

NOT THE FULL STORY

Owen O'Sullivan OFM Cap.

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PREFACE

Why write an autobiography? I did it to clarify ideas in my head, to get them down on paper so as to be able to understand myself better. This long version is written primarily for my extended family, for any among them who might be interested. I am also considering abridging it in another edition, omitting most of the family material, and focusing on my life in the church. That might interest a wider audience.

I began writing a broad outline, or map, of this story on the train from Cork to Dublin, when going to meet my sister, Maeve (Veve), there on 8 February 2013. I finished the first draft, up to the end of Gurránabráher, on 19 July 2013, and the second version on 31 March 2014.

The story has lots of loose ends and unanswered questions. That is the way life is, and I'm trying to tell it like it is. Is it the whole truth, the full story? No. For reasons relating to myself or to others there are things left unsaid, and I believe it is better that way. But, to the best of my knowledge, everything I have written in it is true. I haven't fabricated anything, or, I believe, exaggerated. The opinions offered are those I honestly hold; none of them is stated for effect.

In some instances, in order to protect identities, I have changed names of people and places, along with other potentially identifying information, while preserving intact the substance of the matter.

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PART 1: THE EARLY YEARS

My Parents

My Father

My father, Gerald - Gearóid in Irish - was born in Sneem, Co. Kerry, on 10 June 1912, the youngest of seven sons. His mother was a primary school teacher and his father a head constable in the RIC, known locally as John the Head. John had been told by his superior officers that he would not be promoted beyond that level because he was a Catholic. When the Independence movement began to develop after the 1916 Rising, and especially after the 1918 general election, he became involved with the local IRA, not as a member, but by drilling and helping them with some knowledge of military matters, since the RIC was quasi-military.

After primary school, my father boarded at Saint Brendan's in Killarney, the Seminary, as it was called, and loathed it. The food was appalling, with coal sometimes being found in the butter. Many years later, when the school approached him for a donation for some renovation project, he replied that he would gladly contribute to a demolition fund. He felt that the priests in the college for the most part did not want to be there; they had sought ordination with parish ministry in mind. They were square pegs in round holes and wanted only to get out of the college and into a parish. Half way through secondary school he was transferred to

Rockwell College where he was very happy; after Saint Brendan's, Rockwell was bliss.

When he completed the Leaving Cert course in 1930, he was accepted into teacher training at Saint Patrick's College in Drumcondra, Dublin. He graduated two years later, on 9 June, the day before his twentieth birthday. The Eucharistic Congress was about to begin and the college wanted the rooms for visitors so the term ended early. The staff wanted the students out, and they were happy to oblige! He went first to Saint Joseph's Patrician Brothers' secondary school in Galway, teaching Irish, English and Mathematics, at a salary of £2-10-0 a week. He had a great knowledge and love of the Irish language. While there he began studying in University College, Galway (UCG) for a bachelor's degree, being allowed time off for the purpose. Since he was already a trained teacher, he was allowed to start the course in second year. In autumn 1933, he began teaching in Saint Patrick's (Practising) School in Drumcondra. This interrupted his degree course which he was not able to resume until autumn 1935, completing it in June 1937.

In the school in Drumcondra he began the new school year with what was something of a revolutionary gesture for the time. When he went into the classroom on his first day, he saw a stick on the teacher's desk; it was a standard item of school equipment, almost as much a part of the scene as chalk. Saying nothing, he picked it up, broke it across his knee and threw the pieces into a bin. He didn't believe in corporal punishment, partly, I think, in reaction to his father who had very much

believed in it. After the class, the boys took and divided the pieces of stick among themselves. In 2004, when I conducted his funeral, a woman came to my sister, Veve, afterwards to say that her brother had been one of the boys in the class and had kept his piece of stick as a souvenir of my father until a few years before.

My father's faith was strong and simple. He and my mother read widely, but rarely, if ever, about the faith. They had a bible, but opened it only to check a reference, and that rarely. He was the most honest man I ever met. Once, after he and my mother had quarrelled about something, and I had taken her part without knowing what I was talking about, he said to me, 'Loyalty to your mother is a good thing; but loyalty to the truth is even better.'

He had two great fears all his life – cancer and death. He did, in fact, contract cancer in his eighties, but saw it off, and lived a pretty active life for ten years after his operation, dying in 2004 at the age of ninety-two. He never liked talking about death, and put off making a will, until ten years of nudging finally brought him to it. He was cautious where my mother was adventurous. He was often naïve, especially in politics. This was surprising, as his work in the Department of Education had brought him into contact with ministers and he had a close view of the goings-on. By contrast, my mother was perceptive, and would often score a bull's eye with a forecast of how things would work out, what reactions might develop, or what was really going on behind the veil of spin. One minister was known among civil

servants as “a very promising politician” because he promised everybody everything, dutifully taking notes to give people the appropriate impression, while dropping the matter the minute they were out the door, occasionally saying to his staff, ‘What a shower of bastards!’ When they were looking for one particular minister, if a special need arose, they had a list of the watering holes he would frequent on his way home, and would usually manage to track him down in one or other of them.)

As he moved up the promotional ladder, my father had a lot of contact with the Office of Public Works. He regarded them with little respect, seeing them as people who postponed decisions and avoided work where possible. Frustrated by this, he tried to sting them into action on one issue, pointing out that the space the OPW allocated to each child in an Irish classroom was only slightly more than that allocated by the ministries of education of the *Bantustans* in apartheid South Africa. Did it work? He never learned.

A major interest of his was in curriculum development, and he was proud to have been chairman of the committee which produced the new primary school curriculum in 1971. (It was revised and replaced in recent years.) He was delighted to be the first chief inspector of schools to be invited by the Irish National Teachers’ Organization to address their annual conference. Speaking about the curriculum, he said he trusted their professional judgment on how to apply it in their schools. For teachers to be told that “The

Department” trusted them was as pleasant as it was surprising. (It had earlier withdrawn a £2 annual grant for flowers to be planted in school gardens, seemingly because it did not trust teachers to use it for that purpose.) They were even more surprised when he was instrumental in persuading the minister of the day to provide teachers with a meal at the department’s expense during in-service training courses. Prior to that, they had had to fend for themselves. This simple gesture gave them the feeling of being valued.

But my father did not have a high opinion of the INTO. He saw it as a trade union concerned with pay and conditions, not a professional organization with a commitment to raising standards. When teachers’ unions were consulted, he said that the INTO would almost invariably be late in presenting its submission, holding the process up, and seeking to be treated as a special case. (Is this relevant?)

In his retirement, he wrote school text-books, and enjoyed the work a great deal. They were published in the *Rainbow* series by the Fallon publishing house. He often said that moving from the civil service to a commercial business was a breath of fresh air: to work with people who made decisions rather than postpone them, and who took personal responsibility rather than avoid it by spreading it among a committee or two, was a welcome change.

My Mother

My mother was born Clare McGivney, in Mohill, County Leitrim, on 6 March 1911. She went to primary school at Corduff, where her uncle Fr. Joseph McGivney was priest, and to the Mercy convent school in Mohill. For her secondary education, she went to the Marist sisters in Carrick-on-Shannon, and later the St. Louis Convent in Monaghan. She then went for teacher training to Hull in England, and qualified there. This was because she didn't have a sufficiently good grasp of Irish to train in Ireland; Irish was not taught in schools until after independence in 1922, when she was already eleven years old.

On returning from Hull, she went to the Connemara Gaeltacht to improve her Irish, but mostly lived in a flat in Dublin with her siblings, Vincent, Agnes and Brendan. While there, she placed an advert in the paper for a teacher who would give her tuition in Irish. It was answered by a young man called Gerald O'Sullivan. But the paper had misprinted her name as "Miss McGawney." He came to the door on 27 January 1937 and asked to see Miss McGawney. No one had ever heard of her, or indeed of such a name. Discussion followed: could it be Miss McGivney? It was. Introductions were made, lessons began, love blossomed and a wedding followed on 4 August 1937 in Saint Joseph's church, Boyle, County Roscommon. It was followed by a honeymoon in London and Jersey, going there by plane, no less! It was not without opposition: his parents were against it, saying that, at twenty-five, he was too young to marry, and they had not known each

other for long enough. Wise heads nodded knowingly, saying that the marriage would never last. It lasted over sixty-seven years.

Mother was a woman of independent mind. She was into Women's Lib before it was ever heard of, to the scandal of some relatives and friends; she favoured women's involvement in all sorts of social activities. This scandalized me no less than others: how could a woman be an engineer when everyone knew girls were useless at mechanical things? How could she be a scientist when girls couldn't do maths or physics? A woman doctor? Embarrassing! A woman Guard? How unbearably humiliating for a man to be arrested by a woman! A woman priest? Odd enough that Protestant clergy – even bishops! – were married, but the thought of a woman priest no more entered our heads than the thought of a five-legged horse. A woman TD? Well, alright, if she was a TD's widow, when she might be elected to replace him as a gesture of sympathy; but otherwise, no – they wouldn't be any good at it. These things were all obvious and natural; everyone knew them - except my mother who challenged all of them. She favoured women's entry into every aspect of social life, and women who stayed at home to look after a family being paid by the State. But for reasons which I don't understand, she never did venture outside the role of wife and mother even after her children were grown and gone. At one time, she considered returning to teaching and was offered a job, but didn't take it up.

My parents went to Ballycumber, County Offaly, and taught together in the local national school, Saint Ciarán's, in Boher, from 1937 to 1941. Then the family came along: Una in 1938, Maeve in 1939, Vincent in 1940, and Clare in 1942. While in Boher my father was awarded a Carlisle and Blake Premium for his teaching. He began studying at University College Dublin for a Master's degree in Irish in 1939-40, but dropped it when the opportunity of doing a Higher Diploma in Education came up. In 1940-41, he did the H. Dip., as it was called, by week-end lectures at UCG, graduating with first class honours in 1941. He applied for the position of primary school inspector and got the job, beginning in January 1942. My mother continued teaching in Boher until 1943 when his appointment as inspector became permanent, and then, under the rules of the day, it was necessary for her to leave teaching.

If a woman had a public service job, she was required to resign on marriage. I remember asking why and being told that, with so much unemployment in the country, it was seen as unjust that some families might have two incomes when others had none. Was that the real reason? Or was it that "A woman's place is in the home"? I don't know. An exception was made in the case of teachers, because trained teachers were so scarce, but, if a man were an inspector and his wife a teacher, that was regarded as representing a conflict of interest.

Sandymount, Dublin, 1944

The family moved to Sandymount, Dublin, in 1943, living at 34 Beach Road. I was born on Thursday 2 November 1944 and was baptized Gerald Brendan in the Star of the Sea church, Sandymount, on 6 November.

World War II was still on. Dublin had almost entirely escaped bombing, as Ireland was neutral, but rationing was still in place and remained so until 1952 for items such as soap. The family's supply of gasmasks was stored in a cupboard for years afterwards, kept there by a reluctance, bred of scarcity, to throw anything out.

Sandymount has changed since, with the construction of a power station and oil storage tanks on reclaimed land nearby. But it is still an attractive suburb with good transport links to the city centre.

Thurles, County Tipperary, 1944-52

I was about two weeks old when the family moved to Thurles in north County Tipperary. My father had received a transfer, and the move had been due for some time. We arrived in mid-November 1944. The town's main industry was the production of sugar from beet grown in the surrounding countryside. Sadly, this was wiped out in the late Nineties by a bureaucratic blunder by the European Union.

We lived on the edge of the town, on the Dublin Road, almost in the countryside, in a house called *Rosemount*. It was rented at 30 shillings a week, not quite £80 a year,

at a time when was father's salary was about £400 a year. It was a well-built Edwardian structure, with five bedrooms, a large back and somewhat smaller front garden, a garage, greenhouse, and balcony, the scene of trouble in later years! There was a large living room, and a small sitting room reserved for special occasions and visiting VIP's. The kitchen was small, maybe because of an assumption at the time it was built that only maids would use it, and they didn't count! It had a solid fuel stove, later replaced by an American *Moffat* cooker. There was a washing machine, and a vacuum cleaner, or Hoover as everyone called it. We had no fridge, but what was called a meat safe, a box-like wooden frame with a fine steel mesh to keep out insects; it was hung high up on the side of the house away from the sun, and meat would stay fresh in it for a few days, longer at any rate than indoors. Throughout my time at home before joining the Capuchins, we did not have either a fridge or central heating. In those days before hire purchase or bank cards, people either saved up until they could afford something or did without it.

Siblings

Una, the eldest of the five, was older than I by six years, and I felt confident that she knew everything, and could deal with all problems. She was "brainy." When my parents went to Limerick or Dublin for major shopping, she would be put in charge of the rest of us, a daunting task, as we saw my parents' absence as a golden opportunity for mischief. The presence of a maid was little inhibition. One example of our mischief was

going out on the balcony to play, dance and push each other, despite, or perhaps because, it had been forbidden. The balcony had a wall of about 30 cm in height which was decorative more than preventative. Una tried threatening, pleading and everything she could think of to get us to come back in, as she knew well there would be “blue murder” if anything happened, and she was afraid of being blamed. Fortunately, nothing did happen. Una was never afraid to speak her mind in any circumstance. She was always a worker, giving everything she had to whatever she was doing. Her experience of Saint Louis, Monaghan, our mother’s *alma mater*, where Una spent her last two years at school because science was taught there, was markedly in contrast with that of her fellow-students, Nuala Ó Faoláin and Marian Finucane; Una had nothing but good to say about it.

My father taught us to swim in the Drish River. It was not much more than a stream, but, here and there, it broadened into pools of perhaps 50 cm in depth. On one occasion, I fell in, fully clothed, while looking for a water hen’s nest. At the time, I couldn’t swim. I remember opening my eyes underwater and seeing the reeds through brownish bog water, and feeling frightened. Una heard the splash and rescued me. Thank you, Una.

Maeve, known as Veve, was eleven months younger than Una, and they did everything together. Veve was the kind one, the one you could always go to in trouble,

the one ever ready to help, the inventive one who would keep trying until she found a solution to a problem. 'Love finds a way.' (1 Corinthians 13.7)

Once, there was a paper chase across the countryside. I took part in it with Veve but we got lost. A Garda found us and brought us to a Garda station, a bleak building, where we were offered tea, bread and butter, which I refused, having been taught always to decline politely! (Snobbery, perhaps?)

Vincent, known as Vin, the middle one of the five, was the adventurous one. He did his own thing, and used to go to horse races during the season, school hours or not. He never had money for a ticket, but he didn't let that stop him; he crawled under the fence. On more than one occasion, when returning home after some such expedition, he felt tired and decided to rest in a house – any house – along the way. People used to leave the key of their front door tied to a string, the other end attached to the door-knocker, and throw the key into the letter box. All you had to do was pull the key out by the string, and you had full access to the house. People trusted one another not to abuse it. Vin would get the key, open the door and let himself in. Then he'd go upstairs into this house of a total stranger, lie down on someone's bed and go to sleep. He also broke his arm on one occasion, while with the Boy Scouts, and that gave him hero status in my eyes!

He was known to go into the small sweet shops that were common in those days, knock on the counter for the woman of the house, some poor harassed creature trying to supplement a small family income through the shop, and ask politely how much were the four-penny *Crunchies*! One day, when walking in the farmers' fields – farmers were generous in allowing people to walk across their land, a practice now diminished by claims for compensation for injury - he found a large kite which gave him great pleasure for a long time afterwards. And he had a *Meccano* set with which he made all sorts of interesting buildings. It's not surprising that he became a civil engineer in adult life.

I learned a lot from Vin in those days: he answered my question about why thunder seemed to roll across the sky by saying it was Saint Peter rolling a barrel of stout across the floor of heaven for a party! I don't remember my reaction. He also tried persuading me that a penny was worth more than sixpence because it was bigger - but I wasn't foolish enough for that.

Clare and I were a pair, like Una and Veve. We fought every day, but we had our adventures, too. One day, she and I, out walking, came to a pond and wanted to play in it with our shoes on. I hesitated, fearing the reaction at home, but she explained that shoes that were really soaked through and through would dry much more quickly than those that were merely damp, so I needn't worry. In we went. The promised quick drying didn't follow, but the "war" at home did!

Clare also – perhaps with clairvoyant insight into my future in Africa – taught me how to ward off a snake. Not a pressing issue in Ireland, mind you, but still, you’d never know. When a snake threatened, you took your hanky out of your pocket – spotlessly white, of course – and waved it in front of it. Dazzled by the reflection from the blazing sunshine, it would be confused and retreat to look elsewhere for easier prey. The technique relied on a series of assumptions, one less likely than the other!

‘Close your eyes, and open your mouth, and see what God will give you!’ I said to Clare one day. She was foolish enough to trust me. She did as instructed, and I put a snail in her mouth! One another occasion, I tried it again, and – amazingly – she complied, and I put a worm in her mouth. It’s no wonder we fought. She came home from school one day with her skirt in rags after a fight with another girl over whose turn it was to go on a swing. But she didn’t mind, because she had won the fight.

Clare and I called one day to a local bakery which had *éclair*s on display in the window. The lady owner of the shop knew the family, so between us we let her know that it was our birthdays – the two are just a day apart. We let that sink in and hoped she’d take the hint. She did: we were given an *éclair* each... bliss! Was it really our birthday, or was it made into a movable feast for the purpose? I don’t remember.

Sweets were important: a square of Cleeve's toffee, about two centimetres each way, cost two a penny, Gob Stoppers were three, Dollies six, and Aniseed Balls ten. Unwrapped, they were taken by hand from a jar, and put into a piece of newspaper, shaped on the spot into a cone, and twisted at the bottom to keep it closed.

Occasionally, we went to the pictures in the local cinema. In those days, Indians were unambiguously bad, while cowboys and cavalry (sometimes called Calvary) were good. When an Indian bit the dust, it was no more than he deserved. The five of us played cowboys and Indians out in the neighbouring fields; Clare was usually the Indian. One day she climbed a tree and went out on a branch to get away from our pursuit, but we got a rope around the branch and swung it until it broke, dropping her in a bed of nettles. Sorry, Clare.

I had a pet white rabbit, given by a local man. I loved it and was broken-hearted when, on return from school one day, I found it in the glasshouse, dead, killed by a guilty-looking cat with blood on its whiskers. (I've hated cats ever since.) I cried and cried, but, after drying my tears, agreed with Clare to bury it. I dug a (very) shallow hole between two apple trees at the end of the garden; we tied a string around the rabbit's legs and threw it over a branch. While Clare held the string, I led the funeral prayer - shades of things to come! - a *Hail, Mary*. Then we sang, '*I'll sing a hymn to Mary*' but began laughing half-way through. Clare let go the string, and the rabbit fell into the hole - RIP.

My parents once returned from a shopping expedition with a luminous plastic crucifix, a source of endless wonder to us five. How could it light up without electricity? We were given strict instructions not to touch it, but the five of us couldn't resist taking it under the stairs one day, to look at it in the dark. Jostling each other in the confined space, we broke it. World War Three followed!

I got a tricycle from Santa one Christmas when I was about four. I couldn't believe my eyes; it was so wonderful, with a red seat and blue wheels. But how to get it going? How did you manage it? There was no one to ask, as I had slept late, and the others were downstairs at breakfast. Then I had a bright idea: going down the stairs on it would get me off to a good start. I was positioning it for take-off, when my father came to see if I had got up. Seeing what I was doing, he ran up the stairs as fast as he could and caught me in time. He set himself to teach me, and I got the hang of it quickly. My star turn was to go under the kitchen table on it. The family called me Caracciolo, after a famous Italian motor-cyclist of the time.

Primary school

Then came school. I remember a fuss about it at home beforehand, and that made me nervous. Following the usual practice, I went first to the Presentation Sisters' Convent for low and high infants (called halfpenny and penny class) and then first class. The subjects were Irish, English, arithmetic, history, geography and Christian

doctrine. The teaching method was chalk and talk. Nuns were mysterious creatures: they dressed from head to toe in black, and their heads were veiled – did they have ears? some children wondered – and they were all called Sr. Mary Something. I have only a few memories of those early years: - during lunch break, a nun would called out, ‘Anybody else for more cocoa?’ The sisters used to provide hot cocoa and maybe and bread and jam which they paid for it out of their own pockets; there were no grants for such things in those days. I learned lots of stuff by heart like the “times tables”, six times eight is forty-eight, seven times eight is fifty-six, etc. It wasn’t a substitute for understanding but a supplement, and it was useful. And then the Irish lesson, ‘Eirím ar a h-ocht a’chlog ar maidin; ním m’aghaidh, ciaraim mo chuid grúige; ithim mo bhricfeásta....’ We pretended to be broadcasters from a radio station, and spoke through a “*craolachán*”(radio) made from a cardboard carton. Irish was the medium of instruction for all subjects. We made figures with Plasticine. I was curious about the ink in what was called the inkwell, less than the size of an eggcup. I wondered what it tasted like, so one day I drank it. I remember the boy beside me saying knowingly, ‘You’ll die tonight.’ I didn’t think I would, but still....

There was the school play in which I recited a poem about Old King Cole:

‘Old King Cole was a merry old soul, and a merry old soul was he.

He called for his fife, and he called for his drum and he called for his fiddlers three,’ etc.

I won a prize and couldn't wait to collect it. It was the biggest bar of chocolate I had ever seen. But I couldn't believe my eyes with disappointment when I unwrapped it and found it was made of wood! Somehow or other a display bar, for use in shop windows, had been mixed with the real ones. I was broken-hearted. My brother, Vin, was in the same play, acting the part of Jack in the Box. At the end of a recitation by his class, he was supposed to jump out of a tea chest wrapped in fancy paper and announce, 'I'm Jack in the Box.' But the item was delayed, he was confined in the box, and, as a result, when the dramatic moment arrived, nothing happened; he had fallen asleep! My primary school stage career in came to an end when, in a hurry about something, I jumped off the stage, and whacked my head off a desk, needing stitches close to my right eye.

My parents wanted to give us the opportunity of learning music, so they arranged lessons at the convent in the piano and the violin. I recall learning an elementary piece called *Playing Tennis*, which was just two notes over and back, again and again. I had a certificate from the Royal Irish Academy of Music to prove it – wasn't that important? Dr. Larchet was the big name in musical circles, and he was my examiner – God help the man! Overall, the family's musical venture was unsuccessful. I think the part we enjoyed most was taking the violin out of its case on the way home from school, and scraping and scratching the tortured strings – especially since we had been told not to!

After three years at the Convent school I started at the Christian Brothers'. I had lay-teachers there during my time. They taught in the manner of the time, with much use of a stick. The biblical saying, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' (Proverbs 13.24, etc.) was often invoked. The atmosphere in the classrooms was one of fear, fear of making a mistake in a lesson, or not being able to give the right answer. Punishment would often follow, a beating on the hand with a stick or leather. 'Six of the best – *Sín amach do lámh*' were words that evoked dread. In winter, when a child who might have walked or ridden a bike for a few miles, would come in with cold hands and be beaten on them, the pain was much greater than on a warm hand. It was harsh.

In recent years, I read the autobiography of Pervez Musharraf, a former president of Pakistan, who mentioned that the only time in his life he was beaten was by a Catholic priest in high school. And, in Thailand, when I was trying on one occasion to explain to a local guide about the location of a Catholic school in Chiang Mai, he didn't understand at first, but then said, 'Oh, I know! You mean the school where they beat the children.' I feel ashamed that in a Buddhist country this would be the identifying mark of a Catholic school.

