time,
In a place of refuge from life's demands and troubles.

During 2018,
over **2,700 people** stayed at the Carmelite Retreat Centre as Retreatants,
and many more attended there for one day occasions, and to pray.

As I am speaking up, under the stigma which exists around mental illness,
From which I have suffered greatly; and I have raised other personal matters,
**I would be grateful – for me, and my family – if my name is NOT disclosed
beyond this meeting and the necessary public records of this meeting.**
I wish to **thank you, the Independent Planning Commission,**
for holding this Public meeting.

I could have lodged a **written submission**
which could have been redacted, omitting my personal details –
which would have been preferable -

But I **felt so strongly that the voices of people like me**
Needed to be loudly heard in this matter
I have stepped out of the woodwork
So I chose to come here today and speak directly to you.

I speak for the disadvantaged,
Whose voices are not heard
Because they do not come out of the woodwork to be heard,

I hear the desire by some
for a cemetery in the large area of south-west Sydney.
Surely, there is somewhere else in the area
where that wish could be fulfilled.

Re Proposed St Andrew's Road, Varroville Cemetery. To IPCN: 4 April 2019.

Please,
do not facilitate a burial ground to be located on St Andrew's Road, Varroville,
Or anywhere near the Carmelite Retreat Centre.

Thank you for listening to me.