

## Justinian: Australian legal magazine.

### News on lawyers and the law

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Justinian in Bernard Collaery, On the Couch, Religion, Timor Leste, Witness K

**The nun on the battlements for Bernard Collaery and Witness K ... Relentless organiser, protester, and campaigner ... East Timor's long struggle and the all too late engagement of Australia ... The "Act of No Choice" in West Papua ... Progressive politics and the Catholic Church ... Eggs, carrots and leftovers ... Devisor of cunning schemes ... Sister Susan Connelly is on *Justinian's* Couch**



Sister Susan Connelly: preparing bags to be worn over the heads of protestors supporting Bernard Collaery and Witness K while proceedings are underway in the ACT Supreme Court

**Susan Connelly** is a Sister of St Joseph, the religious congregation founded by Mary MacKillop. She has been a primary school teacher and principal, and worked for 10 years teaching scripture in state schools.

Susan has been involved with Timor-Leste (East Timor) issues since 1994. She travelled to Timor many times, involved with various projects which the Mary MacKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies initiated. Her work included justice advocacy, administration, fundraising, community education, music, and research.

In 2017 Susan finished a PhD which will be published by Bloomsbury in 2021. Its title is *East Timor, René Girard and Neocolonial Violence: Scapegoating as Australian Policy*. It is an interpretation of the relationship between Australia and East Timor through the lenses of French-American philosopher René Girard's insights into human violence and scapegoating.

After working to support the Timorese quest for justice regarding the Timor Sea resources for some years, Susan became heavily involved in the matter of Witness K and Bernard Collaery. She does research, public speaking and writing on the subject.

She is a member of the *Josephite Justice Network* and is the convener of the NSW *Timor Sea Justice Forum*. She is currently helping to establish *COSOCK - Coalition of Supporters of Bernard Collaery and Witness K*. See: [Bernard Collaery support](#).

**Describe yourself in three words.**

Dedicated, dogged, delighted.

**What are you currently reading?**

"The Jesus Driven Life" (Michael Hardin)  
"Oil Under Troubled Water" (Bernard Collaery)  
"This is Happiness" (Niall Williams)

**What's your favourite film?**

"True Lies" - I especially love the scene of the horse in the lift.

**Who has been the most influential person in your life?**

Mum and Dad.

**When were you happiest?**

On Sunday, 16 August. Sometimes something just clicks, and you realise something at a new depth. That happened to me on that day.

**What is your favourite piece of music?**

Beethoven's Triple Concerto.

**What is in your refrigerator?**

I share it with two others - many eggs and carrots, leftovers, numerous jars of things, and some bi-carb to absorb any smells.

**What is your favourite website?**

<http://girardianlectionary.net/>

It's a cavernous collection of writings on the liturgical readings for the Sunday. It presents biblical interpretations based on the work of the French-American philosopher René Girard and is maintained by a Lutheran pastor in the US.

It is my first reference point when it's my turn to prepare the prayer for my community. It's great to find new ways of looking at biblical texts.

**Who would you most like to be with on a desert island?**

A boat builder.

## **What is on your bedside table?**

Mess.

## **Why did you want to be a nun, and why a Josephite?**

I believed that it was what God wanted me to do. And I still believe that.

I was taught by Josephites at the various schools I attended, and I suppose I just gravitated there. Now that I know about Mary MacKillop's life and the ways she dealt with the extraordinary set of circumstances she was faced with, I feel very much at home.

## **What is the most rewarding aspect of your work?**

Working with wonderful people from all walks of life who want the best for Australia, who are concerned about truth, and who aren't dazzled by the failed promises of big money.

## **And what is the most frustrating?**

To know that here in one of the richest and most stable of the world's democracies our media is controlled by such restricted ownership, and that generally, people are content to swallow too much calculated bilge.

Matters of great concern often do not receive the investigation that their importance deserves. For example, we rarely have reports on the grotesque incarceration of proven refugees or the abysmal treatment of asylum seekers in the community. Government restrictions on interviewing refugees who have been locked up for years may explain the lack of facts, but that in itself is a deeply troubling story. How dare this happen in a supposedly free country!

We have powerful media forces who pick and choose the situations about which they will challenge government, resulting in a too-easy relationship between these powers. Bad laws can then be passed and can evade scrutiny because the only instrument with the resources and the reach to inform the people is controlled by too few. Social media is not designed for in-depth reflection, and therefore it runs on sensationalism, quick-fixes and image.

## **How and why did you get involved with justice issues in Timor Leste and West Papua?**

In 1992 I went to a book launch of "Telling" by Michele Turner, a collection of Timorese oral histories. Photographs from the book were on the walls, and I was appalled at what I saw.

I pursued the history of the torture and murder of the Timorese people and became involved in the last years of the long struggle. It was a delight to meet many Timorese people here, and I travelled to Timor itself for many years after that, working in the Mary MacKillop Institute of East Timorese Studies. Our main tasks were to produce a language program in the Timorese language Tetun, and to support health initiatives. I soon learned the extraordinary history of the Australian soldiers who were in Timor in 1942, and the terrible loss of Timorese lives as a result of their loyalty to our men.