One of the staff in Thurles, who enjoyed high esteem in the town as a great teacher, I found cruel. There was a boy in the class who was older and larger than the rest of us but well behind in his ability. In addition, he suffered from a stammer. I recall the teacher mimicking him, in front of the class, mocking his efforts at speech. It was

done so as to make the rest of us join in laughing approval. To my shame, I did. Then, one day, something dramatic happened. The teacher mimicked the boy once again, but he stood up face to face with him and punched him in the head. I was delighted, and the other boys, too, because we felt that a bully had got what was coming to him. Other teachers were called and the boy was brought out of the class. We never saw him in the school again. In later years I sometimes wondered if he had been sent to a reformatory to be dealt with, and, if so, what happened to him there. We had heard of such places, and they inspired fear; they were places you didn't want to go to.

At the time, parents, with few exceptions, beat their children and approved of teachers doing the same. Many times throughout the years, I heard parents say that if their child, on returning from school, complained that the teacher had beaten them, they would say to the child that, if that was the case, there must have been a good reason for it, and they would then give him or her another beating to reinforce the point. The relationship of parent to child seems to have been one of mistrust, even adversarial, as if the child was a threat that had to be kept at bay. Parents were quicker to blame than to praise. There was a readily available and frequently used bagful of put-down phrases used with children, like, 'Who do you think you are?' 'Don't be getting too big for your boots', and so forth. A confrère told me of a girl he knew who won a prize at primary school for her religious knowledge. Her teacher, out of simple generosity, had bought a prize, organized a competition,

and she won it. When she went home, she was delighted to tell her parents, perhaps expecting commendation. Her father's response was to say, 'Well, if you came first, the rest of them can't have been much good.' That must have been savagely destructive to her self-confidence, but it was the kind of response widely used. Children needed to be "kept down," it was thought. Many years later, in speaking to an active retirement group, I cited this incident as an example to illustrate a point, but found that the group, by then grandparents, said that the father was right, as otherwise the girl might have 'got notions about herself' or 'got beyond herself.' Self-confidence was often seen as a problem to be overcome, a sign of potential pride or disobedience. I'm glad to be able to say that my own parents were not like that. They encouraged, they supported, they challenged.

There was also a widespread assumption that boys needed to be beaten pretty regularly even if they had done nothing wrong. 'It's good for them,' people used to say. About the year 2004, an elderly woman boasted to me of how she had taught her children the difference between right and wrong by beating them - with a poker! At home, there were threats of punishment from time to time, but I don't recall any being given, except being sent to bed early.

My siblings and I walked to school, but we occasionally got a lift from The Fat Man in a pony and trap. In winter, straw was placed in the "well" of the trap; that was the insulation. The leather reins rested on a brass rail, highly polished from being rubbed constantly.

Occasionally, the horse would flick its tail and you would get a lash across the face – not always welcome, especially on a cold morning! Other rear-end activity wasn't welcome either, but you put up with it for the sake of the ride!

I had my tonsils out in 1951 at the local hospital. As I was being given the anaesthetic, I said to the nurse that I wanted to stay awake. She assured me that I would. I remember that, as I drifted off to sleep, I felt cheated. It was my first experience of being lied to by an adult. Later, when my parents came to visit and presented me with a rosary beads in a purse, I felt like the greatest VIP on earth. This was followed by the school sports, which I was not allowed to take part in, as it was not long after my tonsillectomy. So the Brothers gave me a gentleman's top hat to wear, and I have a photo to prove it!

Fair days were tricky. Farmers from the surrounding countryside would gather from early morning in Liberty Square and Cathedral Street in the town centre to buy and sell farm animals. Shop windows were boarded up for protection. By school-time, especially on wet days, the square would be awash in cow dung, slithery and easy to fall in. Frightened cattle might run, and, if you weren't quick, you could get knocked over. On the way home from school, the farmers would have had plenty to drink, and occasionally fights would break out, a new and scary experience.

Returning from school one day with a friend, we walked past a filling station and saw the pump attendant spill some petrol on the ground. One of us had a box of matches – I don't remember which – lit one, and threw it on the petrol. It exploded instantly with a bright rush of flames that frightened us. We ran; I heard shouts and looked over my shoulder to see someone running from the garage with a fire extinguisher. They mustn't have known who we were, because there was no follow-up! I may have had a pyromaniacal gene as I also remember setting fire to a newspaper and putting it into the box of turf that was beside the wood-burning stove we had in the kitchen. When the flames roared up, I became frightened and didn't know what to do. Fortunately, at that moment, my mother came into the kitchen and dealt with it.

In later years, my mother told us that a Garda sergeant had called to the house one day to say that we were the wildest bunch of children that had ever come to the town. And she had thought we were angels. We weren't, but I think our guardian angels must have had nervous breakdowns!

There was a local man who used to expose himself on the road and invited my siblings and me to play with his genitals. To me, it was a joke, an adult making a fool of himself, something I wasn't used to. My parents were alarmed, and issued a *firman* that we were never to go near him.

Snapshots from Thurles

A man ambling along the road on a balmy summer's evening, singing, 'Stars twinkle above; it's the loveliest night of the year.' He was just happy; life was as simple as that.

My siblings and I learned to keep an eye out for the archbishop, Dr. Kinane, when he went for a walk along our road; we knew he had sweets in his pocket and would share them. Cultivating bishops is a skill I seem to have lost along the way!

We had picnics of a sort in the fields in summer. We would look for mushrooms and "cook" them (i.e. burn them) over a fire made of anything combustible we could find. We brought tomatoes from the hothouse, and bottles of water to drink. Vin, with his scouting skills, directed operations. We looked for newts, and were astonished to discover that, if you caught one by the tail, it could disconnect it and you'd be left holding a wriggling tail detached from the body. We watched larks in the clear air, dropping like stones until just above the ground. There was plenty of wildlife – hares, foxes, badgers, ants, pheasants, frogs and tadpoles; and, in those pre-myxomatosis days, rabbits were everywhere. We gathered flowers for the May altar at school, and had one at the top of the stairs at home – daffodils and cowslips were prominent, and took particular delight in taking them from a field belonging to Dr. Armstrong, the Church of Ireland archbishop, who lived just across the road. Protestants didn't go in for devotion to Our Lady, so stealing flowers for her made it even better. We often

got lost on these expeditions, and my father would have to go looking for us around the countryside in his car. We would lose a sense of time, but we thought you could tell it by blowing dandelion seeds from the stem: if it took five puffs to blow them all away, that meant it was five o'clock. But we also played in safety on the roads as there was little traffic; an oncoming car evoked excitement and we would run to look at it. Common sights on the roads were the horse and what was called the "common cart", a pony and trap, or a donkey drawing a load of turf.

I discovered black people one day when I saw two African American soldiers – we called them Negroes in those days – walking along the road in uniform. I doubt if I had known that black people existed, but it was certainly my first time seeing them.

My mother was a gardener and taught me the names of flowers – lilac, lupins, laburnum, tulips, roses, woodbine, Saint John's wort, honeysuckle, forget-me-not, geraniums, pansies, fuchsia, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, snapdragons, lily of the valley, and others.

Vin and I looked for birds' nests, and - I'm glad to say - had the sense to leave them alone when we found them. Thrushes used to build theirs in furze bushes, where they were well protected by sharp spines. The smell of furze in the spring still recalls those memories.

I remember Ireland as being a safe place. In 1949, in the Republic of Ireland, there was 1 murder, 2 armed robberies, and 16 cars were stolen. (Source: Central Statistics Office, *That was Then; This is Now*, 1999, p.60.) In the fifties, life expectancy for an Irish male was sixty-six, and for a female was sixty-seven. Now it's eighty-one and eighty-two respectively. I sometimes reflect that, with the average age of clergy in Ireland approaching seventy, it's the medical profession that keeps the church going.

We had a radio, while many families did not. TV was unheard of. There was only one radio station in the country - Radio Éireann - and we used to have people come to the house to listen to Gaelic football or hurling matches. It made me feel important. We had no phone, but, since no one else had one either, there didn't seem to be much point to them. One of the great thrills of radio was listening day by day to the story of the liberty ship, *Flying Enterprise*, and its Danish captain, Knut Carlsen, who was rescued at the last minute by the tug *Turmoil* in January 1952. This story from real life brought excitement to our quiet, sedate lives.

One day, I saw a woman carrying hares to the fair and asked my mother how she had caught them. Probably tired of being bombarded with questions, she said the woman had run after them; I was impressed. And, one evening, I asked her what stars were, and she answered that they were atoms in the mind of God.

Clare and I were walking home from town one day when we passed a confectionery shop. There were éclairs in the window. If only we could have one, but we had no money. We discussed strategy. We went into the shop and engaged the saleswoman in conversation. There was a connection there; my mother had known her from Boyle in the past. We “accidentally” let it slip that it was our birthdays. Clare’s is the third of November, mine the second. But was it November at all? I don’t remember. At any rate, she felt obliged to offer us something for our shared big day. What would we like? Éclairs, of course... bliss!

Our food was simple. We ate home-made brown bread with “country” butter. White bread, a luxury, was delivered to the door from Delahunty’s bakery by a horse-drawn van; we used to wait for it, and delighted in pulling bits of crust off the loaves while we occupied the driver with chatter, so that he wouldn’t notice. For breakfast we had oatmeal porridge, or “goodie” which was bread without the crust, with sugar spread over it and covered with hot milk; I think we had it if we had a stomach problem. My mother made jam from crab apples, vegetable marrows and rhubarb (in later years we called the latter Ronnie Delaney jam after the 1956 Olympic 1500 metres winner, because it was so watery that it ran all over the place!) We collected milk from a nearby farmer; it was unpasteurized. Meat was fairly common, especially beef or mutton, but chicken was a luxury. Fish was for Fridays, and we didn’t like it, mainly, I think, for its association with penance. Apart from apples, there was little fruit, and it was only slowly

that oranges, bananas, raisins, sultanas and prunes returned after the war. Rice was for puddings only, never a substitute for potatoes; that would have been culinary treason. Pasta we never heard of. We grew vegetables in the back garden and had a gardener, Harry Kavanagh, who was left-footed (literally) and had a spade that no one else could use; he made me a present of a pigeon one time, but it didn't last long. We also had maids, who came and went with great speed; I think my mother may have been a hard task-mistress. My favourite job in the kitchen was using the hand-wringer on the washing machine; I thoroughly enjoyed pushing shirts, blouses and pyjama tops into it, crushing the buttons as they went!

Clothing was a matter of patch, mend, wear and hand-me-down. My father's brother, Michael, who ran a shop in Sneem, used to send us cloth and food items during the war. Clare and I, as the youngest girl and boy, got what had been worn by the others for a few years. I don't think that ever bothered me. Family photos from the period show us dressed in warm clothes, but fashion was never a consideration.

My parents voted Fianna Fáil and read *The Irish Press* under its masthead of *The Truth in the News*. We were simple, credulous people. American cartoons like Dagwood and Blondie were favourites of ours, but Flash Gordon was my special favourite, along with a forgotten character who had a handy attribute – X-ray eyes; maybe he was *Dantro the Planet Man*. Vin's favourite was the cowboy *The Cisco Kid*. These cartoon characters

probably did more good for US-Irish relations than any ambassador!

One of my American uncles came home in 1951, I think. He was a brother of my father's, Father Dan, a priest in Arizona. He had been ordained in Saint Kieran's College in Kilkenny in 1929 for Glasgow diocese, but persistent chest problems called for a transfer to a dry climate. Arizona suited him, and he was happy there – until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) which he heartily loathed. He was given VIP treatment while with us. He asked for butter without salt as he couldn't stomach salted butter. At that time, all Irish butter was salted. So there was a problem – how to accommodate his wishes. Many years later I was told by my father that what my mother used to do was to take a piece of the butter we all ate, set it on a separate dish, instructing us not to touch it, and given it to Father Dan, assuring him that it was perfectly safe for him to eat. He did so happily and was none the wiser! He used to horrify my father when he complained that he couldn't get more than seventy miles an hour out of my father's Ford Prefect which he borrowed. Prefects were never expected to do such speed, and there was hardly a road in the country where seventy was possible for any length.

Death cast a shadow over the family twice in 1950. The first, in February, was of my father's brother, Vincent, who was then forty-one, and married with four children. He and my father had been close to each other as boys, being nearest in age in their family. Vincent was

a doctor and died when his car went off the road and over a sheer drop near Rathdrum in County Wicklow in the early hours of 2 February. There were no barriers in those days to prevent such things. The suddenness and violence of his death shocked my father, and, in later years, the mention of Vincent's name would always bring him close to tears. There was an unusual sequel: their mother was still alive, a frail woman of eighty-three, and they were afraid to tell her what had happened for fear the shock might kill her. But she had to be told, so they cooked up a story to ease the shock: they said Vincent had died of a heart attack. She listened to them, and then said she knew it wasn't true because she had had a dream of his car going over a big drop. I feel embarrassed to say that I have no memory of him, but only of the large American car he had, a V8.

A month later, Brendan, a brother of my mother's, died at the age of thirty-one. He suffered from tuberculosis and was given a wrong blood transfusion during a chest operation. In those days, if there was an enquiry into such a death, it would have been kept secret, within the "walls" of the profession, so to speak. We might never have known the truth but for the fact that a brother of Brendan's was a doctor. Neither was there compensation; indeed, people would have taken offence at the mention of it in such circumstances; it would have sounded like saying that you could put a price on a human life. As with Vincent, I don't remember Brendan either - I was five at the time - but I remember being sent to a neighbour's house to be looked after while my mother went away. I found it a frightening experience,

because of the uncertainty and secrecy that surrounded it. It seems that the neighbours were told to tell me nothing. I knew something was wrong, but didn't know what. And why was I being put in a neighbour's house, one whom I didn't know? What was going on? I could have coped with reality, I think, but not with evasion.

The life of faith

As a family, we said the rosary each evening, kneeling in the kitchen or on the steps of the stairs. Before I started school, my mother had taught me the basic prayers – the Sign of the Cross, Our Father, Hail Mary and Glory be to the Father. This she did before I went to bed in the evening. I remember thinking that the Our Father was very long, and wondering if I'd ever be able to remember it all, and I used to confuse the words of the Sign of the Cross and the Glory be. My mother told me later that teaching us our prayers was when she really learned them herself. We ran into difficulties with the rosary later, mostly through my giggling, I think. Although we didn't have "trimmings" as some families did that could greatly lengthen the prayers, Vin, on one occasion, according to my mother, possibly exaggerating, said thirty-two Hail Marys in his "decade."

Sunday Mass was a must; it was unthinkable not to attend. We knew our *Catechism*:

Q: What sin do they commit who do not assist at Mass on a Sunday or holy-day of obligation?

A: They who, through their own fault, do not assist at Mass on a Sunday or holy-day of obligation commit a mortal sin.

And we knew the consequences of mortal sin: -

Q: Where do they go who die in mortal sin?

A: They who die in mortal sin go to hell for all eternity.

(Put references at the end. *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, approved by the archbishops and bishops of Ireland, M. H. Gill and Son Ltd., Dublin, 1951, nn.287, 65.)

It was strong stuff, but the wrath of parents was nearer to hand than hell, and there was simply no question of not going to Sunday Mass. Not to have done so would have been like apostasy, treason and suicide all in one, unless we were prevented by illness. Dressed in our Sunday best, my mother would lead us into the cathedral, saying, ‘Go right up to the blue statue.’ This was the statue of Our Lady about half-way up the cathedral on the right-hand side. I have few memories of Mass other than looking at the blue stained glass windows at the other side; I thought they were too dark and didn’t like them, although I do, now. (The nuns had a separate Mass in their own convent chapels. At that time the Presentation Convent had about a hundred sisters and the nearby Ursuline Convent about eighty.) Sometimes the archbishop would preach, and this was something to dread. When he began by saying, ‘I have just a few short words....’ you knew it was going to be a long session. Everything except the sermon was in Latin, so people usually prayed quietly during Mass, some using the rosary, a few following it with an English

missal. People had strong faith and reverence; before, during and after Mass there was silence, and people prayed.

I think it's a great pity that the church ever introduced the idea of an *obligation* to attend Mass on Sunday. Participation in the Eucharist is a grace and a privilege, something to be treasured. To move it into the category of obligation changes that. It evokes negative responses, such as the habitual late-arriving which is a universal Catholic practice not found among Protestants. A sense of resentment at the coercion involved expressed itself in a minimalist level of participation, or simply by not coming to Mass at all, and then seeing that as an abandonment of the faith. When Irish churches were full on Sunday mornings, with standing room only, you could see people read the paper or even sell cattle at Mass; some men would leave the church during the liturgy of the word and go outside for a smoke, returning later. Lots of people went to Mass out of social pressure, and dropped it altogether soon after emigrating. A cultural Catholicism didn't have roots in personal commitment. The obligation required people to be present for the offertory, so people had things worked out to arrive just in time for it, and not a moment earlier; or else, if people came at the start, it was considered alright to leave at Communion. (There was Communion at the early Masses, not the later ones, as people had been fasting from midnight.) You could cut off the top or the tail of the Mass – but not both. This was all worked out officially and I was taught it at school. People had learned which priests in the locality were quick and

which were slow, and they would find out which priest was on which Mass, and go to the quickest. I know of a priest who does everything himself at Sunday Mass, has no sermon or prayers of the faithful, and uses every trick of the trade to speed things up, and people come to his Mass in much larger numbers than the “slow” priest. In my childhood, the numbers who came to Mass was high; the level of participation was another matter. If people come under duress, they will likely display passive aggression; it’s the way humans level the pitch. I saw in Zambia many years later, that, where people had a daily Mass where the mission was located, few came to it, while, in distant churches, which might have Mass only once or twice a year, people came and participated with an enthusiasm that had to be seen to be believed. In this regard, change has been under way for several decades now, driven by the grassroots. I believe that good will come of it, with better participation by congregations who are there because they believe in it and want to be there.

I don’t remember my first Confession. I know that we were well prepared for it, with my father asking me the *Catechism* questions about it, and the teachers at school teaching us the formulae. With classroom sizes of about forty, rote learning was probably a necessity from the teacher’s viewpoint, and I think there’s a good deal to be said for it: we remembered. Confession was usually weekly, on Saturday morning; if you went only fortnightly, you were getting slack. Years later, when hearing confessions in Saint Brendan’s Mental Hospital in Grangegorman, Dublin, I remember noticing how

even confused patients who could not normally put a coherent sentence together in conversation were able to make a coherent confession. I felt that there were two factors at work: one was that they remembered the childhood formula and it helped them; the other was as if they said to themselves, ‘This is important, so cut out the messing.’

I don’t remember my first Communion either, although I have a photo of myself looking angelic to recall it. I remember some of the fuss about it at home beforehand, but not the event itself. It puzzles me that those two major events passed so unnoticed in my life. As I grew up, I came to like confession more and more; it was my favourite sacrament, because it was one-to-one, more personal than the others, and there was a sense of purification in it. I don’t recall ever feeling the joy, even ecstasy that others speak of in making Communion.

Faith seemed “natural,” even obvious. Without our being aware of it, it gave us creed, code, cult and community. There was a set of shared values to live by and hopes to live for; there was a shared language for communicating them. Faith helped form good relationships; it motivated people to a willingness to share and to serve, and it gave us an active sense of conscience. It helped create a community that was coherent, integrated, and self-respecting. I was proud to be a Catholic throughout my childhood and teen years.

In recent decades, through the reports of inquiries into institutions run by church personnel, and into sexual and

other abuse of children by clergy, we have been made aware of another side – dark and evil - to that same society. I think that, throughout that abuse, there was an undercurrent of class division, fuelled by snobbery. People at the bottom of the ladder didn't matter. In Dublin diocese – perhaps in others, too – when abusing priests were transferred, there was a pattern: they were sent progressively to parishes which were lower and lower on the socio-economic ladder. The poor generally don't have the education or the self-confidence to challenge the powerful. Issues were ignored, or swept under the carpet. There was much moral cowardice.

But today's society has its dark areas, too, and there is sometimes wilful refusal to look them in the eye, recognize them for what they are, call them by name, and deal with them. I believe that later generations will look back on the early twenty-first century and ask, with wonder and amazement, how we passively accepted some things which will seem outrageous to them. A minor example might be why we accept the deaths of hundreds of people on the road each year as an acceptable price to pay for a lifestyle of personal mobility. And, as for alcohol, they may ask why so many of us were seemingly stuck at the level of the infant who is never happier than with a bottle to his mouth. Just as we now look back in wonder at how “normal” people saw nothing wrong with slavery, with putting their fellow human beings up for sale in a market like a farmer selling animals, so also later generations may look back at us and wonder how we could regard as

right, much less as *a* right, the deliberate killing of an infant in its mother's womb.

My parents' life during the years in Thurles, 1944-52, and indeed before and after was hard and challenging, but, I think, happy. By the standards of the time, we were better off than average. My mother had five children in seven years. Five children was considered a small family. My father was committed to education and worked happily at it even after his retirement. They lived a simple life, neither smoking nor drinking, a conscious decision to save money at a time when parents had to pay for everything in a child's education after primary school, and when there was virtually no State health care provision, and social welfare services were minimal. Parents made provision or the family went without. My parents' entertainments were also simple: a walk, which, I suppose, gave them a chance of getting away from us and being able to talk together, or an occasional film. If we accompanied them on a walk, we went in front so that they could keep an eye on us. If it was raining, they might listen to the radio or read a newspaper or book. Their first holiday together was twenty-two years after their honeymoon. They were self-sacrificing and thought little of it; they expected it of themselves. If circumstances had called for greater sacrifices, they would have made them. And they taught us to be true to ourselves, to have independence of mind, and to be self-confident.

Did our parents love us? The question seems an insult. Of course they did. I have never doubted it. They loved

us, even if that love was undemonstrative; I have no memories of hugs or kisses, or anyone saying, ‘I love you.’ That would have seemed silly, unnecessarily effusive, more appropriate to Hollywood than to home. I think there may also have been a fear on their part that familiarity might breed contempt. But, the more I see of life, the more grateful I am for the parents I had. They were very good.

My happiest childhood memories are of our time in Thurles. I was very happy, and this was mainly because we were all there together. Towards the end of our time, Una and Veve went to boarding school in Thurles because Una was doing her Inter Cert and they didn’t want to change her during an exam year. Boarding school continued in later years and resulted in our missing each other a lot, which is something I greatly regret. I often missed them. Neither Una nor Veve liked boarding in Thurles: the food was inadequate and poorly cooked, and standards of hygiene were low.

I had just turned eight when we left Thurles for Blackrock, County Louth, following my father’s transfer.

Blackrock, County Louth, 1952-56

In November 1952, we moved into a new four-bedroomed (one downstairs) semi-detached red-brick house on a quiet lane off the main street of the village. It cost £2,080. A block-built garden shed was added at the back for an extra £50, an outrageous price – pure

robbery! There were confident local predictions that the house would fall down, because it was built on sand. But it and its three neighbours are still there sixty years later looking pretty solid.

By this time, Una and Veve were at boarding school, but no longer in Thurles; Una went to my mother's old school, Saint Louis in Monaghan, and Veve to the Saint Louis school in Dundalk, just a few miles from Blackrock. Vin, too, went boarding, first to the Franciscan College in Multyfarnham, and then in the new college in Gormanston; he has happy memories of both of them. Clare went to the Dominican Sisters school in Dundalk as a day-pupil, and I went to the Christian Brothers School (CBS) there. Classes were big, with forty or more being normal. As with the Presentation Sisters in Thurles, the Brothers provided food at their own expense for boys from poor families; some boys came to school without having had anything to eat. A brother would come at mid-morning break and call for the "Bun and Milk Boys." Sometimes I used to wish that I was from a poor family because I missed out on this, even though I could happily have eaten at any hour of the day or night.

While there also I was confirmed, in April 1954. The ceremony took place in the cathedral which was packed with children from several schools. Sound systems were poor or even non-existent in those days, and I heard little. The ceremony seemed interminable, and my only memory of it was that; I thought it would never end. Like confession and first Communion, confirmation was

an assembly line process which, at least subjectively, had little impact. I tried to resist the temptation to be mercenary and not estimate its worth in terms of the gifts of money I received.

I got into trouble at the CBS for stealing stamps from another's boys album, which must have been embarrassing for my father as a school inspector. My parents decided to transfer me to the local three-teacher national school on Sandy Lane in Blackrock. For me, it was a happy choice. The "Master" as he was called, Michael Joseph Spillane, was warm and humane. He taught third, fourth, fifth and sixth class together in one room, about twenty-five in all. By sixth class, we were literate and numerate including mental arithmetic, and could write a job application. We had learned large parts of the *Catechism* by heart, and understood it, I think.

There were just two other boys in fifth class when I went there – Seán Ward and Jerry McCabe. We had regular jobs to do each day: one was to set the mouse trap and place it on the mantelpiece above the fireplace; another was to come in early in winter and light the fire in the grate. There was a coal shed at the back, and Seán and I had a standing arrangement with an extremely poor elderly man who lived alone in a semi-derelict house next door that we would each bring him a bucket of coal daily in exchange for a Woodbine cigarette. After the deal was done, we would return to the shed, close the door and smoke our fags, all the more enjoyable for being the product of a bit of crookery! The Master himself was a smoker and I was occasionally sent to a

nearby shop to buy him a packet of twenty of the locally-made Sweet Afton cigarettes. They cost 2/8 – that’s two shillings and eight pence for those who don’t know, a little over one-eighth of a pound – and he swore he give them up if they increased the price. A budget came, they went up to 2/10, but he continued! I remember one day finding a packet of twenty Craven A, with the cat on the red, white and black wrapper. This was manna from heaven. Seán and I, on own way home from school, diverted to a boat upturned on the shore. We went in underneath it and lit up; the hull would keep the smoke from being seen by bothersome adults. But the smoke became dense underneath the hull, and its smell was joined to tar, seaweed and fish. We couldn’t take it, and had to get out and puke.

My father took an enlightened attitude towards smoking. He wanted to remove its “forbidden fruit” attractiveness, so he said that we were free to smoke if we wanted to. All we had to do was ask him, and he would buy us a packet of cigarettes, or a pipe and an ounce of tobacco. I was startled by this proposition; it was the last thing I had expected. Was this before or after my school ventures into smoking? I don’t remember, but I think I was afraid to put his offer to the test; I don’t remember ever asking him. Maybe I was trying to pretend I was all innocent and uninterested in smoking. At any rate, my parents didn’t smoke and none of the five of us children became smokers.

The second teacher at the school was Miss Winifred Campbell, who had been a Protestant but became a

Catholic. She was a really good person and I kept in contact with her and the Master for many years. The third teacher, who taught infants, was one whose name I don't remember. I got into trouble for putting my head around the door of her classroom one day and calling her a Danish battle-axe. Why Danish I don't know; perhaps it was a phrase I found in a book that appealed to me. I was made to apologize.

There was a reward for doing the jobs at school: the Master would sometimes give me a lift home on the bar of his bike. On one such occasion he asked me what I was going to do when I grew up, and I said I was going to write a book. He didn't laugh or belittle, but asked me what it would be about, and I said I hadn't decided yet.

Snapshots from Blackrock

One snapshot was of waking one morning in the winter of 1952-3 and finding the ground covered in deep snow. No school – great! Along with other children, I went to a nearby field which was blessed with a slope that seemed scarily steep at the time. Somebody had a toboggan of sorts and we enjoyed ourselves to the full sliding down the slope.

In March, when the Master was occupied with other children, Seán and I would watch hares running madly around the field at the back of the school, sometimes fighting in their odd way like boxers punching each other.

Less happy memories were of the sinking of the Stranraer-to-Larne roll-on roll-off ferry, *Princess Victoria*, in 1953 with the loss of over a hundred lives, and of severe flooding, the result of a combination of Spring tides and a northerly North Sea gale, that caused a storm surge that took over two thousand lives in the Netherlands and Britain.

There was the explosion of the first hydrogen bomb in 1953, which people blamed for the bad summer in 1954 when there was widespread flooding. We were told of a hydrogen bomb the Russians had that was so powerful that it couldn't be tested; I remember thinking that, in that case, it was pointless having it.

And there were the Comets, the new British passenger jets that left a contrail across the sky which we looked at with wonder. Then they began to crash; Jordan was blamed and threatened, because one or more came down on or near it; but metal fatigue was the cause.

I was beginning to acquire a lifelong interest in politics. A prominent name was that of Mohammed Mossadeq, the Iranian Prime Minister, who nationalized the BP oil company because he wanted Iran's oil to be used for the benefit of the Iranians rather than that of BP. My father said he had the right idea but would probably not succeed because he stood on his own, and the oil companies were too strong. He was right: the CIA overthrew him, restored the *status quo* and he spent the rest of his life under house arrest. That came as a shock:

the Americans were supposed to be the good guys, weren't they?

A neighbour bought a black-and-white TV with a tiny screen. He invited us to watch a performance of a Shakespearean play with Laurence Olivier in the lead part. My pals and I had no interest in Shakespeare, and Olivier seemed melodramatic. What we really enjoyed was when our host left the room, and we turned down the sound and laughed at the effusive talking faces with no sound; that was real entertainment.

My mother said to me one day, 'The war is over.' I think that may have been the first I knew there had been one on. It was the Korean war, and I felt a sense of relief that it was over, whatever it was about. My parents took me to a film about it called *Bridges at Toko-Ri*, starring Mickey Rooney and Grace Kelly; I loved every minute of it, not the romance indeed which for me was a boring waste of time, but the battle scenes.

A very easy subject at school was the geology of Ireland. It came under geography, and we were told simply that there was nothing there. That was easy to remember. It wasn't until later I discovered that we thought that way only because we hadn't looked. When exploration was undertaken, copper, lead, zinc, natural gas, and, more recently, oil, were discovered.

The fifteenth of August, the big day in The Rock (short for Blackrock) was when large numbers of Orangemen came from Northern Ireland for a major drinking

session. Fights would ensue, and sometimes bottles of drink were bought, smashed, and then used as weapons to stab someone in the face with. Orphans came from several Northern orphanages, and my friends and I tried to wangle our way into the queue when it came to meal-times, hoping for some grub, thinking that the server, with so many faces from orphanages other than his own, might not notice us. But our accents gave us away, and we were sent packing!

My two grandmothers died when we were in Dundalk, my paternal first in 1952, and my maternal in 1954. It was the first time I saw my mother crying.

My first ventures into book-reading began at this time. For Christmas one year, I was given *The Wind in the Willows*, and really enjoyed the adventures of Mole, Ratty, Mr. Toad and Mr. Badger. I also got *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, but was disappointed; I wanted fights, not Lady Guinevere swooning. The book that caused me most trouble was *The Three Musketeers*: there were lots of good fights but the bad guys kept winning! The king's men had to be bad: being Irish, I was allergic to kings; and the cardinal's men had to be good, since he was a cardinal. But Alexandre Dumas didn't seem to think so; he had it the other way round. I couldn't understand it and gave up.

Shortly after leaving Blackrock we heard of a fire in Windscale nuclear power station in Cumbria, Britain. Unusually, there was an easterly wind blowing at the

time, and ash from the fire was said to have fallen in the Dundalk area. This was followed years later by an unusually large number of deformed babies born to local girls who were in their teens at the time. In later years, the power station was re-named Sellafield.

Life in the church

I became an altar server in the local church of Blessed (now Saint) Oliver Plunkett, the only one in the world dedicated to his name. I was delighted with the soutane, which was red because we were in a diocese – Armagh – that had a cardinal for its bishop. A red soutane gave big status, much more than a black one. Serving Mass required learning the responses in Latin; there were several pages of text to memorize. It was my first contact with Latin, and I liked it. And there were many movements and actions to remember in serving Mass. The sacristan, a retired man, gave me a telling off one day for daring to touch an empty ciborium – a chalice-like container for holding Holy Communion - in a cupboard. No one was allowed to touch that, except the priest, he said.

Mass in those days was different from today, and not just in its language. Communion was different: sometimes there would be none; at others, it would be distributed after Mass; most often it would be distributed during Mass. There were special children's Masses, where the church would be full of children with no adults; but still we were quiet. We had a sense of the sacred which was good - not intimidating, but

reverential. When the priest preached, he usually began by removing the chasuble (the outer Mass vestment) almost as if to emphasize that the sermon had nothing to do with the Mass – and indeed sometimes it didn't! I recall one about girls' immodest behaviour. I didn't know what the word immodest meant and asked my father; he explained that the priest said it was wrong for girls to wear slacks. At the end of Mass there were special prayers in English to Blessed Michael the Archangel, asking him for protection against all the wicked spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls. I liked the prayer because it was in English, and there was a picture on the wall of Blessed Michael spearing a black devil and pushing him down to hell. I had problems with believing it happened like that. I wasn't the only one: in later years, in Africa, people asked me why the devil was always black and the angels always white.

Some of the collections were awful affairs; even then I felt badly about them. The priest and a collector would go around the church, people would hand over their money, the collector would take it, and the priest would announce the name and the amount: Mr. A, two and six; Mr. B, one shilling; Mr. C, sixpence, and so on. It sounded like blackmail. But I remember my father speaking of a priest who told him that he was embarrassed to be still financially dependent on his parents in his forties, because the priests' collection wasn't enough to live on.

Being an altar server meant I was more aware of church matters than I would otherwise have been. I recall the local priest, Father McNulty, announcing that the cardinal had declared that it was permissible for farmers to do “servile work” on Sunday, namely, to save the hay, in that wet summer of 1954. “Servile work”, defined as manual rather than mental, was normally forbidden by the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day. Sunday was a day of rest: shops, garages, restaurants and businesses were closed. But the catechism taught that it was lawful to engage in servile work on Sunday, when an urgent need of our selves or our neighbour or the service of God required it. But people were reluctant to act on this without the bishop’s ruling.

Redemptorist priests came and gave a parish mission, one week for men, the other for women. The crowds coming were often so large that loud-speakers would have to be erected outside the church, and sermons would be a talking-point afterwards in pubs and at home. Children did not generally attend. The preaching was fiery, black-and-white stuff. (A story circulated in Thurles of a man who ran from the cathedral during such a sermon, threw himself in the river, and drowned. Was it true or false? I don’t know.) I remember being scared of going to confession during the mission, not scared of the priest but of the people, because, owing to the large numbers, priests heard confession openly in different parts of the church, not only in the confessionals, and I was afraid people might hear my sins. I don’t think they would have been too shocked if they had, but I didn’t see it like that.

Lent was a special time. It began with Ash Wednesday and everyone was proud to wear the black mark of the ash on their forehead as a sign of penance. During Lent, many people went to Mass, made the Stations of the Cross, or just simply visited the church to pray, daily. People fasted for the forty days, eating one full meal and two collations; a collation was a small meal, like a boiled egg and a slice or two of toast. (At an election rally in Cork in 1957, a politician caused great amusement by condemning the failings of “the Collation government.”) People abstained from meat every Friday in the year, and, if receiving Communion, abstained from food from midnight the night before. The number of people going to confession increased substantially during Lent, and few people would not have gone. Everyone had their Lenten resolution, usually to give something up, like smoking, or a favourite food; people took seriously the matter of making, breaking and re-making a Lenten resolution. In the church there would be no music, singing, or decorations. As the season moved on into Passiontide, the last two weeks, the crucifix and statues were covered in violet cloths, giving the church an air of desolation. All of the above heightened the sense of achievement and of celebration when people went to Mass on Easter Sunday morning to find the church a blaze of colour, light, decoration and music. Out of it came a heightened sense of community; we had been in the same boat, sharing the difficulties of fasting and keeping our resolution. Lent demanded commitment and it gave it also. But did it lead people to focus on observances more than relationships?

Each year in the church, 2nd November was All Souls day. For each “visit” to the church on that day, you could gain a plenary indulgence applicable to the souls in purgatory. You said seven *Our Fathers*, *Hail Marys* and *Glory be to the Fathers*, with another *Our Father* and *Hail Mary* for the pope’s intentions, while having made Communion and sacramental confession within nine days before or after the 2nd, and were free from all attachment to sin. The latter was a tall order! People made multiple visits, going out and then back in again, as often as they could, to free as many souls as possible from purgatory. There was an understanding that one soul was released for each visit. It seems mechanical and ritualized now, and resting on dodgy theology, but it was done with faith and reverence.

Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve was wonderful; there was something magical about it, especially if there was snow. We walked to the church, the family, the seven of us, together. Perhaps it was a child’s sense of association with Jesus as a child, but it was the most special Mass of the year, besides which Easter seemed of minor significance. The Easter ceremonies followed the pre-1955 reform, and were strange to those who understood Latin, while to those who didn’t, they were simply longer than the usual Mass. I feel a sense of loss that the midnight Mass has been mostly brought forward to an earlier time, sadly because of men coming in drunk and making a nuisance of themselves.

Looking out to the wider world

Towards the end of our time in Blackrock, the IRA began its border campaign of attacks on police stations in Northern Ireland, or the Six Counties as we then called it. My view was that they should blow up everything British and we'd get the Six Counties back. They had been taken from us, and we were entitled to them. Then Ireland, long a province, would be a nation once again - as simple as that! A popular hero was Seán South from Garryowen in Limerick; but what I didn't learn until recent years was that he was a man of fascist sympathies and anti-Semitic to boot. In 1957, Cardinal D'Alton, the archbishop of Armagh, proposed a solution based on a federal system of government for a united Ireland. It got nowhere: Unionists did not want to be part of the Republic in any shape or form. The family visited the North on a few occasions, a difficult process requiring a triptyque for the car, which involved placing a bond in advance with the Northern Ireland authorities. I was shocked by the sight of policemen with guns. The *B Specials* in particular were loathed because of a reputation for sectarian brutality. The border campaign fizzled out in 1962 for lack of support from the Nationalist community. Governments in Belfast and Dublin had each imposed internment of suspects indefinitely, without trial or charge. In Northern Ireland, the *Special Powers Act* was so draconian that John Vorster, then South African minister for justice and later prime minister, said he would gladly exchange all of South Africa's security legislation for it.

Another family outing we undertook after school from time to time was to go to the Cooley Mountains. Although at the time I didn't enjoy climbing, something of it must have remained with me, as I came to love it in later years, in New Zealand, Ireland, and Tanzania.

My mother had an atlas in the house from her schooldays, printed in the nineteenth century, when much of the map was coloured red. I loved looking at it, and indeed still enjoy maps. A name that caught my eye in Africa was a place with the mysterious name of Barotseland; I remembered the name because it was unusual, with no notion that I would later spend twenty years there.

Cork

I was unaware of it at the time, but my father was doing well in his work as a school inspector, and was well regarded by his peers. He said that he saw his role as that of helping teachers to be better teachers, not as a snooper or spy, trying to catch them out in a mistake. He never mentioned names, but occasionally spoke of going to schools where the teacher was drunk, or had failed to turn up at all; this happened more often in one-teacher schools. Many teachers were untrained. What is remarkable perhaps was how many good teachers there were who cared for the children in their charge and gave them a good education.

We had come to Blackrock in November 1952, and left it for Cork in February 1956. My father's school district

was in the west of the county. Cork at the time was in a depressed state, with high unemployment and emigration, a pattern which was found in most of the rest of the country. He had difficulty in finding a house, as there was little private building. There was an impressive amount of public building under way in Cork at the time, in the new suburbs of Ballyphehane and Gurránabráher, under a dynamic city manager, Philip Monahan. Gurránabráher became known as “The Red City”, not because of any communist leanings, but because of the red tiles of the roofs which stood out clearly on the hillside. Cork was trying to put its best foot forward with an international film festival, and re-building its Opera House, destroyed by fire in December 1955.

We rented a house – *Villa Antoine* – on the South Douglas Road which had previously been occupied by a rabbi, the Reverend Samuel Barron and his wife, who had left for the then Gold Coast, which became independent as Ghana in 1957. She was a survivor of the concentration camps. The front gate of the house opened directly onto a busy road without a footpath, and I think that may have been one reason why my parents saw it as only a temporary solution.

At this time, Una was studying science in University College, Cork (UCC), Veve was in her last year at Saint Louis Secondary School in Monaghan, Vin had two years to go at Gormanston, and Clare went to school in Saint Al’s (Aloysius) Mercy school near the city centre. I was sent to the Model National School near the City Hall, on a direct bus route from home.

A great teacher - genuinely

I attended the Model School from February to June 1956 when I did the Primary Cert, an exam that was necessary for entry into secondary. I had an excellent teacher there, perhaps the best I have known – Major Mossy Donegan. He had strict discipline, and there was no messing in his class; we were there to work. With him, discipline was not a synonym for beating, as it often was elsewhere. What I most remember him for is that, whatever subject he taught, he imparted character training. For example, in English class, he taught us how to parse and analyse a sentence – the subject, the predicate and the object; the principal clause and the subordinate clause; the use of punctuation – commas, colons, semi-colons, full stops, etc.; and that a sentence was to be a unit of meaning. He would write a sentence on the board, give us time to think about it, then choose a boy to stand in front of the class and analyse the sentence, giving reasons for his position. Other boys could and would challenge the analysis, and he would be expected to defend his position.

One day, Mr. Donegan followed this pattern with a sentence that the class found difficult to analyse and which brought lots of disagreement. Gradually the class formed into two groups, each centred round a different analysis. The issues were argued back and forth in favour of analysis A or B. Gradually the A group grew larger until there was only one supporter of B left – me. I had to choose, either to go with the flow, or stand by what I thought, despite the self-assured grins of the other boys. I genuinely thought I was right and the others

wrong. To my relief and delight, the Master declared that I was right, and explained why. That was a great lesson for me, and I have gone back to it in my mind more than once since then.

The medium of instruction in the Model School was Irish, which I had studied only as a school subject. I found it difficult, even though, for a time, in Thurles, our parents had tried to persuade us children to use it at home. But that hadn't worked as we didn't have the fluency for conversation. This time, however, I picked it up quickly enough, and whatever Irish remained to me in later life I gained there.

The only exam I ever really worried about in my life was the Primary Cert. I felt unsure about it, and was surprised when I passed.

Snapshots from Cork

At this time, sport, entertainment and cultural life of any sort in Cork, especially for children, was severely limited, because of an outbreak of polio which hit the city, and crippled about ninety children. My parents, with a view to getting us out of the city, rented a bungalow in Knocknacarra, Salthill, County Galway, near the golf links for our summer holiday. The bungalow, a ramshackle building made of railway sleepers wrapped in tar-coated felt, would fail a health and safety check today on a hundred grounds - it did in fact burn down later – but for us it was heaven. We had the sea, the golf links when they were free, and walks to

the Grey Island – actually a peninsula – in the early morning to collect mushrooms. I used to listen to foreign radio stations, using as an aerial the metal bunk bed I slept in. Radio Moscow was easily recognisable by the pseudo-American accents of its presenters, holding earnest discussions about the brilliant successes of the latest Five Year Plan. Galway cathedral was under construction and we marvelled at the stonework. One day, near the Franciscan Abbey, beside the salmon weir, I saw the pale body of a boy of about my own age lying dead on the river-bank. He had drowned - intimations of mortality.

I saw a newspaper advertisement for a staff position in John Player, the tobacco company, with the note, ‘No Catholics need apply.’ And this was in the Republic in the fifties!

I posted a letter to a friend one morning and received a reply by post that afternoon. There were two deliveries daily, and one on Saturday.

About 1960, I attended a lecture by a Garda superintendent in which he said that the main crime the Guards had to deal with was the theft of bikes.

I recall my father coming home from town one day to say he had discovered that his bank balance stood at 6d (sixpence)! Under the civil service regulations of the day, he was not allowed to go into debt, except for a mortgage, lest he be drawn into taking bribes. My parents never bought anything on hire purchase; their

attitude, and that of many, perhaps most, others was that you did without things until you could afford to pay for them.

The news of the world

The outside world kept breaking in. The invasion of Egypt by Britain, France and Israel - euphemistically called "the Suez crisis"- in autumn 1956 came in retaliation for President Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. Irish people supported Egypt. I saw a picture on *The Sunday Press* of the bodies of a dead woman and child on a Cairo street in front of a destroyed building, captioned, "There were no civilian casualties", quoting a British military spokesman. The invasion led to closure of the Suez Canal and fuel rationing; I resented the fact that priests were exempt. And the Soviet invasion of Hungary, which followed soon after, a similar exercise in colonial arrogance, could not be condemned by those who had not condemned the attack on Egypt. Large numbers of Hungarian refugees came to Ireland, mostly in transit for a few months before leaving for the U. S. They evoked resentment, as they demonstrated in the camps, demanding facilities and conditions which few Irish people had in their homes at the time.

Bishopstown, County Cork

Our family moved in November 1956 to a new semi-detached house, *Inis Ealga* (a poetic name for Ireland), in Bishopstown on the western side of the city on the

road to Bandon. It was similar to our house in Blackrock, and cost £2,240. My mother asked what in God's name the world was coming to when the price of a house had increased by £160 in four years. (The Blackrock house had been £2,080.)

The locality was populated mostly by elderly retired people, and newly-married young couples with babies. There were no boys or girls of my age, and that was a limitation I found difficult to cope with. But one near neighbour was a puzzle: she was unmarried, but seemed to have frequent male overnight visitors. My parents wondered what the explanation might be for this strange behaviour. I knew that some of the visitors were plainclothes Guards, because of the brass fire-extinguisher in the back window of their otherwise unmarked cars. (You should have been more careful, Guards, and you detectives; boys notice these things!) But that only added to the mystery. Eventually the truth came out – she was a prostitute.

Bishopstown was then a small place; our parish church was the Lough parish, though I don't think we ever went there as it was a good distance away. Instead we went to the Society of Missions to Africa (SMA) church in Wilton, or to the Franciscans in Liberty Street for Mass at 11.15. Occasionally we went to the Augustinians on Washington Street, or, rarely, to the Capuchins in Holy Trinity, which I thought a strange place, with the collectors in brown Third Order habits jiggling a kind of horse's nose bag on a pole before you for the collection.

Pres

Despite my fears, I passed the Primary Cert and started secondary school at the Presentation Brothers' College on the Western Road in the autumn of 1956. It was a gentler place than the Christian Brothers' schools; there was no corporal punishment, except rarely, if a teacher lost his temper. The absence of such punishment didn't turn us into libertines nor did the school degenerate into indiscipline. Most of my teachers were laymen, and I have good memories of them: Danny Duggan, of whom it was said that if a boy couldn't learn Latin from him, he wouldn't learn it from anyone; Fred Holland, a good teacher also, but who failed with me where maths was concerned; Seán McCarthy, an excellent teacher of Irish and Christian doctrine - better than the brothers with the latter - because he understood it and was able to explain it. The Brothers tended to say, 'Just take it on faith' when I was looking for explanations. He was a hard worker, and was overworked. Dan Donovan taught English, and had a great love for the theatre, especially Shakespeare. I remember feeling sorry for Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* because he was forced to become a Christian, and I felt it was an abuse to compel him. Flor McCarthy taught geography, and I had a variety of teachers for history and science. One of the science teachers used to conduct mysterious experiments in a room off the science hall; we boys were given to understand that these were simply beyond us and it was best not to enquire. Naïve though we were, it gradually dawned on us that the "experiments" were extra-curricular, alcoholic in nature, and mainly about how to get drunk while projecting an appearance of sobriety!