I feel very deeply that we Australians are very ready to extol the courage of our own people, but are reluctant to recognise that of the Timorese. There is no other nation on the face of the earth, besides Timor-Leste, that lost at least 40,000 human lives as a direct result of helping us in World War II. We don't tell that story. Its representation in the War Memorial is a disgrace. But of course, how could we tell such a thing given the subsequent history of betrayal during the Indonesian occupation (1975-1999)? We came in at the end, (and well done INTERFET), but we got there at a minute past midnight - and the Timorese death toll was already horrific.

As for West Papua, it's much the same story. Australian governments seem to do whatever Indonesia indicates is required. The parallels between Papua and Timor are striking, although the big difference is that the UN oversaw the so-called "Act of Free Choice" in 1969, whereas the snatching of Timor was a clear invasion. At gunpoint, 1,025 Papuans agreed to Indonesian takeover on behalf of 800,000 others who were not given a chance to have a say.

I met one of those who agreed when I was in Papua in 2016. A local government employee at the time of that "act of no choice", she has spent her life since then accusing herself of betraying her country. She was separated from her family for weeks and then given a megaphone through which she had to read the statement of submission to Indonesian rule. Those inside the room with her politely clapped, surrounded as they were by armed soldiers, but those outside shouted "No, no!" and then ran into the forest, pursued.

Two Papuans, Clemens Runawery and Willem Zonggonau, caught a plane to go to New York to denounce the Act. Landing in PNG *en route*, they were forced off the plane by Australian officials and put on Manus Island.

Killings, torture, repression, denigration of culture and language, transmigration, all the trappings of occupation resemble that which happened in Timor. Even some of the stars of the Timorese atrocities were transferred to Papua after the Timorese referendum in 1999. Such re-assignments of war criminals make salutary reading.

We Australians have heavy responsibilities towards West Papua, as we have towards Timor-Leste.

### **And Bernard Collaery - what it is about his case that has made you protest with such commitment?**

Australian governments have attempted to squeeze the last possible drop of profit from the resources of the Timor Sea by using every trick in the book – spying, lying, and now trying the two people who had the spine to say "this is wrong" – Witness K and Bernard Collaery.

The dismal narrative of Australian greed and deceit re the Timor Sea resources is all of one piece with Australian complicity in the subjugation of the Timorese, and the silence about the WWII history. Interpreting events from a desk is one thing, but when faced with such collapse of claimed national values, one cannot sit on one's hands. I am conscience-bound to act on the knowledge I have.

This is all about values and principles, about the nature of truth, and about what laws are supposed to do. Equating the law with justice is a very big mistake. We now have laws that allow economic interests to be protected under the umbrella of "national security". This means business concerns are put on the same level as foreign affairs and defence. As a result, swindling the Timorese by spying on their negotiators under the guise of an AusAid program is presented to the Australian public as a legitimate exercise to promote economic security. Of course, government neither confirms nor denies that the spying took place, but that is immaterial now. In fact, it's just silly. Millions of dollars are being spent pursuing Witness K and his lawyer for whatever part they are supposed to have played in letting the cat out of the bag.

### **When is your faith most challenged?**

My faith is very much challenged in the effort to balance the worship of Jesus with the work of Jesus, when I see us as a church too focused on ourselves, our imagined past, our success, our position in society. Constant reflection is needed lest we break the First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God - you shall not have strange gods before me".

History shows how easy it is to make strange gods, even out of religion. For a Christian, the focus must be on Jesus, on his "dangerous memory", on his revelation of the depths of our human violence.

**Do you feel like an outsider in a church that is mostly very conservative?**

No, I don't. I was very conservative as a young person – as a young sister. I found it very difficult to change out of the habit after the Second Vatican Council, and I thought the church was going to the dogs. Over time I changed, and now I would be described as a progressive. But I remember what I was like, and how I thought, and I was sincere in my attitudes then. This has taught me that people generally hold their beliefs sincerely and should be respected for that. The church is very large, and there is room for all.

Anyway, I don't think that generally we're over-conservative. The church has many faults, which are greatly emphasised in the popular media - our sins are before us always, yet the enormous good that a great many church people do is often ignored. What amuses me enormously is the caricature of religious people that usually inhabits TV shows and films that feature people of faith. We are presented as a bunch of nutters. Of course, we have also wrongfully given others a hard time, so I'm not bleating.

**What activities consume most of your waking hours?**

Answering emails and phone calls, devising cunning schemes, finding out about things I need to know, having cups of tea. COVID has focussed us at home here, the three of us, and we are known to have poetry with morning tea at 11:00 a.m.

**If you were on death row, what would you request for your last meal?**

Fish and chips, then Bombe Alaska.

**If you were a foodstuff, what would you be?**

Bread.

**Who do you most admire professionally?**

There's a long line of fabulous women with whom I have lived and taught, worked and prayed, who have my immense admiration.

**What is your favourite word?**

Oh dear, so many ... "omnishambles" would be a stand-out. It's delicious.

**What would you change about Australia?**

1. The national fixation on winning, of being the first, the best, the greatest, the bravest. It's a gross depiction of the rivalry which is a basic human flaw, and which leads, in the long run, to violence.
2. Laws that decree that the Attorney-General's case must be given greatest weight in court decisions. (This doesn't happen, you say? Sorry, it does. Have a look at the Collaery and K cases.)
3. The absence of a Bill of Rights.
4. The absence of an independent federal anti-corruption body with appropriate and effective power, itself subject to public scrutiny.

**What would your epitaph say?**

She came, she saw, she had a go.

**What comes into your mind when you shut your eyes and think of the word "justice"?**

Forgiveness and peace.