Brother Angelo Conlon was the principal for my last years there, and he brought great energy to his job. I was astonished, as were the other boys, when we returned to school one autumn for a new year to find that the school had been refurbished and was bright, clean, and attractive-looking. From a background where schools never seemed to change from one year to the next, and drabness was the norm, this was a breath of fresh air, as surprising as it was delightful. Unfortunately, Angelo did not live long after, dying in 1967 at the age of only fifty-five. When I began in Pres, as it was called, fees were £6 a term, rising to £7 towards the end of my time.

In Christian doctrine we used a textbook called *Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine* written by a retired archbishop, Michael Sheehan. It was a simplified form of what I was to meet later in training for the priesthood under the name of Fundamental Theology. It gave rational arguments for the existence of God and moved on from there. I found it really good; I liked it and was good at it. Of course, my companions and I liked to think up difficulties to throw at the teacher. One arrow that landed on target was about the infallibility of bishops: the book said that, under certain circumstances, they were. We cited Bishop Lucey who had spoken at confirmation criticizing the county council for buying expensive road-building machinery when there were many unemployed men in the county who would have been glad of a job as manual labourers. Was he infallible? I don't recall the answer but it didn't impress. Despite that, my experience of the book, and especially of Seán McCarthy's explanation of it, was positive. It

demonstrated that faith and reason were in harmony, coming from one source - God - and that an intelligent and robust presentation of faith was possible.

One of my classmates was Eoghan Harris, later a journalist and senator. He was articulate and outspoken. With the IRA border campaign regularly in the news, although state censorship prohibited the use of the letters IRA – only oblique references to “an illegal organization” were allowed – Eoghan set out his position: the only solution to the Border problem was a heavy machine-gun. He mellowed.

Rugby was compulsory in first year; after that, as I had failed to impress, there was no more, and I was happy to hang up my boots. My mother forbade me to participate in school activities other than classes; ‘Come straight home’. She wanted to limit my contact with other boys in case I got a Cork accent! That was a horror too dreadful to contemplate. Coupled with the absence of peers in Bishopstown, that made life at home lonely. My companion was a dog we called Rover, who turned up one Christmas Eve and introduced himself. He was half crazy, spending much energy chasing birds, running across fields after them, looking up into the sky as if he hoped to catch them!

Transport to and from school was by bus at first: 2d (pence) to and from, morning and afternoon; 1d each way at lunchtime, a fare subsidized by the Corporation. Then I bought a second-hand bike for £2 and enjoyed cycling; the trip took about fifteen minutes.

I did not really enjoy my time in Pres, though it wasn't the school's fault. Being prohibited from participation in its activities meant that I was permanently on the fringes. Also, the range of subjects was narrow; there were no continental languages, commercial subjects, biology or botany, but that was the norm at the time. I did first, second and third years as usual, without pushing myself. I was lazy, and bored. Which came first, the chicken or the egg? In third year, at the age of fourteen, I did what was called the Inter Cert, the halfway exam between Primary and Leaving Certs. I sat seven subjects: Irish, English, Latin, Maths, Science, History and Geography, and got honours in all of them. Then came the big disappointment: my parents said I was too young to go forward and should repeat the Inter Cert course. I had already been made to repeat a year in primary school for the same reason, and had found it boring. Now the same decision was made again; I had no voice in it. With a heavy heart, I went back through the mill again, and, the following year, re-sat the Inter Cert. in fourth year. I got honours once again, but at a lower level in some subjects. I had lost interest.

One effect of this was that when I went forward into the next year, I had only one thought, and that was to get out of school as quickly as possible. I had had enough of it. This was fifth year, and I saw light at the end of the tunnel. My plan was to do Leaving Cert in fifth year, though it was not normally done until sixth, along with Matriculation (university entrance), which was normally in fifth. I broached this plan to my father, who said no. I should do Matric in fifth, and Leaving in sixth, as per the

usual school programme, he said. But I was determined - and lucky: events played into my hands. My father received a temporary transfer to Sligo at the other end of the country for a year, so, while he was away, I studied the Leaving Cert course at home along with the Matric course. For the first time at school, I worked. I got copies of past examination papers, and tried doing them. I read a lot, and put effort into it. My mother, though feeling unsure, gave me encouragement.

There was another obstacle to overcome: I would not be allowed to sit the Leaving Cert at school because of being only in fifth year. So I tried the Christian Brothers in MacCurtain Street and got their permission to do it there. June came: I sat the Matric in Pres and the Leaving Cert in the Christian Brothers. I passed the Matric, and got honours in the Leaving Cert. When my father returned and heard that I had disobeyed him, he was really angry. But I said I was wanted no more school because it was boring, so, perhaps with memories of my pointless repetition of the Inter Cert in mind, he relented. On the day that I finished the last exam, the family went to Salthill for holidays and I happily washed school from my system in the sea.

Further afield

At this time, my brother, Vin, was studying civil engineering at UCC. He didn't do well, spending much time listening to Radio Luxembourg on LW 208. There was friction between him and our father, down mostly to differences of personality. Vin was happy-go-lucky, and

lacked the academic drive my father had. For my father, education was hugely important, and I think he couldn't understand how Vin seemed unfazed by failing exams. In 1959, Vin left for England where he had previously worked during the summer months. This time it was permanent: he settled in London, signed up for courses with various engineering institutes, passed the exams, and got a good job. He later married a Galway woman, Veronica Hynes, and they had a family - a son, John, and a daughter, Clare.

Clare, my sister, continued at Saint Al's. She didn't like it, and changed to Saint Louis in Monaghan, my mother's *alma mater*, and Una and Veve's school.

Why wasn't I sent to a boarding school like my four siblings? I don't know. It may have been down to finance. All the expenses of our health care and education was borne by our parents. I have no regrets about it: the thought of boarding school never appealed to me, and I was happier at home.

On 3 October 1957, Veve joined the Saint Louis Congregation as a postulant. It was an emotional occasion, and, unusually for us, tears were shed. We were sad to see her go, but proud of her. On the next day, the Soviet Union beat the US in the space race by being the first to launch a satellite, the *Sputnik*. The local newspaper, the *Evening Echo*, used to publish the times when it could be seen in orbit, every eighty minutes, and people would go into the countryside away from street lights to see it pass over.

In the same year, there was a general election which returned Fianna Fáil to power. But my parents, though happy with the result, were disappointed when Éamon de Valera, the Taoiseach, known to everyone as Dev, chose a cabinet made up largely of the old guard of the party going back to the nineteen twenties. And my father was further annoyed when Dev gave a speech saying that Ireland needed more scientists; he asked if Dev knew what he was talking about when the country couldn't employ those scientists it already had. He was thinking, of course, of Una, who was soon to graduate as a scientist but whose job prospects at home were severely limited. She did, in fact, have to emigrate on graduation. Emigration was like a haemorrhage of the lifeblood of the country. As with many of our problems at the time, we blamed it on the Brits. But I think the truth was that Europe's post-war recovery had by-passed us, or, rather, we had stood apart from it, because of a self-imposed policy of political and economic isolationism. It was our own choice, and we paid a price for it. In conversation with an elderly mother one day, her family came up for mention, and she said sadly, 'They're all away.' I felt sorry for her, living out the last years of her life without the presence of her children or grandchildren, except, perhaps, for a rare visit. I could not have foreseen that the same would become true for my own family before long.

At about this time another foreign news item came more frequently to our attention: the struggle for independence in Cyprus. The Greek guerrilla movement, EOKA, led by George Grivas, wanted *Enosis*, union

with Greece. He was a hero, as the Old IRA of the nineteen twenties had been. A new word entered the vocabulary: *terrorist*. I had never heard it before. I learned that the invention of a new word made it possible to insinuate a point of view, a judgment, without having to argue a case for it. I learned, too, that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. The British imposed collective punishment on villages suspected of supporting EOKA. And then came the announcement that Grivas' diaries had been found, a cornucopia of his guilt. That rang bells straight away: Roger Casement's diaries had been found, too, providing evidence that led him to the scaffold. Fortunately, wiser counsels prevailed, and Cyprus became an independent republic, and Grivas a general in the Greek army.

I think my nationalist fires were also stoked by the release of *Mise Éire*, a film made from archive material about the struggle for independence from the 1916 Rising to 1922. It was my first time seeing this material, and I was thrilled by it. But what really swept me away was the music: Seán Ó Riada's score was perfect; it was to Ireland what Sibelius' *Finlandia* was to Finland. I asked my mother about Ó Riada: was he Irish? With a name like his, he must be, but was it really possible for Ireland to produce such a composer? (We had little self-confidence as a nation, probably as a result of the Civil War of 1923, which was surely the greatest mistake in our history, seeming to confirm what the British had said, that we were incapable of self-government.) But this man, with his music, gave the whole country a lift, and at a time when we sorely needed it. David Currie

was to do the same a little later when he re-worked traditional airs with the Northern Ireland Light Orchestra. I discovered that Irish music could be both traditional and modern, and that a full orchestra gave it a body and strength that I had not heard before.

In 1958, Pope Pius XII died. He had been pope since before the Second World War and enjoyed great respect in the church; there was a tangible sense of loss at his death. His successor, Angelo Roncalli, who took the name of John XXIII was a little short of seventy-seven at his election. There was disappointment at the choice of such an elderly man. People felt that the church's leadership needed new blood, as indeed it did in Cork, where the average age at which a priest was appointed to head a parish was seventy-one. John XXIII seemed like a nice, quiet old man – period. But, in 1959, he announced that he was calling a synod of the diocese of Rome, appointing a commission to revise the code of canon law, and calling an ecumenical council to renew and update the church, and to promote the unity of Christians. In the pews, no one took any notice. The church had such an aura of permanence, of unchangeability, that the possibility of anything else did not enter into consideration. We were proud of that. There was only one model of church, the one we had - as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be world without end. So we thought.

In 1959, there was a presidential election and a referendum on changing the electoral method from proportional representation with a transferable vote to

the direct non-transferable vote along British lines. *Fianna Fáil* promoted the change because their political base was rural, and Ireland was urbanizing. They saw the first-past-the-post system as one which would redress that demographic balance in their favour, so they urged people to vote ‘Yes and De Valera.’ But the people thought otherwise, and voted No - and De Valera went to the Phoenix Park.

Spreading the wings

Home was becoming confining; I wanted to spread my wings. When I was fourteen, with my mother’s permission – my father was away – I hitch-hiked from Cork to Kilkeel in County Down, staying at a youth hostel in Dublin on the way. Veve was there on holidays from the convent; we spent a day or two together, and then I hitch-hiked back home. My trusty bike was another escape route. I cycled to Macroom one day, a round trip of about 64 km. (40 miles). I was surprised at how easy it had been, so, shortly after, I cycled to Kinsale, which was about the same distance, and then, a few days later, to Bandon, also about the same. Then I really took off, and went to Macroom, Bandon and Kinsale in one day, before returning to Cork. That was a round trip of about 110 km (70 miles). Looking back on it, I realize how lucky I was: I went without food, drink, money, a map, a coat, or any idea of what I would do if I had a puncture. My guardian angel was working overtime!

Home was over-protective and stifling. While my mother was adventurous, my father carried caution to an extreme. He would be in favour of an idea until the moment came to apply it, and then he would see all sorts of possible dangers and decide against it. This fear of his became more pronounced in his later years. I had seen an article in a Catholic paper about a monastery being built in Wales and the monks were asking for volunteers to help. I wrote, applied, and was accepted. But my father vetoed it. In hindsight, even I would agree that he was right in that instance. At fourteen or fifteen I was too young, and, besides, I knew nothing about building.

Conradh na Gaeilge

I don't think I consciously set out to work my way around this protectiveness by devious means. Instead, I found a way by seizing opportunities that presented themselves. I decided to join *Conradh na Gaeilge*, an organization for promoting the Irish language. I don't know whether I thought of that as a clever stratagem - maybe, but I don't think so - since my father was not likely to object, given his love of the language, and my mother was happy for me to spread my wings. There was an unexpected bonus to membership: I learned to dance, though my first steps must have been torment for my unfortunate partner. All went well for a few meetings until I was told that, *in absentia*, I had been elected treasurer of the branch. I couldn't understand this: I was fifteen and hadn't a clue what a treasurer should do. My panic morphed into suspicion when I heard at second or third hand that there had been some irregularity in the

accounts before my coming. I feared being set up as the fall guy, so I dropped out of the branch quickly.

The Legion of Mary

Another “safe” attempt at a break-away was when I joined the *Legion of Mary*, then an active and numerous Catholic lay organization. But I soon tired of its brand of piety and of the assigned work of collecting and distributing religious magazines. I lasted no more than a few months.

The FCA

Then came the real breakthrough, though I don't remember how it happened: I joined the FCA, An Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil (the Local Defence Force), the army's part-time second-line reserve. I don't remember asking my parents' permission; maybe I did, or maybe not. I had already begun to learn that, if you have a good idea, it's better to go ahead and do it than to ask for a permission which may likely be refused. I made sure not to join a school-related unit. Perhaps with my father's possible reaction in mind, I joined an Irish-speaking unit. The first difficulty was to be accepted for enlistment. I was only fifteen, and the legal minimum age was seventeen. I was presented with an application form that landed me with something of a crisis of conscience. It asked for the date of birth, and I noticed with some trepidation that, at the end of the page, I was asked to sign a statement to the effect that everything written above was true. What should I do? If I gave my real date

of birth, I would not be accepted; if I gave a false one, I would be signing my name to a lie. I found it difficult to decide. In the end, after Date of Birth, I wrote 2 November 1944 (the real date), and signed. The platoon commander, Lieutenant Niall Fitzgerald, came in a moment later to check the form. His pen stopped at Date of Birth. He looked at me - ‘Do you really want to join?’ ‘Yes’, I said. He changed the second four in the date to a two, and signed. I instantly became seventeen – an Irish solution to an Irish problem! Thank you, Niall.

I enjoyed every minute of my time in the FCA. The fact that most of the others were working lads rather than school boys was a great and welcome change for me. After some initial square-bashing we soon got down to what I was interested in – guns. We started with a .22 rifle, and almost immediately went on to a Lee Enfield .303, the standard rifle from World War II. From there we learned how to dismantle hand grenades, use a field radio, and navigate cross country. We trained with Swedish *Energa* anti-tank grenades. On one occasion, an accident happened. Inexplicably, a grenade was fired prematurely; it whizzed past a soldier’s head, just missing him. If it had hit, even though it was a dummy, it would have smashed his head to pulp. Our platoon, *An Buíon Gaelach*, a support platoon of A Company of the newly-formed 23rd Battalion, formerly the 47th, was equipped with Vickers medium machine guns and French-made 81 mm mortars. I was assigned to the machine guns, and was delighted when our unit won prizes for marksmanship in the Southern Command Championships at Kilworth Camp in north Cork.

On the day of the championship, the mortar section was ordered to direct fire at an abandoned house on the other side of a valley from us, while officers in bunkers in the valley assessed the accuracy of the unit's fire. The machine gun section was able to sit back and watch. The order came over the field telephone, 'Scaoil seacht bpléascán!' (Fire seven – seacht – rounds!) Though we machine gunners were unaware of it for the moment, the order had been misunderstood as 'Scaoil gach pléascán!' (Fire every round!) The mortar-men had a year's allocation with them, ninety rounds at £5 each, a lot of money in those days. Delighted with this unexpected order, they went to work with a will dropping bombs down the tubes as fast as they could load them. We sat back and enjoyed the fireworks. Before long the field-telephone rang with a peculiar intensity. The mortar-men couldn't hear it because of the noise of the guns, and we, who heard it very well, and suspected it might be an order to cease fire, ignored it. It wasn't our responsibility and we were having too much fun. The abandoned house was blasted off the face of the earth, but it was nothing to the blasting the mortar-men got from the observing officers. It was all good clean fun.

Each summer I spent two weeks with the FCA in Kilworth Camp. There I read a notice one day about the necessity of prophylaxis against STD's. What on earth was that about? STD I knew – it was the recently introduced Subscriber Trunk Dialling automatic phone system which replaced the operator-based one - but that didn't seem to fit. There was another possible

explanation: with my interest in matters of faith and knowledge of Latin, I knew that STD stood for *Sacrae Theologiae Doctor* (Doctor of Sacred Theology). But that didn't seem to fit either. And *prophylaxis* – that sounded like Greek, which I didn't have. I gave up; some things are just too complicated.

I had one companion from school in the unit – Eoghan Harris. He taught us *Rosc Catha na Mumhan*, (the *War Song of Munster*). He was in socialist mode at the time, so he also taught us a great socialist rallying anthem which we belted out with enthusiasm. I half-remember a few snatches: -

‘Three, three, the red, red flag, proudly flying over us.... One voices liberty, and it stands for the workers’ unity.’ Returning to Cork one day along the Lower Glanmire Road, we caused alarm to some citizens of Cork following behind our truck; they must have wondered if the country was being taken over by Communist soldiers as we cheerfully sang for the coming of the revolution.

But there were sobering moments, too, as when the platoon sergeant, explaining a projected movement to us, recited an official formula, ‘We will attack and kill all enemy there.’ I think that was the first time I woke up to understand that this was what war is about: killing people. I didn't feel such confidence in my fighting ability that I was oblivious to the possibility that I might be the one killed.

When the time came for me to leave the force, I had to write a request into a kind of ledger. I had time when

doing it, so I read some of the previous entries; one after another they read the same: each was a protest by soldiers who stated that they objected to serving in an army that took orders from a government which operated a concentration camp where citizens were interned without trial or charge. They were referring to the Curragh camp for IRA internees as the State tried to suppress the IRA Border campaign, and it meant they were IRA sympathizers. The army was probably glad to see them go, as it was wary lest it be used, unwittingly, as a training ground for the IRA. I then understood also the inflexible insistence of the army on every round of ammunition being fully accounted for and documented.

I left the FCA after two years, not yet having reached the legal age for joining it. The FCA was a humane organization and I retain the fondest memories of it.

Bumps on the road

For about a year, my father was away in Sligo. It was at a time when he and my mother were hard pressed financially, trying to pay the bills for Una at UCC, Veve in Sion Hill College as a young sister doing teacher training, Vin and Clare at boarding school, and me at Pres. There were tensions between them. On one occasion, they had been giving each other the cold shoulder for some time, and the atmosphere in the house was fraught. Then, while at table with a frosty silence in the air, a singer on radio sang the song, *I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts*. For some reason, it caught our attention, and then he came to,

*There stands me wife, the idol of me life
Singing roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch.*

The sheer silliness of the ditty struck a funny bone, and we all began to laugh.

The ice was broken, and normal relations were restored.

But things didn't always work out so well, or heal so easily. Once, they went into a freeze that lasted up to a week or two. There were just the three of us in the house, and I found it awkward. I was the go-between, and was used for passing messages from one to the other. I would rather they had shouted at each other, even though I dreaded those rows as well. And things hadn't healed by the time my father returned to Sligo. Then, one day, my mother told me she was leaving him. She had seen an advertisement for a teaching post in Northern Ireland and decided to apply. For some reason which I do not understand, she asked me to write the letter of application. I pointed out that my handwriting would never be mistaken for an adult's. It was clear and legible, but unmistakably that of a child. But she insisted, so I did it. I learned new terms such as the Burnham salary scale. To my surprise, the school replied, asking for more information. More letters from me followed. Then came a bigger surprise: they wrote back, accepting her, even without an interview. I wondered what was going to become of me in this new situation – would I be left in Bishopstown with my father, or go North with my mother? I had no idea, and was afraid to ask. In the end, nothing came of it: my mother said nothing more and I didn't ask. In later years, I sometimes wondered whether, if divorce had been available in Ireland at the

time – it was prohibited by the Constitution – my parents would have taken up the option. It is certainly possible that they might. But it was not possible, so they stayed together, and happily, for over forty years more.

The perils of adolescence

While all this was going on, I was growing up and becoming aware of changes not only in the world around me, but in myself. In matters sexual, I think I was typical of the boys and girls of my time, that is to say, I was entirely uninformed, totally and comprehensively clueless. Ignorance was seen as the safeguard of innocence. My parents never said anything about sex, nor did any other adult that I knew. It was a subject that “decent people” didn’t talk about. But things were beginning to change: one day my mother, hot with anger, waved around a letter she had received from the Saint Louis sisters in Monaghan, asking for parental consent to the sisters speaking to the girls about sexual matters. She was amazed and outraged that her *alma mater*, of which she was so proud, could consider such a thing. ‘Have the nuns gone pure mad?’ she asked. It was only years later, as a theology student, that I learned that Pope Pius XII, in a document in 1941 called *Davanti a Questa*, had urged parents to educate their children in sexual matters, and to get help in doing so from teachers and others. The Sisters were probably acting in response to that. A female relative of mine told me that, when she had her first period, she didn’t know what was happening and thought she was dying, but was afraid to ask anyone.

One of the Brothers at school - he later went on to become a priest - introduced the subject one day in our religious education class. He said he was going to speak to us about a sensitive subject which he did not wish us to talk about afterwards. That, of course - as he should have foreseen - guaranteed that we would talk about it. He said that sex was beautiful and good, and that God had given it to parents to help them through the difficulties of married life. But sins against sex were always grave sins, and, for us boys, it was a grave sin to watch the irregular motions of the flesh in members of the opposite sex. What were those irregular motions? I'm still waiting to find out.

At the time, there was an implicit, tacit, but almost universally accepted equation in attitudes to sex in Ireland, namely: sex = sin. Questions in my pre-teen years about where I had come from had been answered by, 'We found you in the garden under a head of cabbage', or 'A stork brought you.' I didn't believe either answer, but the question remained unanswered. The subject was wrapped in layers of guilt, embarrassment, shame and prudery, and my parents were victims of that as much as I was. It was impossible to talk about sex, except in dirty jokes and street-corner gossip. That was how I and most of my peers learned about it.

I had had hints from various sources. A next-door neighbour, recently married, was said to be pregnant. She was 'expecting a baby'. But what did that mean? Then, later, 'The baby was due.' I had noticed that she

had become “fat.” Then I heard that the baby was born; the mother arrived back from hospital with the baby in her arms, and she had returned to her previous size. I began to wonder if there was a connection. But how did the baby get there in the first place? Several years later I heard the simple formula that, ‘Everything from the knees to the neck is out.’ But, at this stage, I didn’t have any idea what that forbidden territory had to do with the matter.

Sex was mysterious and sinful, frightening too, because the salvation of my immortal soul depended on getting it right. That was emphasized as strongly as it could be. I went one day for my regular weekly confession to the Franciscan church in Liberty Street, and confessed something of a sexual nature. Was it masturbation? I don’t remember; it may have been, though I am pretty sure I didn’t know the word at the time. The priest was kind and gentle. I asked him hesitantly and fearfully if it was a serious sin - I couldn’t bring myself to use the dreaded word *mortal* even though the two were the same in those days – and he said it was. I left the confessional in tears. I had committed a mortal sin. I had heard in sermons that every time a person committed a mortal sin, they crucified Our Lord all over again. And I would go to hell for all eternity if I died without having first confessed such a sin. I had got off this time, but....

Looking back on it, it seems hugely out of proportion. Masturbation is probably as much a part of the normal growing-up process as, for example, teenage rebellion. It

may represent an adolescent's attempt to learn about his/her sexuality, to understand the self. If it persists, especially compulsively, it may be a sign of a failure to develop adult maturity. In adults, both male and female, it may be simply a relief of tension, or a relapse into an adolescent immaturity. There is something self-centred and inward-looking about it, and it may reduce sex from being a gift for others to being a toy. But to speak of it as deserving of eternal punishment in hell, which was the standard teaching in my time though now denied by some, seems over the top, to say the least.

There was also a more serious side to it. There was a process at work: the first step was to make people feel guilty, and sex was the way to do it. For a start, it's universal; everyone is sexual, so no one escapes the net. Most people feel some measure of embarrassment, shame, or guilt about it; that seems to be hard-wired into the human psyche. The second stage was to introduce fear: that was done by teaching that there was no such thing as a sexual sin that was not mortal. The moral theology manuals I later studied taught that the sixth commandment did not admit of parvity of matter. The sixth commandment was 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' but it was extended to include any and every sexual activity outside marriage, and quite a lot within it. Parvity of matter? Parvity was smallness (Latin *parvus*, small.) There was no such thing as a venial sin against the sixth commandment. Mortal and venial were the categories of seriousness of sin. Mortal, or deadly, sin was punished by God by the pains of hell for all eternity unless confessed and absolved in confession; not so,

venial; it could be forgiven by a simple expression of regret in what we called an act of contrition. Heaven and hell were carrot and stick on a cosmic scale. The third stage was to offer forgiveness of sin in the sacrament of confession. So the process was one of piling on guilt and fear with one hand, and offering to remove them with the other. It was a control system, working from within, with the controlee's cooperation. It was social conditioning, which we thought of as conscience. It worked: if you can control people in their sexuality, controlling them in anything else should not be too difficult. The price people paid for this was scrupulosity, anxiety, fear, stress, sometimes mental illness or even suicide.

It took me almost fifty years to understand what was happening - I'm a slow learner - but, in fairness to priests who operated the system, I think we were its victims as much as anyone else. Thankfully, the years since Vatican II have moved us substantially away from that, and there is not now the unhealthy preoccupation with sin that burdened so many people in the past. We may have swung in the other direction, so that now nobody recognizes anything as sin, or takes responsibility for wrong-doing. (There must be a place for guilt if a person has done wrong; guilt is to conscience as pain is to the nervous system.) But a return to the past, as desired by more than a few in the church, is not the answer.

The above was an abuse of religion. Religion is meant to enable people to live to their best, to discover their identity and live by it; it is not meant to intimidate – that is not the way to growth as proposed by Jesus who said,

‘I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.’ (John 10.10)

After school – what next?

As a child I had thought of becoming a priest; indeed, it would have been impossible not to have considered it, as it was suggested pretty often by anyone and everyone. I think I may have said yes at the time as a way of earning easy approval, but my heart wasn’t in it. The church enjoyed great esteem and affection. It was a going concern, assured of itself – sometimes too much so. (In contrast, the State at the time seemed unable to get its act together.) Churches were full for Sunday Mass and often had congregations in the hundreds for daily Mass also. Attendance at the sacraments was frequent and regular. Parish missions were packed; public address systems were often set up outside churches to facilitate those who wouldn’t find a place inside, and sermons were talking points in pubs. If one applied the www test – worship, word and work – the church would have passed it with flying colours. There was active missionary life abroad, and also active lay missionary organizations at home. The church was heavily involved in education, health care and a variety of social services. It engaged with society at every level. The age profile of clergy and religious was low, and vocations were abundant. In 1961, the year I left secondary school, one girl in every eight joined a convent, and one boy in every twelve went to a seminary or religious order.

At school, we had been asked by a Brother to write an essay on the question, ‘Would I like to become a priest or religious?’ I began mine with the word NO, and went on to state that priests and religious were smug and self-satisfied, inward-looking and self-serving, and looked down on laypeople, seeing them as second-class members of the church – “the mere laity” was a phrase sometimes heard - and I didn’t want to be part of that. That wasn’t what the Brother had been hoping for, I expect, but there was no reaction.

Also at Pres, a visiting auxiliary bishop of San Antonio, Texas, invited us to consider entering a seminary for his diocese. He apologized for having to say that we could only have either a new car or a holiday at home each year, but not both. I was stunned. Like most of my peers, I was idealistic, and the nature of his appeal turned me off completely. Was this what priesthood was about? When asked about the status of black people in the church - we had become aware of racial issues since the confrontation at the Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 - he replied that churches were segregated; they had to be, he said, as otherwise whites wouldn’t come. That finished that: we were more than disappointed; we were scandalized.

I was “head-hunted” by priests from various orders. A Franciscan, standing outside the church in Liberty Street, extolled the virtues of his life by saying that you get up in the morning, pray for a while, say Mass, and then, after that, you were free for the rest of the day. That sounded like an invitation to a life of idleness, and held

no attraction for me. A Redemptorist I found to be too pushy, and it evoked a reaction. A priest from a missionary society was more interested in what was between my legs than my ears, so I made a hasty exit from his house. I had often seen Capuchins on my way from school in the afternoon, as they took a walk from Saint Bonaventure's University Hostel; some were friendly, some grumpy. I used to wave to them; some would wave back, some not. One always waved back, a man with a beard that looked as if it had been trimmed with hedge clippers; I came to know him in later years as Father Felix, and he was well named. The diocesan clergy had one great drawback and that was that they lived alone, not in community. I had enough self-awareness to know that I needed community. I had also been put off by the behaviour of a diocesan examiner of religious knowledge who had called to Pres. We were about fourteen or fifteen years old at the time, but he called us to gather round him. We complied reluctantly. Then he drew one of the boys to him, and sat him on his knee. We were ready to dissolve with embarrassment at this, and each one was glad that he was not the one. The teacher was present but did not intervene. The status of priests was such that everyone felt powerless to do anything. None of that did anything to point me towards the priesthood. So I was clear on what I didn't want. Or was I?

I had been prayerful as a child and a teenager. I had a small shrine of sorts in my room at home, and saved up to buy and install a Sacred Heart lamp, nearly electrocuting myself in doing so. I used to call in to the

SMA church in Wilton on my way home from school, and often went to confession there. I read missionary magazines. But I set aside the thought of being a priest, feeling that I had already considered it enough and there was no point in spending more time on it.

The summer of 1961 was a beautiful one. Vin was home on holidays, and, one day, we had the house to ourselves. We started talking about what I would do in the future. I was not at all sure of myself, and was conscious that the summer months were slipping by and the time for making a decision was growing short. By this time Clare had gone on to teacher training and subsequently became a teacher of handicapped children, so she was going places. We had in the house a copy of *A Guide to Careers*, published by the *Irish Independent* newspaper. Vin and I went through it from cover to cover, from almoner to zoo-keeper, but I found nothing that interested me. He asked about teaching: it had the attractiveness of a short course of study and a secure job at home, with long holidays; but I had had enough of classrooms. He asked about medicine, since I had at some earlier point mentioned it. But that involved a long course of study and I did not have much confidence in my knowledge of physics and chemistry – they had been weak subjects at school. So what was it to be, then? The army? I liked the uniform but that didn't seem like much of a reason.

At some point I had a dream, but I don't know when; it may even have been after I joined the Capuchins. In it, I was facing a long corridor with a clear light at the end. I

began walking, stopping at each door as I came to it. Each was labelled with the name of a job – doctor, teacher, army officer, farmer, civil servant, etc. One by one I tried the handles and found all the doors locked, except one, that labelled *priest*; it opened. The dream seemed significant. (And it wasn't the last one to be so; I have learned to listen to them.)

I think it was simple desperation that made me reconsider the priesthood; I couldn't think of anything else, and time was running out. I asked myself what it involved, and the most obvious challenge was that of not being allowed to marry and have a family. That thought made me feel lonely. I had occasionally been a baby-sitter for the family next door and was happy doing it – this was the baby whose origins had earlier puzzled me so much – and I felt keenly the loss involved in celibacy. I wanted to marry and have a family, but I couldn't do that and be a priest. A choice had to be made.

I thought about the matter for maybe a week or so. Then I came to the idea that what I wanted was to live my life in such a way that I could look back on it at the end of my days and feel that I had spent it well. I felt that the best way of doing that was to spend it in God's service. How to serve God? – in the church, as a priest or a member of a religious order, or possibly both. The lack of community life in the diocesan clergy ruled that option out for me. Then I went through a list of the orders I had had some contact with, and, one by one, discounted them, except for the Capuchins, because some of them had been friendly. I knew also that they

were missionary, and that was good, too. I asked Vin if he knew any of them, and he said he knew Father Vianney from UCC. Although he had never spoken with him, he had gained a good impression, so I went to Saint Bonaventure's at O'Neill-Crowley Cross and asked to see him. We met, and I told him of how I felt. He gave me the two-volume history of the Capuchins by Father Cuthbert to read. I got half-way through volume 1, but it was heavy going. I met him again and he suggested I write to Father Berchmans, the novice master. I did so, and he was prompt and positive in his reply.

I decided to take the plunge, though quite unsure of myself. When I told my father he said he was disappointed that I appeared to be doing it because I could find nothing else, and that indeed was the truth. He would rather I went into it boots and all. I don't remember what my mother said, although she told me years later that she didn't think I would last a week. So, just about two weeks after meeting Vianney, I went to Kilkenny with my father to enter the Capuchin novitiate. At the last minute, he got mixed up and was bringing me to the Dominican priory until I re-directed him! On 19 September 1961, at the age of sixteen, armed with a reference from a parish priest whom I had never met before, I went into the friary.

It was desperation that had made me think of priesthood. This, if not a good reason, at least was not a bad one. If that was all there was to it, I'm sure I would not have lasted long; it would not have provided the motivation. But my reason for actually taking the step,

was, I think, genuinely a desire to serve God, and, in that way, to do something lasting. But lots of things about it puzzle me: given my dislike of school, why did I opt for the priesthood, which has the longest course of study of any profession? Given the tensions that I saw frequently in my parents' marriage, was I, consciously or otherwise, avoiding marriage? I wonder, too, whether, had other options been available, I would have made this choice at all. Probably not, I think. Would another choice have been better? I don't know. Was sixteen too young an age at which to join? I don't think so, as it did not involve a final commitment; that did not come until perpetual profession at twenty-one. But I feel sure that, if I had not joined then, I would not have joined at all.

Part 2: BECOMING A CAPUCHIN

Kilkenny – the novitiate, 1961-62

My first impression – my father's, too - was of a friendly welcome from Father Berchmans, the novice master. He was then thirty-five, wore a large black beard, and had a benign and peaceful look; and the reality matched the image. He offered us what he called a 'simple meal' which was in fact, by our standards at home, a full and generous meal. Then the time came to say goodbye. My father was close to tears. I gave him the money I had - a few shillings - which he accepted with embarrassment. Then he left, and I went inside the enclosure for the first time. The understanding was that I would not see home again until after ordination, which would be not less than eight years away. But I was looking forward to a new life and wasn't deterred by that.

A day or two later, my fellow newcomers and I were given a pattern, a bale of cloth and a sewing machine, and told to each make ourselves a *habit*, the religious garb of the order. I was as shocked as the others; I didn't have a clue how to make anything, and I was scared of wasting material in a botched attempt. But, unlike our predecessors and successors, we had a lucky break: one of my fellow novices, Joe Moore, later Brother Cletus, had been a tailor. We turned to him, and he didn't let us down.

On 3 October 1961, after an eight-day retreat, I was formally received as a novice; Gerald O’Sullivan “died” and was re-born as Brother Owen of Sandymount.

I had earlier been introduced to Brother Lucius, my “Guardian Angel”. My what? This was the tongue-in-cheek title given to a novice approaching the end of his one-year novitiate and who was entrusted with guiding the first steps of a newcomer like me beginning it. He took me on a tour of the house: it seemed vast, with a community of over thirty. Along the way, I met Brother Pius Higgins, who was kind and welcoming. After a moment or two, Lucius and I continued on our way, and then he tipped me off that I should not speak to Pius again. I was astounded. Why? Lucius explained that brothers and novices were not supposed to speak to each other; the novices and postulants were apart from the rest of the community. (A postulant is someone, not yet a novice, who wishes to be received into the order, and enters a period of preparation for that.)

In fact, what was called a community was actually three, and they formed a social pyramid. At the top were the priests, the “Fathers”, led by the Guardian, often known as the superior; the rest were “subjects.” In second place were the cleric novices; the non-cleric novices, those destined to be “only a brother”, or lay brothers, went to a separate novitiate in Rochestown, County Cork. In third place were “the brothers”, friars who were not and would not be ordained, and would remain that way all their lives. Although we prayed and ate together, we were three communities, not one. At the

time, I thought it odd; the idea of being forbidden to have a conversation with someone as gentle and good as Pius - we didn't have a vow of silence - I found strange; I didn't understand it.

I didn't see it then, but what had happened was that the Capuchin order - not only in Ireland - had assimilated the values of a class-conscious society with an Upstairs-Downstairs, master-and-servant mentality. In addition, the church was, and is, in love with hierarchy. I was accustomed to hierarchy from the FCA; the military are conscious of stripes, epaulettes, pips, buttons and medals. It was the same here. It illustrated how the church can stray from its Christian foundations. Jesus had said, 'You must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven.' (Matthew 23.8-9) His egalitarian brotherhood had given way to hierarchical stratification.

It illustrates how a Franciscan order, too, can stray from its origins. Saint Francis did not found an order; rather a community of brothers came into being by attraction to him and his way of life. He called them "friars minor," or, in simpler language, "lesser brothers." Their vocation, in fidelity to the gospel, was to fraternity: all were brothers; that was the basic calling. The brothers exercised various ministries, of which the priestly ministry was one. But, under pressure from the church's leadership, the order became progressively more clericalized and monasticized. Francis was not a

priest, and only reluctantly became a deacon in response to pressure from the pope.

Francis did not choose a monastic life: if he had wanted to, there was already a Benedictine monastery in Assisi that he could have joined. But, in Kilkenny, our life was, for all practical purposes, monastic. We were cut off from contact with the people; we had a stratified internal life, and every detail was regulated by rules and bells. We had the *Rule of Saint Francis*, the *Constitutions* of the Order, the *Ordinances of the General Chapters*, the *Provincial Statutes*, the *Handbook of Customs*, the *Norms of the Capuchin Apostolate* applicable after ordination, and the *Novitiate Rule*. This latter was composed by a French Capuchin, one Père Baron Joseph François le Clerc de Tremblay, the *éminence grise* behind Cardinal Richelieu. Happily, it was fading from use by my time, but I still remember some of its rules. One was, ‘Spit on the side of your junior.’ Another laid down that novices should always go in pairs; that included going to the toilet. While one conducted his business there, with the hood of his habit over his head “for modesty’s sake,” the other would wait outside. We were not to enter each other’s rooms, but, if necessary, to converse at the door, kneeling; we waddled up to each other like penguins, and talked. On Fridays, in the darkened choir, we had “the discipline”: we scourged ourselves on the bare backside with five strands of chain, each of about 20 cm long, while chanting the *Miserere* (Psalm 51) in Latin. One novice did this so vigorously that his place was regularly sprinkled with noticeable amounts of blood. But the discipline was cancelled in the

summer when beams of light would shine through gaps or holes in the curtain – an old one – illuminating bare bums. If you broke something, even accidentally, you were to wear it around your neck on a string during the main meal in the refectory. Another rule laid down that, when novices went out for a walk, each one should fall in with whichever novice he first met, and not pick and choose among them. That made good sense; it helped us get used to living with personalities that might not be to our liking; it stretched us.

We had what was called the *culpa* (Latin, *fault*). This was held every two months or so. In it, we assembled in the refectory before lunch, and each novice, in turn, confessed in public to a fault, such as breaking the silence by talking or arriving late for the Divine Office. (We were told strictly not to confess a sin. That was for the sacrament of penance only.) The guardian would comment on it, usually with some harmless platitude, like ‘Try harder.’ But there were occasions when the superior might criticize a student for something he had not done, but which a priest of the community had, and the superior was using the student to take a swipe, indirectly, at the priest. And there were occasions when the superior would humiliate a student, speaking abusively and offensively. The student was expected to remain silent, except to say, ‘May your charity be for the love of God.’ This process was called “fraternal correction.” Its goal could have been better achieved, I think, by a friendly word on a man-to-man basis.

There were penances, sometimes for the novices only, sometimes for all, such as eating dinner off the floor. The plate – not the food! – would be put on the floor and we would eat the meal, sitting as best we could on the floor. But we took this in our own style and sometimes reduced it to laughter by sliding pepper and salt cellars to each other up and down along the floor until barked at for doing so.

As I look back on these rules, I don't know whether to laugh, cry, or marvel at how we retained our sanity! It was all pretty much a classic initiation ritual: new name and title, new clothing, new identity, and ritual humiliations. Similar processes take place in prisons, armies, and what we used to call asylums. Instead of the person being led to grow according to his character, abilities and personality by a process of “organic” growth, a common stamp was pounded on everyone from the top.

Who we were

My fellow-novices included an Englishman, a former Anglican and fairly recent entrant into the church. There was also a warehouse clerk, two fitters, a tailor, a barman, a film projectionist, and eight who came straight from school, six of them sons of farmers, one son of primary school teachers, and one son of an engineer. Considering the diversity of our backgrounds, we got on well together. We were our own principal support, we “formed” each other, and shared our hopes and disappointments. Strong bonds of solidarity developed

between us. When some left the order, after shorter or longer periods of time, we maintained our links and some continue to meet down to the present day. One of the things that helped me from the beginning was the feeling of being accepted by my fellow-novices as I was. In the novitiate, quite simply, I liked them, and I think they liked me. That was a big positive factor. And we helped each other with simple things, for example, the “old hands” helping us newcomers to learn how to walk wearing the ankle-length habit. Going up the stairs was the tricky part. You tended to walk up *inside* the habit and then trip! There were many laughs; humour was a great and much-needed safety valve.

Capuchins have a tradition of wearing a beard, because, as the *Constitutions* of the day stated, ‘it is manly, natural and austere.’ They added, ‘but unlike seculars they shall not trim it.’ For some of us that was a challenge. You couldn’t actually *do* anything about it but wait, and growth was slow and unpromising. An early Minister General of the order had refused admittance to ‘beardless youths’. Was that ominous? No; we didn’t take it that seriously.

During the year that followed I often felt uncertain. I had come to the novitiate to find out if I had a vocation, not with the assurance of having one. The language of “having a vocation” wasn’t helpful; it suggested that it was a kind of thing which one “had”. I think that, if you’re happy in the life, and find meaning and purpose in it, then you “have” that mysterious thing called a “vocation.” But it took me quite a while to work that out.

A fairly typical day

Our day began at 5.15, and we started prayers at 5.30, with the Divine Office from the *Breviary*, all in Latin, which we knew pretty inadequately, or not at all. First was Matins, now known as the Office of Readings; it had nine psalms, and either three or nine lessons. Then came Lauds, or Morning Prayer, with five psalms; the reading of the *Martyrology* of the day, followed by a period of meditation or mental prayer for half an hour, based on the passion of Jesus. Next was a general examination of conscience. Then came Prime (since abolished) and Terce, now known as Prayer during the Day, before noon. This was followed by Mass, and after it, thanksgiving. We went for breakfast at about 8.00, having said prayers for two and a half hours. It was a heavy stint, and I'm not sure how prayerful it was.

After breakfast, we had morning prayers at the statue of Our Lady, and then what was called a conference with the novice master at 9.00. Though called a *conference*, which might suggest a dialogue, it was in fact a class in the old style, where the master did the talking and we the listening. It was in two parts – first, an exposition of the *Rule* of Saint Francis by one Albert of Bolsano. It was canonical in character, rather than anything spiritual or uplifting. We learned, for example, the difference between simple and solemn vows: acts contrary to simple vows were merely unlawful, while acts contrary to solemn vows were not merely unlawful but invalid as well. Heavy going for teenagers! Occasionally, we made a foray into the difference between an act of perfect contrition and a perfect act of contrition, between

affective and effective prayer! Recalling it, I wonder how we survived it. But worse was to come.

Part two of the conference was a study of *The Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtue*, written by Alphonsus Rodriguez, a seventeenth century Spanish Jesuit. He urged his readers to despise and mistrust themselves, and to be suspicious of their motives. His was a world- and body-denying spirituality, which, if taken seriously, would lead to a division within the self, an opting out of the world, a disengagement from community in a pharisaical attempt to get on the right side of God through determined personal effort. This was dreary stuff, far removed from Jesus who said, ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ (Matthew 19.19) We found relief in the supposedly “edifying” – to us, hilarious – stories of the early monks of the desert of Skete, Egypt. One was of a monk who fell asleep during meditation, and was punished by God who allowed a crucifix to fall on his head and kill him, presumably *pour encourager les autres*. Another was of a monk - not the sleepy one - who had been told by a prophet that he would die by something falling on his head and killing him. To escape this, he fled to the desert, far away from potential threats. But, one day, an eagle captured a tortoise and was looking for something hard to smash it on to break open its shell. Seeing the monk’s shiny bald pate far below, it took careful aim and let go. Needless to say, the tortoise hit the monk on the head, killing him, while the eagle went on to enjoy its dinner. We laughed heartily at these stories - a sensible reaction.

We also had a reading of Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. This was a kind of spiritual precursor of Rodriguez: 'As often as I went out into the world I came back less a man.' 'Hope for nothing, and you will not be disappointed.' These writers - there were others in the same mould - presented salvation as an evacuation plan, the purpose of life on earth being to get out of it safely to heaven. Life on earth had no intrinsic value; it was merely a dress rehearsal for the next. The only value anything had was what it might have for you on your death-bed. (Where did that leave exams and much else?) Then, after the *Imitation*, we had the *Little Office of Our Lady*, which was an abridged version of the morning office all over again.

I have often wondered since why these texts, and this approach, were taken. We were Capuchins, a branch of the Franciscan family. There was plenty of good Franciscan literature around - even though not as much as today, which has seen it blossom on a wonderful scale - yet we used little of it. It was something of a perverse achievement to make the Christian life and Franciscan tradition so boring. Berchmans used to say to us, 'You keep the *Rule*, and the *Rule* will keep you.' 'You did not come here to change the order, but for the order to change you.' I don't think I questioned any of that at the time, but now they seem like unwise half-truths.

Before lunch, we had the particular examination of conscience, and the offices of Sext and None, now called Prayer during the Day for midday and afternoon. The idea of the particular examination of conscience, in

contrast to the general one in the morning, was to focus on your most serious fault. It led some to scrupulosity.

During lunch, there was often a reading from some spiritual book, such as the *Martyrology* in English, or we novices took it in turn to recite the *Rule* of Saint Francis or his *Testament* which we learned by heart. After lunch, which began and ended with prayers, we had a short period of recreation followed by manual work – housekeeping, gardening, or maybe a project of some kind. Once a week, we had a hurling match – this was Kilkenny after all – or maybe Gaelic football, or sometimes a walk. One project which Berchmans had was to raise the height of the wall at the back of the novitiate. Before thinking of any shuttering, he had us mix a large mass of cement. The cart before the horse! There was panic while we rummaged through a shed, looking for bits and pieces of wood which could be knocked together to make shuttering. We found some and tried to hammer it into shape, while Osmund, a novice, sweated profusely, turning the mass of cement over and back to try and prevent it from hardening. Then we needed reinforcing – more panic. Every bit of scrap iron we could find – I remember an alarm clock and bits of a long discarded heating system – were pressed into service, thrown more or less at random into the mix, nothing connected to anything else. But it worked, and the wall stood until it was demolished in the late nineties to make the foundation of a car park. Much of our manual work was really only a way of filling the day, without much point to it. It may have been a test to see whether we were willing to work.

In the evening we had rosary, evening meditation helped by a reading, sometimes from Franciscan sources, and then Vespers, now known as Evening Prayer. Following this, there was supper and then recreation. This was mostly chatting among ourselves, walking in the garden, or listening to music. There were no newspapers, radio, or TV. This was followed by a short period of study of what we had been taught in the morning, and then Compline, or Night Prayer, and bed. This was early, at about nine o'clock. On Tuesdays, we were called again at 11.45 pm and we chanted the Office from midnight until 1 am. To make up for this, we slept in until 5.45 am.

Perhaps a better way of describing our day is to say that we fell and we got up, we fell and we got up, we fell and we got up. Surprisingly, in view of the above, with its long periods of recited prayers, we had no personal spiritual direction. To have asked for it would have led to the assumption that you were “on the way out.” We were also taught little about prayer; I think it was assumed that you would learn for yourself as you went along. What kept us going was the goal that lay ahead – the priesthood; for that we were prepared to put up with almost anything.

Our rooms were small but adequate: a bed, table, and chair and a small wardrobe. We slept wearing a “night habit” over pyjamas; it was just like the ordinary one, except made of light material. We wore habits also while doing manual work and playing sports. This was because of a tradition that Saint Francis had promised eternal life

to any friar who died wearing the habit; we were taking no chances! We washed in a communal washroom, did not have watches, and bells called and ruled us day and night. The bell was ‘the voice of God.’ Heating was adequate by the standards of the time, and the food, if plain, was good and sufficient. There were some new items on the menu, such as macaroni and cheese. I had never tasted pasta, didn’t know what it was, and I think this was true of the others also. Irish cooking was unadventurous in those days – potatoes, meat and veg was the furthest extent of our culinary horizon. We had fish on Fridays and fried eggs on Wednesdays. Another innovation was coffee, freshly percolated; I had never drunk coffee before joining the order.

An “atheist” interlude

There were some sharp shocks. One day, for no reason that I can fathom, unrelated to anything I can think of, God simply dropped out. At least that’s the way it felt. It wasn’t that I had come up with some brilliant intellectual argument showing that God did not exist; it wasn’t a matter of argument at all. It was more like a light being switched off, leaving me in a dark place. It was a disturbing experience, my first time having it – though not my last. I felt extraordinarily lonely because of it: if there was no God, what did anything matter? What did I matter? Was there any direction, purpose or meaning in life? I floundered around helplessly for a few hours, not knowing what to do. Then it occurred to me to go and talk with Father Canice about it. He was elderly, confined to bed, a famous preacher in his day, a small

man who could make even his whisper heard at the back of a crowded church in the days before public address systems. He performed the magic: he listened. I remember nothing of what he said and it may have had nothing to do with the outcome. But God came back; it was like a light coming back on after a power cut, only more slowly. I don't see it now as a loss of faith, but rather as faith at its best, that is to say, holding on, trusting, when all the props are gone. Perhaps it was what Saint John of the Cross called 'the dark night of the soul.'

Am I in the right place?

There was another test. (God is not one to let sleeping dogs lie.) I was not sure if I wanted to be a Capuchin, but one thing I was sure of was that I did not wish to be a lay brother. I had seen for myself that their status in the order, and in the eyes of the people, was low. They were defined by what they weren't; they weren't ordained. 'He's only a brother' was a common phrase. Their role was defined as that of helping priests by doing the manual work of the house so as to free them for pastoral ministry. I knew I didn't want that, and I knew also that my parents would object strongly if I asked to switch from the cleric novitiate to the non-cleric one. The problem was that I felt God wanted me to do it. God wants it; I don't – it was as clear as that. What to do? In my mind, I fought against it, but the thought wouldn't go away. Finally, I gave in, and left the garden where I had been working to go and see the novice master to ask for a change to the brothers' novitiate in Rochestown. I had

hardly begun to do this when something happened. It was as if God was saying to me, ‘It’s OK. I don’t want you to become a lay brother. I just wanted to know if you were willing to become one if that’s what I asked of you. Now that you’ve answered with a yes, stay where you are, in peace.’ I felt a wave of relief and happiness. Thank you, God.

The three vows

As time went by, and the twelve-month novitiate was nearing its end, I began to think more about the three vows of religious life – poverty, chastity and obedience. (I don’t mean the unfortunate term *religious life* to imply that laypeople are not religious.) Poverty felt almost like a joke – I had no money anyway, and the order provided what I needed, so the absence of personal property made no difference. For some novices, entry into the order was a step up in the world, having a room to oneself and the assurance of meals on the table. In more recent years, the vow of poverty has come to seem like the world’s best social security system, where everything, especially health care, is provided. If you want to practise detachment from money and material things, be a taxpayer and parent!

The vow of chastity was a strange mix. At one level, it was simply the absence of sex in any form, a price to be paid by someone wishing to be a priest. In the novitiate, I was as uninformed about sexual matters as before. I think that Berchmans, the novice master, guessed this, and, perhaps feeling that it didn’t make sense for such a

person to take a vow of chastity, asked me one day, using the jargon of the time, if I knew “the facts of life”. (What an odd expression!) I froze; I didn’t know them, but was too embarrassed to admit it. I lied and said I did. I think he understood what was going on, and he asked me if I was sure. Once again, out of embarrassment, I lied. Sorry, God, and Berchs, too! But, if I had little knowledge about sex, what I did have in full measure was a powerful sense of sin about anything related to it. The hormones were kept on a short leash, held firmly in place by guilt. I asked myself what I would do in later years – there was no opportunity in the novitiate – if I had sex with a woman, and I felt that I would have had such an intense sense of betrayal that I would probably not be able to live with it and would have taken my life. I am not suicidal – occasionally homicidal, perhaps! – but never suicidal, except in that possible scenario. In the years since then, I have often felt that we make a big deal of the vow. It’s as nothing compared to the sacrifices married people make in their lives, and there may be no lonelier place than the marriage bed, when one or the other says no.

I have heard from time to time of surveys which purport to show that most priests have a woman on the side. I have also heard of others purporting to show that most priests are gay. How do they add up? (Do surveys give the results their sponsors want?) My impression, after more than fifty years in an order, is that the great majority of priests and religious are habitually faithful to their vows. The only doubt I have about that is that, if I had been asked twenty years ago if some priests sexually

abused children, I would have been outraged by the question, and denied that such a thing happened. Clearly, I got that wrong, so I might be wrong about the other, too.

The vow of chastity, like the other vows, is supposed to be essentially a vow of love, freeing the person in their heart to have a universal love, in imitation of Jesus Christ. Not having a family does indeed create more time for serving people, and more freedom to be moved from place to place as pastoral needs require. But that is something functional, not a matter of the heart. I don't feel this freedom of heart in myself. I think the theology and spirituality built up around it, beautiful though they sound – in documents such as Vatican II's *Presbyterorum Ordinis* or Paul VI's *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus* – don't correspond to the reality that I feel in myself. I think I have “achieved” chastity, if I may use such an odd expression, at the price of a significant freezing of my emotions and my humanity. I believe that the absence of sexual relations and the loss of real fatherhood is a diminution, a loss of humanity. I think I would have been a better human being if I had married, had a family, and worked at an ordinary job, preferably a productive one, and served God in that way. In short, I think it was a mistake for me to undertake to live a life of chastity.

Historically, I believe that the celibacy of the clergy originated in the desire of the church to secure church property so that it didn't pass into the hands of a priest's family, and also to give a bishop more control over his

priests. I know too many priests and religious whom I believe are lonely, spiritually empty, psychologically immature and socially maladjusted – because of being celibate. I look at the many priests I know who have left the priesthood and married. To me, it seems that the move did them good, made them better human beings. I cannot take seriously the theology of chastity as a way to a universal love. The reality doesn't seem to bear it out.

I think the church's great reluctance to change its present discipline on clerical celibacy has its basis in a recognition that the priest is at the heart of the institution's power structure. Change anything about the priesthood and you change the dynamics of the power structure. A change in the priesthood from single to married and you initiate a large and ongoing process of change in that power structure. And I think the clerical/hierarchical leadership of the church has too much institutional status invested in the present position to want to change it.

Polls consistently show that people favour allowing priests to marry, and allowing married men to become priests. But what I see at local level is that collections for the support of priests are not enough to sustain a family. In one parish with two priests where I served, in a diocese where a priest's annual salary was set at £12,000, the collections for the priest were insufficient to support one. A family couldn't live on £12,000. But I think change will develop on the ground, whatever Rome says, as the number of priests in the Western world continues its decline to the point where the

Eucharist becomes a rarity in Christian faith communities. There are alternatives.

And the vow of obedience? I was used to being told what to do at home, at school, and in the FCA. Compared to them, what the order asked was not taxing. But there was a big difference: I was told - and it was the standard teaching at the time - that what the superior asked you to do was God's will for you. (There was the *caveat* that, if you were asked to do something against your conscience, you should not do it; conscience always had priority. But, since that was unlikely to happen anyway, it was mostly a non-issue.) God's will - for a believer that was the trump card to beat all trump cards. How could you go against it? The novice master said that it did not mean the superior was infallible; rather it meant that the subject was infallible. (Superior and subject was the language of the time.) By obeying, you could be certain that you were doing God's will. Had Jesus not said to his apostles, 'He who hears you hears me'? Initiative was not welcome; permission was everything. I accepted this. I remember happily explaining it to my father when he visited me. He demurred, sensing something wrong but saying nothing, probably because of not wanting to undermine my vocation. I was to learn later from some of my companions that they did not accept it even then, but I did.

I now find my naiveté breath-taking. How could I not have seen what was staring me in the face? It was a system of conditioning and control operating at the most

effective level, that is, not imposed from without, but welcomed from within. It was intended to break us, and then re-make us to be biddable. A conformist would be at home in such a system; someone with neither the imagination nor the courage to think for himself would fit in well. There had been many warnings about “singularity”; it was a big no-no. I sometimes think that, if we were honest in the church, we would advertise for vocations, stating, ‘Wanted: compliant cogs for the ecclesiastical machine.’ It was a system that exalted hierarchy and fostered infantilism, dependency and even irresponsibility – all in the name of “God’s holy will”! Conditioning was mistaken for conscience, just as certainty was mistaken for truth. To take a vow of obedience is, in effect, to sign a black cheque, drawn on one’s life, and to hand it to another human being. I question whether it is moral to do such a thing. It belittles a person, diminishes his/her individuality and chokes initiative.

Poverty, chastity and obedience had become security, isolation and passivity. The church operated that system because it was afraid to trust, afraid of losing control, afraid of the individual, and afraid of the human; it was like an over-protective mother who clasps her children firmly to her bosom, afraid to let them go and grow. But, in Kilkenny in 1962, all those ideas were a long way into the future.

On the feast of Saint Francis, 4 October 1962, I cried with joy as I made profession of the three vows. A day or two later, along with my fellow newly-professed, I

went to Saint Bonaventure's, Cork, to begin the next phase of my journey, the study of philosophy.

Snapshots from Kilkenny

I was told to carve a cross for the large rosary beads we wore on our cord. Father Bonaventure Murphy, then in his eighties, gave me a piece of wood and some tools. A cross is not easy to carve: it's all right angles, and they look odd if you don't get them right. I didn't, at least not fully. I pointed this out to 'Bony,' as everyone called him. In reply, he said something I never forgot: 'The man who never made a mistake, never made anything.' And another elderly friar used to say, 'If you can't do the best, do the best you can.'

And then there was the day when a friar, who was crazy, chased a fellow novice, whom he disliked, round the house, carrying a shotgun, and threatening to kill him. Was the gun loaded? The novice didn't wait to find out, and, since he could run faster, got away. He left the order several years later, and went into a position in political life where his novitiate-acquired skills in dodging the bullets might not have gone astray.

One of the really good things about our life was that those who left it, for whatever reason, were always welcomed when they came for a visit, as many did, and good friendships were maintained afterwards.

Our novice-master, Berchmans, often sounded gruff and looked severe, but he was always fair, had no

favourites, and treated everyone with respect – a good man.

There was an openness, unexpected to me, in communicating with us novices about the affairs of the order. From time to time, a letter from the provincial and definitors (councillors) would be read in the refectory giving information about decisions, including financial ones, on such matters as the amount of money sent to the missions, or spent on repairs to friaries, etc. This was a mark of trust, and was welcome. However, one such communication was different: it was from the Minister General of the Capuchins, an American called Clement of Milwaukee. He wrote of a calumny being spread against the order in Italy by communists to undermine its reputation among the people. They were spreading around a story that the friars had been involved in cigarette smuggling, which, at the time, was a state-controlled monopoly in Italy. An accident had occurred in which a truck, being backed through the gate of a friary, had killed a man by pinning him against a pillar. And the communists were blaming the friars for this. At the time, I had enough political awareness to be skeptical about Reds under the bed excuses and explanations offered as diversions and subterfuges. I suspected that this was the case here, and learned later that it was. The friars had indeed been involved in cigarette smuggling, and the truck had been loaded with cigarettes, which were to be off-loaded into a friary. The “calumny” was true!

We went to see Kilkenny Castle. It was then virtually a ruin. Its owner, the Marquess of Ormond, bequeathed it to the state at about that time. We were not allowed to see much of it, because of the danger of falling plaster, or to go upstairs, because the stairs was insecure. It was wonderful to return years later and to find it in its present splendid condition, thanks to the much-maligned Office of Public Works. They did a splendid job. Thank you, OPW!

Saint Bonaventure's, Cork, 1962-66

A new friary

The house I moved into was about two years old, and had been under construction when I was going to and from school. It was a strange building, one that made me wonder what the architect was thinking. The toilets with their pipes faced onto the main road; the bedrooms were on the side away from the sun, while washrooms and stores faced towards it. There were no washbasins, lights or curtains in the bedrooms. Central heating was a pipe without a radiator, half of it covered by a built-in wardrobe. In winter, the house was cold and damp, with condensation running down the walls of the stairwell. The bedrooms faced a yard where a firm of sand, gravel and block merchants kept their trucks. Overnight, workers used to have fun driving the trucks round and round, rodeo-style, and then slamming on the brakes. With no curtains, and a belt of trees between the house and the yard, the branches were projected onto the bedroom walls. Along with the noise and the lights from the yard, sleep was difficult. There was something a bit

insane about the whole arrangement as if it was designed to make unnecessary difficulties.

Vatican II

On 11 October 1962, the Second Vatican Council opened in Rome, only the second such council in over four hundred years. The announcement in 1959 by Pope John XIII that there was to be one raised hopes and expectations among the Irish people. The church was seen by young people as stodgy, too set in its ways. Older people often complained that the church – by which they almost invariably meant the clergy, or the bishops – were arrogant. The media gave it what coverage they could, but were greatly hindered by the Vatican's policy of avoiding giving anything away. Communiqués were noted more for what they omitted than for what they said. In the absence of accurate and adequate information, rumour and gossip filled the gap, as might have been expected. Proceedings were in Latin. Philips, the Dutch electronics company, had offered, *pro bono*, to install a simultaneous translation system; it received no reply. Many years later, I was to learn of an Irish Capuchin bishop at the council, Timothy Phelim O'Shea, who, after more than thirty years in the bush in Africa, had forgotten all his Latin – and was far from being alone in that situation – who was reduced to reading *Time* magazine to try and find out what was happening and what he was voting on.

For us, the Council passed largely unnoticed. We had no access to newspapers or radio, except on rare

occasions when we managed to sneak a look at the priests' paper. Speaking about the Council, our spiritual director warned us on one occasion, 'not to be expecting changes', and that was it. At about the same time, the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, on returning from a session of the Council, had said, 'You may have been worried about much talk of changes to come. Allow me to reassure you. No change will worry the tranquillity of your Christian lives.' He was one of many with his head firmly buried in the sand.

We were students for the priesthood, entering into a life that would be deeply affected by the Council, and it was ignored. I think this was because it was unwelcome, and clergy hoped it would do nothing except reinforce the *status quo*. At that time, one of the proudest boasts of the church was that it did not change. 'The Catholic church never changes' was trumpeted as a badge of honour. There was also more than a touch of smugness: we were Holy Catholic Ireland, and had no need of new-fangled ideas from continental theologians. Their churches were empty, ours were full – what did they have to teach us? Ireland had no world-class theologians; mostly it had men trained in the manuals, and who didn't look beyond them, perhaps out of fear of being regarded as *innovators* – a bad word.

Shortly after the Council ended in 1965, I got a copy of *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbott. I read the decree on religious life, and chapter 6 of the Constitution on the Church, which dealt with the same topic. The Guardian of the friary saw me doing this

and scolded me, saying I should leave theology alone until I had finished philosophy. I quietly persevered with it, reading the messages from the Council to the world at its close, and finding in them a breath of fresh air, wonderfully positive and uplifting, engaging with the world in a dialogue of critical yet constructive solidarity, not withdrawing from it in fear. Today, I see “wise heads” – some of them very young - shaking in disapproval, speaking about ‘the over-optimistic anthropology of Vatican II.’

Our attention as students was drawn to a Roman document, an apostolic constitution, a medium big gun in the hierarchy of Vatican documents, issued shortly before the Council. It was called *Veterum Sapientia* (The Wisdom of the Ancients), dated 22 February 1962, on the promotion of the study of Latin. Among other things, it stated: -

‘Of its very nature Latin is most suitable for promoting every form of culture among peoples.’ n.4

Latin... ‘is a most effective training for the pliant minds of youth.’ n.11

‘In the exercise of their paternal care they [bishops] shall be on their guard lest anyone under their jurisdiction, being eager for innovation, writes against the use of Latin in the teaching of the higher sacred studies or in the liturgy, or through prejudice makes light of the Holy See’s will in this regard or interprets it falsely.’ n.15.2

‘No one is to be admitted to the study of philosophy or theology except he is to be thoroughly and perfectly grounded in this language and capable of using it.’ n.15.3

‘Future ministers of the altar must be instructed in Greek in the lower and middle schools.’ n.15.7

As regards the syllabus for the study of Latin, the document said it would be prepared by the Congregation of Seminaries and Universities, adding that, ‘Ordinaries [bishops] may not take it upon themselves to put their own proposals into effect until these have been examined and approved by the Sacred Congregation.’ n.15.8

The document had practical implications for some of my fellow students. In a bold and imaginative move, the Irish Capuchin Province had decided some years before to admit to study for the priesthood older men who had not completed secondary education. In the postulancy in Kilkenny they were provided with supplementary classes, and, in Saint Bonaventure’s, provision was made for them to study philosophy at home in the friary, with retired university staff as teachers. They did not have Latin. There was a widespread expectation that the Council would allow the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, as indeed it did, so they would not need Latin to be ordained.

Veterum Sapientia was mostly greeted with dutiful and docile Amens – and then ignored. I heard an Irish archbishop say that every bishop in Ireland had a filing cabinet full of documents from Rome which he ignored. *Veterum Sapientia* was seen as a pre-emptive strike against vernacular liturgy by those in the Roman Curia who did not want it. The men principally behind it were Cardinal Joseph Pizzardo, prefect of the (Vatican) Congregation for Seminaries and Universities, who was

then aged 85, and Archbishop Alphonsus Carinci, secretary of the Congregation of Rites (liturgy, the public worship of the church, such as Mass and the sacraments), who was then 100 years old. When some bishops raised the matter with Pope John XXIII, he told them his hand had been forced in the matter, and they should ignore it. The older students among us heard this with delight as they were able to drop the Latin classes which had been hurriedly arranged for them in the summer.

At about the same time, an announcement from Rome said that a new phrase was to be inserted into the Roman Canon (of the Mass). It read, ‘We honour Joseph, her [Mary’s] husband...’ There was great puzzlement over this. What was the reason for it? Since the Council was discussing liturgy, it seemed strange to introduce a change at this point. There were two interpretations: the pious one was that Pope John had great devotion to Saint Joseph and wanted to honour him; the political one was that, since defenders of tradition were arguing that the Council had no authority to change the liturgy, because Pope Saint Pius V in the sixteenth century had promulgated the Tridentine Mass *ad perpetuam rei memoriam* (for a perpetual memory), the matter was closed. By making a change, however unimportant it might be, Pope John was making the point that change was possible. The Roman tradition of poking around in the entrails for meaning goes back a long way!

These two matters began to wake me up to see that documents from Rome need to be read politically,

whatever their ostensible content; the subtext is usually one of Roman control.

In 1964, the recently elected Pope Paul VI published his first encyclical letter, *Ecclesiam Suam*. I had managed to get a copy by having a standing arrangement with my mother that I could buy books in town, and the shop would send the bill to her for payment. Thanks, Mother; without that bit of holy crookery, I would have remained in complete ignorance about what was going on in the church. I read the encyclical expecting that he would set out a programme for the church in his pontificate. I was disappointed, as he didn't do that at all. But I came to see that what he had done was a lot better: he spoke of the need for dialogue within the church, and between the church and society. He wanted to set in train a long-lasting process based on a relationship of mutuality, and that was more valuable than a programme, which, in any event, was what the Council was about. It was a breath of fresh air. Describing the encyclical as a simple conversational letter, he said, 'The aim of this encyclical will be to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, get to know one another and learn to love one another.' (n.3) He said his purpose was 'to send you a sincere message, as between brothers and members of a common family.' (n.7) I probably did not notice the absence of any mention of sisters.

'The dialogue of salvation was made accessible to all. It applied to everyone without distinction. Hence our

dialogue too should be as universal as we can make it. That is to say, it must be catholic, made relevant to everyone, excluding only those who utterly reject it or only pretend to be willing to accept it.' (n.76)

'Dialogue.... must be addressed to the intelligence of those to whom it is addressed....'

'It is demanded by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society. It is demanded by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity man has reached in this day and age. Be he religious or not, his secular education has enabled him to think and speak, and conduct a dialogue with dignity.' (n.78)

The pluralism of society? Ireland sought to be a unitary society and pluralism was regarded with great suspicion, yet here was a pope acknowledging and accepting it. This indeed was something new. Fifty years later, with great regret, I see the absence of dialogue within the church, and the church withdrawing from engagement with society. We have pretended dialogue, with conclusions and decisions fore-ordained; it is a severe loss.

I also read Michael Novak's *The Open Church* and Robert Kaiser's *Inside the Council*; they helped filled the information deficit.

Philosophy

I entered on the study of philosophy at University College, Cork, for three years as part of the standard training for the priesthood. It would be followed by four

years of theology. There were twenty-eight Capuchin students in Saint Bonaventure's. I was assigned the subjects to study by a friar with the title of Prefect of Studies. He assigned me Latin, Irish, Geography and Logic, which was compulsory as a first step towards philosophy. Latin was still in vogue, if not as essential as before. Irish I liked and was happy to study. Geography was a filler subject which I knew I would drop after first year. I would rather have been given English instead of some of the others, as I liked it a lot and felt it would have been more suitable. But I did not presume to ask; I had been trained to do as I was told without question.

In my second and third years, philosophy was the major subject, and Latin the minor one. Philosophy was a double subject because it had many parts: epistemology, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, cosmology and the history of philosophy. I have often wondered since about its value in preparation for the priesthood. It may perhaps have helped me to think more clearly, but even that I'm not sure of. Cosmology is the only branch in which I have retained an interest, as a hobby. I did the examination for the BA degree in 1965 and got honours.

The method of instruction was old-fashioned. Professors gave their lectures, and then called out notes which we copied down in long hand. There were no questions, discussions, seminars or tutorials. It was rote learning, which is hardly the way that philosophy, of all subjects, should be studied. Exams were a test of

memory and speed writing. We were given the questions beforehand and regurgitated the received material.

Participation in university life did not exist for us. We were allowed to go to the library and the *Aula Maxima* for study, and that was it. If there was a Student Union building, I was never in it. We did not participate in clubs or societies. Even the chapel was out of bounds! Our spiritual director advised us that we should converse with laypeople 'if charity required it, but always to show a gentle tendency to get away'! It was an extraordinarily narrow view of education. Cut off as we were from radio or newspapers, we knew next to nothing of what was happening in the outside world. A student asked me one day in October 1962 what I thought of events in Cuba; I had no idea what he was talking about. It was the time of the Cuban missile crisis, when the world came closer to nuclear war than at any other time. (In fact, in later years, Robert McNamara, the then US defence secretary, met Fidel Castro of Cuba, and they shared their reflections on it. They discovered that they had been much closer to war than either of them had realized.) For all that we knew of it, it might never have happened. The spirituality of disengagement we were being fed meant that such matters were seen as no concern of ours; we should say our prayers and mind our own business. This was despite Pope Pius XII writing in 1950 about seminary life that students should be encouraged to 'self-discipline and a sense of personal responsibility.... They [staff] should accustom students to think for themselves.... far from being anxious to keep the students from knowledge of current affairs, they should

see that they have this knowledge.’ (Apostolic Exhortation *Mens Nostra*, 23 September 1950, n.83) More significantly, for a religion based on incarnation, on God entering the human situation and becoming like us in all things except sin, it was hard to understand.

One of the things I did enjoy was the walk to and from the college, about 1.5 km each way; the only tricky part was dodging the dog turds outside the greyhound racing track on the Western Road, a matter of more than ordinary concern when wearing sandals and in bare feet!

Because I had done well in the BA exams, I was directed to study for an MA. My own preference would have been to go on to theology, get ordained, and go to the missions. But it was a decision that was not mine to make. I did get to choose a topic, however. I had always had an interest in politics, and still do, though without ever being tempted to go into it; I don’t have the personality. But I have a soft spot for politicians, and feel that Irish politicians don’t deserve the unending stream of cynicism poured on them. I believe that most of them want to serve people and do some good for the country. For my thesis, a minor one, I undertook a study of the themes of religious liberty, property and democracy in the Irish, French and American constitutions. Looking back on it, the subject was too diverse, and I would have done better to focus on one topic. I read a lot, and collected a great deal of relevant material, but, it now seems to me that there isn’t actually a *thesis* in it; there was a great mass of material alright. It wasn’t very good, but maybe they weighed it – it was

800 grams – and decided that was enough. In addition, I had written exams in three subjects and did better in them. So, in 1966, I graduated with an MA.

In the friary, relations between students and priests were distant. Vianney, who had helped me take the plunge to join the order, and I scarcely exchanged more than a few words in four years. It would not have been acceptable for me to have taken the initiative. It was part of a culture of keeping one's distance, strange for people called to live in community. Indeed, the Christian life itself is a call to community, but social *mores* were given priority.

It was decided that we should have a recreation hall, as we had previously used the study hall, which had no facilities. We were to build it ourselves, under the direction of Brother Hugh Davis, a man who had worked in the fifties on the Snowy Mountains scheme in south-eastern Australia. Amazingly, it went well. Hugh knew what he was doing, even if we didn't, and he kept us on track. We wore our habits while working, had no safety helmets or boots - a health and safety inspector would have a fit if he saw us today. Climbing scaffolding and going onto a roof doing tiling while wearing a habit and sandals was asking for trouble, but fortunately there were no accidents. I overcame my fear of heights by going up gradually with the building. It was a good experience for us, and we were glad of it. 'Do your best and you'll get better – it worked in this instance!

At Christmas, we presented a play or two, and these gave us a break from study. In the summer we used a swimming pool, supplied from a nearby stream and organized a gala for ourselves. But mostly the summers were wasted: they could have been an opportunity for learning a language or how to cook, for undertaking voluntary work, or serving the church abroad in organizations like *Viatores Christi*, or even maintaining contact with our families. The latter was limited to one letter home a month, with both incoming and outgoing mail liable to inspection. There were no phone calls. Three visits a year by family members were allowed. But the summer months were frittered away on housework or gardening. Even though the latter helped keep us sane, it was far from fully occupying us. We played hurling and Gaelic football, wearing the habit, which gave a handy advantage if you were a goal-keeper; at least the ball wouldn't slip in between your legs!

Sunday in Saint Bonaventure's was a special day. It went like this: -

6.45 a.m. A knock on the bedroom door by the acolyte who was serving Mass that week: '*Benedicamus Domino.*' '*Deo gratias.*' ('*Let us bless the Lord*' and the response was '*Thanks be to God.*') You went to the communal washroom and said the *Litany of Loreto* while washing. Then, while dressing in your room, you said more prayers.

7.00. Community prayers began in the choir with the Angelus and the Divine Office: Matins, with nine psalms and nine lessons; Lauds; the reading of the Martyrology,

Prime and Terce. Then came the community, or conventual, Mass.

After Mass came breakfast, begun and ended with prayers, and taken in silence. After breakfast, we had morning prayers before the statue of the Blessed Virgin - the title seems like a joke considering what had preceded - and then we had 5-10 minutes to ourselves before going back to the choir.

9: a second Mass, followed by spiritual reading for twenty minutes.

10: a choir practice.

11: a conference, given by the spiritual director. It was a talk on Our Lady, the apparitions at Knock, or purgatory, rarely on anything else, never on the Mass - 'It's altogether too sublime,' he said. He rarely spoke about Jesus, but unendingly about Mary - '*De Maria nunquam satis*' ('Never enough about Mary') he used to say, quoting Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort. His was a saccharine sweet devotion, full of superlative adjectives but short of substance. It inoculated me firmly against devotion to Mary for several years until, searching for something with meat in it, I found it in Karl Rahner's *Mother of the Lord*. This led me to see that it was possible to say things about Mary that were solid and real.

12: the Little Office of Our Lady, followed by Sext and None, and the Angelus.

1: Lunch began and ended with prayers, and we had permission to speak.

After lunch, we had a walk, and then a little free time, perhaps twenty minutes or so, before going into Rosary

and Vespers. We had an early supper because we then headed off to Holy Trinity church in the city centre to sing at evening devotions there. When we returned, we had a short period of recreation among ourselves as a student body and then went to bed to begin the new week.

Our spiritual director was a man I found effeminate, touchy, and remarkably self-absorbed. He was hypochondriac, and had two or even three students occupied for several hours a day running here and there attending to his wants. I did not feel much respect for him, because, on occasions when a student was treated unjustly – it didn't happen often but it did happen – he would not take the student's part but covered it with a pious fudge: 'It's all God's holy will.' Once, at an annual provincial visitation, when the Provincial, that is, the superior of the Capuchins in the Irish Province of the order, came on a kind of inspection, I plucked up the courage to ask that we be given a different director. The provincial asked why, and I said that I didn't think the incumbent was suited in personality to young men, that I could never imagine myself confiding in him, or asking his advice. In reply, he asked me whether the director was giving us bad example, and I had to answer that he wasn't. He went on to say that good example was the most important thing in a director. And that ended that – but only in one sense.

It was the first stage in a process of learning over a period of decades that the church's internal processes don't often work, that a person will be fobbed off rather

than have an issue dealt with, that we fudge issues more readily than we face them, and that, if you have problems – and who doesn't? – the message was to deal with them yourself. It took many more years to reach that point but my experience with the provincial on that occasion was the beginning. Was it a church problem, or an Irish one? I'm not sure; maybe both. I think that the besetting fault of Irish life is a lack of moral courage - we run with the hare and hunt with the hounds – and, associated with it, a lack of self-respect; we often belittle and demean ourselves.

As I look back on it, I marvel at how we managed to retain not only our sanity but also our faith. Sunday was a day of spiritual saturation, more likely to turn a person away from faith than towards it. I can recall thinking that it was the kind of day that made you envy atheists. Such spirituality may have led, by way of reaction, to the minimalism in liturgy, where ceremonies were pared to the bare bone, or less, in the name of simplicity, that developed after Vatican II. Another example of it was when as students we sang all the Holy Week ceremonies in Latin in Saint Bonaventure's - much longer than they are now - and then did the same all over again in Holy Trinity church in the city centre.

What was noticeably absent from the timetable was time to oneself, time to think. I think it was intentionally constructed that way. Thirty years later, or thereabouts, when I was myself involved in formation work - that's the name given to training young friars - I asked an old hand from another religious order who had been at it for

forty years what the secret was, and he said, ‘Keep them so busy they don’t have time to think.’ We didn’t have time to think. ‘The devil makes work for idle hands’ was the explanation for leaving the day, even Sunday, the Christian day of rest, with no leisure. Running through it was a strong undercurrent of fear and mistrust. Yet we were young men, idealistic for the most part, who had come in good faith to give our lives to God. It was as if the order was afraid that we could not be trusted to be alone with ourselves for a while, in case of what we might start thinking. I believe that, despite their denials, the superiors were afraid of losing numbers, and losing control. I can’t help but feel a sense of betrayal about it – betrayal of what religious life is about, betrayal of grace and the gospel, and betrayal of us.

There must have been enormous waste of talent in such an inadequate and dysfunctional formation system. But we were isolated, and knew no better and were mostly unaware of the above, except with the benefit of hindsight. The greatest asset we had in formation was ourselves, but its potential was under-utilized. Friendships were discouraged, probably because of an unspoken fear of homosexuality.

At this time - I was about eighteen or nineteen - I did not know what homosexuality was. I think I must have heard the word, or seen it in a book, and knew it had something to do with sex – but what? I plucked up the courage to ask a fellow student who was several years my senior. He told me it meant a man was attracted to men rather than to women. I thought about that for a

while, and then asked what they did, sexually. He described anal intercourse. I couldn't believe it, thinking, 'Why would anyone want to do that, or have it done to them?' I thought he was joking, having me on, poking fun, and that, at any moment, he would burst out laughing at my ignorance. Instead he assured me that it was the truth. He helped me as far as he could, though it was a pity that he identified homosexuality with one particular sexual action, which is as limited and skewed as identifying heterosexuality with vaginal intercourse.

Connie Lucey

A remarkable figure in Cork at that time was Cornelius Lucey, Bishop of Cork and Apostolic Administrator of Ross, to give him his full title. Connie Lucey, as he was universally known, was larger than life. At a time when the city was expanding into new suburbs, he led a campaign to build what he called 'a rosary of churches', five new churches in the suburbs. The people of Cork were very poor at the time, so where was the money to come from? One source was the collection and sale of waste paper; this was before anyone heard of the word *re-cycling*. Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston also helped, but it was mostly the pennies of the poor that built five fine and large churches. At the time of a polio outbreak in 1956, he was the driving force behind the foundation of the Cork Polio and After-Care Association, which provided much-needed practical help. He began a diocesan mission to Peru, a rare, perhaps unique, venture, among Western bishops; it was later transferred to Ecuador when the Marxist guerrilla

movement, *Sendero Luminoso*, made its continued functioning in Peru impossible.

Bishop Lucey wasn't afraid of controversy. At confirmation ceremonies, he would regularly take politicians, both local and national, to task for their failings: for example, he criticized government for imposing more taxation on a diminishing population. Ireland was bled dry by emigration in the fifties; people were our principal export, and, until Dr. T. K. Whitaker and Seán Lemass, there was no policy of industrial development to do anything about it. But, while many people agreed with the points the bishop made, most did not like his choice of confirmation as the venue at which to make them, while some felt that other politicians should have made those criticisms rather than a bishop. His defenders have subsequently said that, in fact, he didn't make those criticisms at confirmation, but rather gave reporters a typed text beforehand, and then spoke to the children at Mass on confirmation. I don't know where the truth lies in that regard. But I didn't think a bishop should speak on political issues, except in rare cases, and not on a sacramental occasion.

But sometimes it was good that he did speak. On one occasion, a car had driven off an unguarded quay into the River Lee close to the city centre, and the passengers were drowned. The Harbour Commissioners said it was the Corporation's responsibility to erect protective barriers; and the Corporation passed responsibility back to the Harbour Commissioners. So nothing was done. Then, a few months later, the same thing happened

again, and the blame game resumed. Connie erupted and blasted both bodies. The people of the city were behind him, and said it was good that there was someone who could get the two bodies moving. The problem was dealt with.

Other public statements of his were less happy; when the Vatican Council was discussing ecumenism, he stated that Protestants just had to accept the fact that they were second-class Christians. I was appalled, coming from a family background where we were taught to respect other religions and their adherents. But, when I discussed it with some others, I found that they agreed with him. On a lighter note, he gave his name to a biscuit: the Connie Dodger. This was a piece of confectionery - thin, and so qualifying for the title of biscuit, and - although not quite the size of a tractor's back wheel - large. It was developed by Cork bakers to get around Lenten fasting regulations. These allowed for what was called one full meal and two collations (small meals). But what about morning or afternoon coffee? Couldn't you have something with them? Connie conceded a biscuit, and bakers saw their opportunity. Whether you agreed with him or not, whether you liked him or not, at least you knew Connie Lucey stood for something; he was a man with a mind of his own, and he was respected for that.

Snapshots from Saint Bonaventure's

A regular and welcome visitor to the friary was "Molly the Dogs"; she was what the Americans call a "bag

lady”. She had a high-pitched Cork accent, and used to say, “I loves cheese, Brudder!” and would be given something to eat and to take away, both for herself and the pack of dogs that accompanied her.

Not far from Saint Bonaventure’s was one of the Magdalen laundries. It was in Sunday’s Well, and was run by the Good Shepherd sisters. The prevailing understanding of the time, which I accepted without question, was that the institution was for “fallen women”, that is to say, prostitutes or unmarried mothers. They would be helped to reform their lives by prayer and repentance, given an education, trained for work, and then discharged for a new start in life. We now know from the report by Dr. Martin McAleese that the reality was often different. There was a strong current of class consciousness underlying the process, as there was also in the handling of child sex abuse: there abusive priests were often transferred to progressively lower class parishes, perhaps with the idea that working-class people, or the unemployed, do not often have the knowledge, or maybe the self-confidence, to be able to tackle the system, whereas the wealthy do. I was to learn later that a local priest, chaplain to the institution, saw the dark side of things and raised the matter with the superior of the convent. He got nowhere, so he raised it with the bishop, and got nowhere there either. In the church, we have often been taught that where people have power without openness, transparency and accountability, some of them will abuse it. In the case of the handling of child abuse, I believe we have learned that lesson, but I think we have put it in brackets, not

applying it to the general life of the church. There, loyalty, obedience and deference are still used to smother injustice.

We had a problem one winter with the heating system. With the onset of cold weather, the guardian told one of the friars to light the furnace – it was a wood-burner - and give us some heat. He went to do as told, but, hours later, we were still shivering in the cold. The guardian asked what had happened and he said he had got a good fire going and switched on the circulation pump. So the guardian and he went to the furnace house to see what was wrong. The problem was immediately obvious: there was a good fire going alright, but the circulation pump was off. The guardian asked the friar what he had done. He pointed to the pumping mechanism. It had two buttons, a green one marked ON, and a red one, marked OFF. Simple enough, one might think. ‘So what did you do?’ asked the guardian. And the friar answered, ‘I pressed the green button first, and then the red one. Off she goes!’

An elderly priest of the community solved the problem of staying warm in winter while saying Mass by wearing two chasubles. (A chasuble is the outer Mass vestment.)

From time to time I did some work on the community library. But one cupboard was locked and off limits. It was known as Press X, an exciting title. One day I found it unlocked and had a look. I saw in it a copy of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler’s autobiography. Delighted, I took it and read it. It was an interesting read, and revealing about its

author. His style of writing was meandering, sometimes jumping oddly from one topic to another. But no one could be in any doubt about his hatred of communists (Bolsheviks), nor for Jews. For him, the latter were to blame for Germany's defeat in World War I and much else besides. There was no mention of gas chambers but his venom was fully in evidence. As for the Slavs, they were *untermenschen* (sub-human) and destined to be ruled. The book was published in 1927, which makes it difficult to understand why his fellow-Germans and the rest of the world were so slow to wake up; he had made things clear enough. There was an added twist to the story. *Mein Kampf*, I discovered, was on the church's *Index of Forbidden Books*, and any Catholic reading one of them was subject to excommunication. So was I excommunicated? I don't remember losing any sleep over it.

A Capuchin who was the head of what was then called by the pretentious title of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors, (now, thanks to the late Taoiseach Charlie Haughey's prodding, known by the simpler title of Conference of Religious of Ireland, CORI) told me of how he wrote to the bishops' conference on behalf of the CMRS offering the services of religious orders in Ireland for parish work. There was then only one parish in the country staffed by religious, Clonard, in Belfast, run by Redemptorists. He received no reply.

I remember Father Peter Dempsey, a friar who was professor of psychology in UCC, being really annoyed by Archbishop (later Cardinal) Pericle Felici, who was

secretary-general of the Vatican Council, then under way. He had stated that any Catholic who was involved in psychoanalysis should be excommunicated. Peter, whose doctoral thesis in Montreal had been published under the title *Freud, Psychoanalysis, Catholicism*, thought this was reactionary nonsense.

I endured more than I enjoyed Saint Bonaventure's. I know a confrère who disliked it so much he never visited it again in his life. I was glad to say goodbye to it in October 1966 and to head north to the other end of the country, to Ards, on Sheephaven Bay, in Donegal.

Ards, County Donegal, 1966-1970

Ards, just off the road between Creeslough and Dunfanaghy on the north coast of Donegal is a place of wondrous beauty. It brings together farm, forest, strand and sea. Every fifty metres or so, there's a new angle, a new view, one more beautiful than the other. And it manages to retain this all year round: even in winter, the cold doesn't make it bleak, just beautiful with a different kind of beauty. That beauty has been a healing force for me, and for many others also, down through the years. It has an extraordinary healing force.

Sometimes with my fellow students, quite often alone, I absorbed that beauty to the full in my four years there. We went for walks in the woods, picnicked along the Back Strand, climbed rocks, explored caves, swam and dived in the pools and the sea. I walked across Clonmass Bay to the larger Clonmass Island, and then swam from

there to the smaller one, before swimming back across the bay to Lucky Shell beach, a fairly crazy thing to do – what if anything had gone wrong, like a cramp? Fortunately nothing did. We were students, and students do crazy things, like when we tried climbing an ice-bound Muckish Mountain in winter wearing rubber boots. After a while, even we had to admit it was crazy! Yet I'm glad I wasn't cautious about it – time enough for caution when you're old.

I used to love walking at night, especially if there was enough moonlight to see the way without too much difficulty. The smells, sounds and sights of the forest are different at night - smells like mould, sawdust, or an occasional flower like honeysuckle; sounds like an animal, perhaps a hedgehog or badger, scuttling through leaves, or the sudden crash of a startled deer running through bushes; sights like the twinkling lights of trans-Atlantic jets high above, or an occasional satellite higher still, or simply the constellations. 'Creation was God's first word,' wrote the theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas, I believe.

The friary I moved into was newly built, but not yet officially opened. The Capuchins, like most religious orders and missionary societies in Ireland, experienced a large increase in vocations in the post-World War II period, and built to meet it. There were forty students in Ards when I went there. The new buildings were up in time for the collapse in vocations which came from the late sixties onwards.

The old house we used until then had been built by a landlord for his estate some two hundred years before. It was cold and draughty. The chapel had a stone floor, and the front door of the house opened out into Arctic winds in winter, freezing friars and people alike as we knelt on the flagstones for Sunday Mass. Even in winter, when the tide was out, people from the Doe Castle area used to walk across the strand in their bare feet, so as to keep their shoes dry, to take a short cut to the church. They thought nothing of it; it was a price they were prepared to pay for getting to Mass.

The new friary and church were blessed and opened on 8 December 1966 by the newly ordained Bishop Anthony McFeely. Not long after, the old house was demolished, though the job proved to be difficult. It had been decided to dynamite it, so the community was herded up the hill near the cemetery (!) to await the blast. It came, and a huge cloud of dust rose over the building. When at last it settled, not even the glass in the skylight was broken, so the decision was taken to opt for the slower process of using a ball and chain to flatten it. I think there was the fear that further dynamiting might damage the foundations of the new house. There were no preservation orders in those days, and the destruction of the house would surely not be allowed today. Yet who would want to live in it, and how could you heat it?

My group was the first to move into the new friary and it was a welcome change after Saint Bonaventure's. There was a light in the rooms, and heat – practicality had dawned at last! Overall, we were a happy group

together. We played practical jokes, like the year someone – not me! - posted a bogus set of exam results on a notice board, and the response was an angry one from those who did less well than they had expected. Amazingly, the same trick was tried the following year, and it worked then, too! Someone also made a recording of a corncrake, and played it on a loop all night outside one friar's door.

Farming

There was a farm attached to the friary, about two hundred acres (nearly 100 hectares) of mostly rocky ground with a thin layer of topsoil suited only for raising sheep, some forest, and the rest good land for cattle or crops. It was a mixed farm which produced a lot of our food: we raised cattle, sheep, pigs, hens, and turkeys. We grew potatoes, vegetables and apples. There was even a glasshouse with one vine in it, although it never produced anything. As on many former landlord estates there were exotic trees, such as a cork tree and some enormous *cupressus macrocarpa*.

Students from a farming background gave the farm a wide berth; they had had enough of it. Townies like me were less reticent. I spent a lot of time there and enjoyed every minute of it – almost. I didn't enjoy being lashed across the face on a cold winter's morning by a cow's tail with hard, dry clods of dung on its end. With Brother Felix Carroll, the farm manager, I made silage, did the milking, fed the pigs, hens and sheep, piked dung, slung hay or silage into cattle troughs in winter, hosed out

buildings, and did the many other chores that are part of the scene.

I once nearly killed myself during silage-making operations. On a hot summer's day, Felix asked me to roll a tractor over and back across the silage to squeeze the air out and prevent fermentation. It was dull, monotonous work, and I became drowsy and lost concentration. I think that, at the end of the pit, I dropped off to sleep, and the tractor, in first gear and low ratio, began to climb up the end wall until it was vertical; and then it began to topple back. At that point I woke, and thought my end had come: being crushed to death under a tractor was the thought that went through my mind. Fortunately, the pit was fairly full at the time, and the engine cover caught against a rafter which held it in place. I climbed off the tractor and had to sit down for a while to get over the shock of such a near escape.

But the farm in every other sense was a life-saver for me. It was an escape from the occasional tensions of the house, and from the monotony of our isolated existence. I used to borrow Felix's .22 rifle or shotgun and go hunting. Hares and pheasants were my main targets. In season, I was nearly always sure of at least seeing some, and, most times, of bagging one or more. On one occasion, though, I had been out of luck. I had walked far and wide and not even seen anything. Coming back to the farm feeling frustrated, a hen started screeching raucously at me from a hay loft. On impulse, I raised the gun, fired, and blasted the hen backwards into the hay.

Shut up! As Aristotle wrote at the end of his *Ethics*, ‘It is difficult for armed men to live in peace’!

I also learned how easily accidents can happen with guns. A student had asked me to show him how to use the shotgun. Foolishly, I loaded both barrels. As he squatted – wrong posture – and then fired, the recoil pushed him back, so that he swung the gun towards me - I was standing behind him - with his finger inside the trigger guard, one cartridge still in its chamber, and he losing his balance. Well, I’m here, writing this today.

The formation programme

The staff of our house of studies had mostly been trained in Rome, with degrees, often doctorates, in one branch or another of theology. There was one teacher with no theology degree, but he was the best. He liked his subject, worked at it, and came to his classes with interest and energy. His field was moral theology, and it was in a process of transition from a heavy reliance on the ethics of Aristotle and canon law to a personalist and scripture-based approach. I think it was probably an advantage to him that he had not been trained in Rome as he was able to come to it with a fresh approach. He dispensed with the Latin manual by Noldin-Schmitt, and used his own notes. There was an English-language manual by a German Capuchin called Heribert Jone, but he warned us against it, on the grounds that ‘It was a bit on the liberal side.’ That seems comical today in view of changed attitudes. He did offer good ideas about hearing confessions, and I was helped greatly by Bernard

Häring's book, *Shalom: the Sacrament of Reconciliation*. As a teacher, his weakness was that he was preoccupied with sex; it was as if that was what moral theology was about; we gave little attention to justice. And the approach was individualistic; there was little communitarian dimension to it.

A major subject was *dogma*, a word that raises hackles with many people, needlessly, I think. It deals with the fundamentals of the faith – God, the Trinity, Jesus Christ. We used a Latin text by Hervé, a French writer, but, judging by the number of books that still had uncut pages, not many of our predecessors had read much of it. It was a real loss that we didn't have a good course in dogmatic theology. It deals with the essentials; it should lead into spirituality and enrich it, but instead it was dry and abstract, concerned with fighting the battles of the past, such as the Christological controversies of the first four centuries of the Christian era and those of the Reformation. I cannot think of anything I learned in the dogma course that made a difference to the way that I have understood or lived my life; it shouldn't be so. Our teacher was at his best, when, occasionally, he heard something in the media that riled him, and he would leave aside the book and talk about the issue, and he had something worthwhile to say. This illustrated to me how human experience should be an integral part of theology.

Scripture is the heart of theology, and we had a scripture scholar who was knowledgeable, open and liberal - but couldn't teach. We covered the ground inadequately. The same applied to other subjects, such as

church history – a favourite of mine – liturgy, catechetics, preaching, and canon law. The latter was a strange topic: the *Code of Canon Law*, promulgated in 1917, made not a single reference to God or Jesus Christ. The Gospels were marginal, if even that, in their impact on the text. Church history was taught like any other history, focussing on the church as a political/social institution, but offering no insights into how it evolved, into different models of church, or into ways in which God might have led people forward in faith in their own time. It was more a chronicle of events than an interpretation of them.

We did not study the documents of Vatican II (1962-65), and received no encouragement to read them by ourselves. There was a library in the house, a fairly large one, but it was locked, and students had no access to it. We had what was called “the student library”, a few narrow shelves containing mostly spare copies of the texts we already used, a dictionary or two, and a copy of *Denzinger*. This was a collection in Latin of conciliar and papal texts, listing propositions condemned as heretical. Compiled by Denzinger and Bannwart, each proposition began with the words, ‘Si quis dixerit...’ (‘If anyone should say...’), followed by a proposition, and concluded with the standard phrase, ‘Anathema sit’ (‘Let him be anathema.’) That was our library. And it wasn’t until 1967, with the election of a new provincial, that we were allowed to have a newspaper, radio and, on occasion, TV.

Our pastoral and liturgical training was amazingly inadequate. We were prepared (!) for pastoral work by being isolated as far as possible from contact with people. We were prepared for leadership by being educated in passivity. That began to change about 1967, but only slowly. There was no supervised practise in how to say Mass or administer a sacrament, except that we were shown how to “baptize” a doll. This was probably because the staff themselves had little pastoral or sacramental experience, except for hearing confessions, and so could not offer it. We preached one sermon a year each.

Our spiritual formation was also pretty deficient. We had an annual retreat, and, of course, the daily spiritual exercises, albeit at a less intense level than in Saint Bonaventure’s. We did not have a weekly spiritual “conference” or individual spiritual direction. The spiritual director was someone you went to for soap and toothpaste, given that role so that we couldn’t avoid meeting him. But he was generally avoided because we were in the dark as to what he would or would not disclose about what a student might have said to him when it came to the *votations* which took place periodically among the staff. These were votes taken, after discussion of the merits of each student, with a view to assessing his progress and whether he would be allowed to continue. The director was a man I couldn’t relate to, and he was often away from the house, which I didn’t mind at all.

A student's affective or emotional development was dealt with by being ignored or suppressed. We lived by denial, and keeping up appearances was a priority. Considering the isolation of our situation, having fifty-five men living together day and night, staying sane was an achievement. There were psychological stresses, severe in the case of a few students, and then psychological help was offered. It's not surprising that so many left the order and/or the priesthood afterwards. The situation changed in later years, so that men then tended to leave before ordination or final profession of vows rather than after. For example, between 1970 and 1999, 138 men joined the Capuchins in Ireland; of those, 119 left and 19 stayed.

In general, the academic process was relaxed: we had lectures in the morning, manual work, a walk, or sport in the afternoon, and study in the evening. At the start of the year, my method was to go quickly through the headings of the prescribed texts taking notes as I went – I had enough Latin to do that – and then read widely on any and every topic. I love reading, and have always had an interest in almost everything. But academic standards were low; few ever failed an exam, and, if they did, they re-sat it and passed. When we emerged from the formation cocoon after ordination, we were little more than clueless. About the only positive thing I can say about the process is that it didn't kill my interest in theology. I think it's a great subject; I read it all the time; it's a way of opening the mind to broader horizons, helping a believer to an integrated view of life, and ensuring that spirituality has something solid to feed on.

In the different stages of formation, none of the formation staff – the novice master, or student directors – was trained for the job. I think there was an assumption that it wasn't necessary. This may have been due to the kind of conservatism which says that if we haven't done this or that before, then why should we start doing it now? There was also the "pious" view that holiness was what was both necessary and sufficient. I think Saint Teresa of Ávila took a better view when she said in effect that she would rather have an intelligent director who could at least tell you the right thing to do, even if he didn't do it, than a pious fool, who could set you off on the wrong track, with all the goodwill in the world. She had her feet on the ground, that girl!

What kept us going as students was the goal in view – ordination. I think we felt that it was worth almost any sacrifice. And we helped each other along the way, with humour and student high-jinks – even if tame by today's standards – bringing some lightness into what might otherwise have become introverted and monotonous.

1968 was a year of upheaval all over the Western world. It affected us in ways that were refreshing. We were allowed to go out into "the world" and begin to engage in some pastoral work. We visited a hospital and a home for the elderly; we tried teaching Christian doctrine in primary school – a failure in my case, as I had no class control; we met with local church groups like the Legion of Mary and the Patricians. These were our ventures into the brave new world of the post-Vatican II church. In summer, we went further afield and

worked for two or three weeks in the Morning Star Hostel for homeless men in Dublin's north inner-city. While there, the Soviet Union and its allies invaded Czechoslovakia and suppressed the Prague Spring. That was a huge disappointment, a light of hope snuffed out, like the Budapest uprising in Hungary in 1956. And, in 1969, after ordination as a deacon, I spent a few weeks working in a Capuchin parish in Olton, near Birmingham, England. There I felt like a fish out of water; it was upper-crust and wealthy, and I felt that some of the friars were snobs, especially those of Irish background who were trying to deny it: they were more British than the British. It was there also that I had my first alcoholic drink, a modest can of beer with Sunday lunch. Thank you, my British brothers, for introducing me to it in such a civilized fashion; I have enjoyed many since.

Humanae Vitae (HV)

I also remember 1968 for a less happy reason. I was returning with another student to Ards friary from Dublin on the evening of 25 July. As we were leaving the Busáras in Dublin, I saw the billboard of an evening newspaper: POPE SAYS NO. My heart sank; I knew what it meant. The morality of contraception had been a burning issue in the church in the sixties, though it had a much older history. In 1930, Pope Pius XI, in an encyclical letter, *Casti Connubii*, had condemned it strongly, saying, 'those who in performing it [the sexual act] deliberately deprive it of its natural power and efficacy, act against nature and do something which is

shameful and intrinsically immoral.’ (n.54) He went on, ‘Any use of matrimony whatsoever in the exercise of which the act is deprived, by human interference, of its natural power to procreate life, is an offence against the law of God and of nature, and... those who commit it are guilty of grave sin.’(n.56) His stance may have been influenced reactively by the decision of bishops of the Anglican communion, meeting at Lambeth not long before, to give limited approval to contraception.

With the widespread availability and effectiveness of the contraceptive Pill, Catholics found themselves questioning this teaching. Pope Paul VI took the issue away from the Council (Vatican II) and reserved it to himself. He appointed two commissions, one to look at the question from the perspective of the social sciences, including demography, and the other, a theological one, to offer an opinion on the moral issues involved. The first commission recommended a change in the teaching; the second recommended no change. After much soul-searching, Paul VI made the decision to uphold the teaching that contraception was morally wrong. In his encyclical letter on the topic, *Humanae Vitae* (HV), published on 25 July 1968, he stated, ‘Each and every use of the marital act must remain open to the transmission of life’ (n.11), and ‘Sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive... [is]... intrinsically wrong.’ (n.14) That excluded contraception, sterilization, masturbation and homosexual sex. It seems that the argument which persuaded him was that, if he changed the teaching, one pope would be seen as undermining another, and that would diminish, or even destroy, papal

authority. If this is correct, it represents an example of the politicization of an issue of truth.

By default, HV makes a good case for doing theology in a way that involves listening to people. There is something a little crazy in celibates teaching married people about the rights and wrongs of something as intimate to them as their sexual life and their decisions about children. The failure to draw on people's personal experience has resulted in the church painting itself into a diminishing corner of credibility where its teaching on sexuality and human relationships is concerned. Ordinary people of good will do not find it credible. As a result of HV, they have exchanged the experience of authority for the authority of experience. And, having done so once, in the case of HV, they have gone on to do so elsewhere also.

I think the church's leadership knows all this, but cannot bring itself to acknowledge that it made a mistake. There is too much authority tied up in it, and it fears the loss of authority that the admission of a mistake might bring. I don't think it has the courage to see that such an admission could be a welcome release, letting go what is not believable, and that its authority might be enhanced. Would it not simply be the right thing to do? Would it be too much to say, 'We were wrong; we absolutized a good ideal'? 'We made a mistake in proposing this as the only right way to deal with this question instead of presenting it as the best way, while not excluding others.' Confession is good for the soul. Not to admit such a mistake seems wrong, and it is the

poor, especially those of the Third World, who pay the price for it. The church seems instead to hope that collective amnesia will gradually remove HV from memory and it will quietly vanish from consciousness. So nobody preaches or teaches it. HV is the emperor's new clothes: officially it is "the teaching of the church", though almost no one, bishops, priests or people, see it that way, or act as if they did.

How did Paul VI – a man whom I greatly respect, my favourite among the popes - get it so wrong? I think the answer lies in the process by which he reached his decision. It was flawed in two fundamental ways. Firstly, he took the question out of the hands of the Council, which could have included it in its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. The Council had just proclaimed collegiality, the teaching that the bishops exercise authority collectively over the whole church in union with the pope, being a "college" like the Twelve apostles of the gospels. (Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 22) But Paul VI acted in non-collegial fashion; he left the bishops out of it, despite their pastoral experience and knowledge of the situation on the ground, and opted for a solo run. Secondly, he also did a solo run in regard to a basic element of Catholic doctrine which is that teaching must be founded on scripture, tradition and magisterium. (Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, nn.10-11.) Scripture has nothing to say about contraception. Tradition, that is, the lived experience of the community of faith in trying to be true to its Christian vocation, is ambiguous on the subject. As John T. Noonan demonstrated in his study,

Contraception: a History of its Treatment by Theologians and Canonists, tradition may be read either way. And *magisterium*, that is, the teaching authority of the church expressed in the body of bishops, he left out of the picture.

It is sometimes said that the authority of HV does not depend on the argumentation supporting it, but rather on the fact of its having been officially taught by the popes. That is a self-defeating argument when offered in defence of a teaching such as that of HV, based on natural law, which is supposed to be the work of reason. A natural law teaching which is not rationally sustainable is itself not sustainable. Papal authority does not operate in a vacuum; merely to say *Ipse dixit* (He said it) is not enough. A teaching is not true because the pope says so; the converse is the case: the pope says it because it is true.

It is significant that the doctrines which have been most contentious in the church in recent decades – ordination of women and homosexuality come to mind – are ones in which a pope did a solo run, leaving the bishops out of the picture. May a teaching which does not reflect the thinking of the church, indeed goes against it, one which has not been “received” in the theological sense of a *received* tradition, truthfully be described as “the teaching of the church”? In Catholic tradition, the assent of the faithful is the ultimate indication that the church’s authoritative decision in a matter of faith has been truly preserved from error by the Holy Spirit: ‘The whole body of the faithful... cannot err

in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith of the whole people, when, from the bishops to the last of the faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals.’ (*Lumen Gentium*, n.12) That assent is not present in relation to HV.

But, if Paul VI got it wrong, (*change this, focussing instead of the non-reception of HV by the people*) that doesn’t mean the rest of the world got it right. Is the new sexual freedom made possible by contraception really liberating? The sexual freedom that took off with the Me generation of the sixties has led to rising levels of sexually transmitted illnesses, teenage pregnancies, abortion, extra-marital affairs and divorce, and distress including suicide among young people. The dream of sexual freedom sometimes looks like a nightmare. Significantly, Alan F. Guttmacher, President of the International Planned Parenthood Federation from 1962 to 1974 acknowledged that contraception results in more abortion, not less.

By the twenty-first century, when the downside of the sexual revolution was apparent, especially in the Western world, some Catholics said, ‘You see! The pope was right after all! *Humanae Vitae* has been vindicated!’ That is not the case. If Catholics had followed the teaching of HV, world population would have increased enormously since 1968. But the teaching, based as it is on natural law, is intended not just for Catholics but for all people: the “nature” in “natural law” is human nature and so the teaching is seen as applying equally to

everyone. If all peoples had followed it since 1968, then unsustainable population growth would surely have led to environmental collapse, along with violence, warfare, and huge loss of life. As it is, with widespread availability of abortion, contraception and sterilization, world population is growing by eighty million people a year, the equivalent of German's population, and 95% of that in the Third World.

This was brought home to me in 1995, when I spent some time in Madagascar. As I entered a mountain-top village in one of the poorest countries on earth, I was greeted by a crowd of small children, emerging from a cold mist, all of them clearly bearing the signs of malnutrition. Completely out of the blue, like a slap across the face, two words jumped at me, 'Humanae Vitae!' That has left an impact that is deeper than any theological argument I have heard.

Furthermore, approximately 30,000 priests left the priesthood while Paul VI was pope (1963-78), and about 100,000 during John Paul II's pontificate (1978-2005). I have personally known forty to fifty. All of them married; judging by the size of their families, it's clear that they used contraception in their married life. The view from inside and outside the box differs.

My view of the matter is that HV offers an integrated and holistic view of human sexuality; it sees it as life-giving and love-giving, procreative and unitive. That is a perspective that merits serious consideration. If it had said, 'We believe this is the best way forward,' that

would have been fine. But, in effect, it said, ‘This is the only moral way forward.’ It made the (common Catholic) mistake of absolutizing the relative – ‘*Each and every* use of the marital act *must* remain open to the transmission of life.’ (My emphasis) That tendency to absolutize has its origins in fear and mistrust of people. We need to recognize that values, even if they have an absolute character, should not necessarily lead to absolute rules. Nor does it necessarily follow, where there is agreement on values, that this will necessarily point to agreed conclusions deriving from them. Life is too complex for that.

As a student, HV presented me with a problem: it was the official teaching of the church into which I hoped to be ordained less than two years later. But I didn’t accept it, except in the limited sense given above. The staff of the friary in Ards did not make a big issue of HV, perhaps because they themselves may have had difficulties with it, although I did hear one say that, if the pope had changed the teaching, he could not have accepted that. There was no inquisition about it; it was not used as a test of orthodoxy. One day, the guardian of the house asked me if I had difficulties with it. I was taken by surprise by the question, but – exceptionally for me, I thought quickly – answered that I didn’t. I knew he would take that to mean that I accepted it; what I actually meant was that I had no difficulty in not accepting it. That was an off-the-cuff answer given under pressure. It didn’t reflect the fact that I thought and worried a lot about it, and gave serious consideration to leaving the order. In the end, I muddled through. Since

1968, I can recall being asked about HV only twice in a pastoral context; people have made up their minds about it, and, for them it is not an issue.

Snapshots from Ards

In Ards, we had a student magazine called *The Open Road*. The title suggests the optimism and hopefulness of the time. I was appointed its typist, editor, printer, and distributor. In 1968, I wrote an article for it on clerical celibacy in which I argued that diocesan clergy should be allowed to marry, so that there would be a celibate and a married clergy alongside each other. Pope Paul VI had written an encyclical letter the previous year called *Sacerdotalis Coelibatus* in which he said there would be no change in the church's discipline on the matter. As far as I know, the article didn't ruffle any feathers; there was no questioning or queries about my commitment to celibacy. Those were the days.

There was a general election in Ireland in 1969. Labour had declared that 'The Seventies will be Socialist.' Jack Lynch, then Taoiseach and leader of the *Fianna Fáil* party, took up this slogan and used it to scare voters: he spoke darkly about 'an alien philosophy' coming into the country. That annoyed me; I was tired of Reds under the bed being used as scare tactics. What annoyed me more was when two local *Fianna Fáil* party workers invited themselves into the friary and went from room to room, without a by-your-leave from anymore, to canvas for support. One of them said to me subsequently that "people" were shocked at the number of Labour

votes from the friary. I was one of them, and thought, ‘That’s the price you pay for the methods you used,’ and also, ‘So much for the secrecy of the ballot!’ But the scare tactics worked, and *Fianna Fáil* were returned to office. At about the same time, there was a re-run of the 1959 referendum on replacing proportional representation with the first-past-the-post direct vote system of election. Having said No the first time, many people were angry at being asked the same question again, even after a lapse of ten years, and they voted No the second time also. Since then, the people have almost grown used to governments ignoring the results of constitutional referenda and returning issues for a second vote, even within months of the first.

Following a general chapter of the order in Rome in 1968, we began having what were called local chapters, or community meetings. These were called about four times a year to discuss simple, local in-house matters. They were a new experience and we were quite unaccustomed to them. We fought like cats in a bag! But we learned, gradually coming to see the difference between argument and dialogue. It was a good process and saved us a lot of bother.

In Irish Capuchin formation it was taboo for a student to show signs of ambition. It would have been viewed with great disfavour. To remind us of this, there were pictures on the walls of the novitiate showing grave-looking friars under the headings, “Friars who renounced the episcopate” and “Friars who renounced the cardinalate.” He would be foolish to show it in the first

place, and the ambitious learned to conceal their desires. I think this was a pity; it was a kind of dishonesty. I see nothing wrong with ambition, provided it is ambition to serve, not for self-aggrandizement, though that's easier said than done. Having said that, I can also add in truth that I have never felt ambition for office. I enjoy politics, but only as a spectator sport. Maybe it's just laziness, or maybe my ideas make me *persona non grata* and unelectable anyway, because I'm not "a safe pair of hands." Thank God for that; it's the safe pairs of hands that have the church in the mess we're in.

The long-awaited day – ordination

It was the hope of ordination that had kept us going through the ups and downs of student life, almost nine years in my case. At long last, the day came – Sunday, 14 June 1970. There were six of us: Senan Dooley from Dublin, a former shop-keeper and small businessman, the "old man" of the group at 37; Lucio (Gino) Binanti, an Italian Capuchin from the province of the *Marche* who is still a missionary in Ethiopia, although he has left the order; Flann Lynch, a former Guard from Clare; John Manley from Cork, who had been a fitter; James Connolly from Cavan, a former barman, and myself. Senan died on 8 December 2000, RIP; the other five of us are still in ministry.

The bishop, Anthony McFeely, a real gentleman, ordained us on a beautiful summer's day in the presence of our confrères, families and friends. For some reason which I don't understand, I don't remember much about

the day. The same is true of my reception of first confession and Communion, and I remember my confirmation only for its being an endurance test. They came and they went, and that was it; I find it odd. There was a sense of anti-climax about it, nothing like the emotional high of my first profession of vows. After ordination, we went outside, gave our blessing, went back in, ate lunch, said goodbye, and left for a week at home.

The following day, I had what is called my first Mass, though the Mass of ordination was in fact the first. It was customary for a newly ordained priest to be assisted at this “first” Mass by a priest, to help him along if he was nervous. I went to the friary in Church Street in Dublin for the occasion. I was ready, but there was no sign of my assistant, so, at the appointed time, I went ahead. At this time, in Dublin diocese, altars had not been turned to face the people, and priests still said Mass facing away from them. When I was about ten minutes into the Mass, my assistant suddenly appeared at my elbow, offering apologies, and succeeded only in confusing me by doing so. He was more of a hindrance than a help!

At this point, neither I nor my fellow-ordained had any idea of where we might be posted, not even to which continent, much less which country or what work. At the visitation some months earlier, I had volunteered for Zambia, but the provincial had been non-committal. Lucio was the only one who knew his future – Ethiopia. This meant that it was not possible to prepare or orient oneself in any way, a real downside. As it happened, we

were all appointed to posts, temporary as it transpired, in Ireland. It was a strange way of doing things. It seemed to rest on an assumption that ordination equipped a man for almost any task. It used to be said, ‘If you can’t do the best, do the best you can.’ There’s truth in that, as I discovered along the way. It’s true that a man, given a job for which he seems unprepared or even unsuited, may discover new talents in himself if he puts his heart into it and tackles it with a will. But it also led to square pegs being bunged into round holes, with an *ad hoc*, make-it-up-as-you-go-along methodology which could leave the man with the feeling of being used as a convenient bush in the gap, which was not uncommonly the case. In life, you don’t get what you deserve; you get what you negotiate, and part of that is learning to say no. But it took me most of a lifetime to learn that, and longer still to apply it – if I have.

After my week at home, I received my first appointment – as chaplain to Saint Brendan’s Psychiatric Hospital in Grangegorman on the north side of Dublin.

“The Gor”, Dublin

On 12 July - Orangeman’s Day -1970, I began work in Grangegorman Mental Hospital, known locally as “The Gor.” It was a large cluster of buildings, some built in the 1820’s, a grim, fortress-like institution. The geriatric unit had seven hundred patients cared for by four hundred staff. The overall patient population fluctuated between twelve and fourteen hundred with a staff of seven hundred. A large nurses’ home provided

accommodation for single female nurses. The hospital provided mostly custodial care, feeding, protecting, and caring for patients, but with little expectation of improvement in their condition. Many were deeply institutionalized: I recall one man, a former World War I soldier, who had been there since 1917, a victim of what was then called “shell shock” or, nowadays, post-traumatic stress disorder. At weekends, patients were often sedated with *Valium*, *Librium*, *Largactil*, or a “*Mogadon* cocktail” to keep them quiet.

There was also what was called occupational therapy, but which might more accurately be termed cheap labour. Patients were trained in simple, repetitive, monotonous tasks, like packing items into boxes, or, at a more advanced level, assembling umbrellas. Their level of pay was minimal. The unit I liked least was the behaviour control unit (not the exact name), where patients’ behaviour was very exactly monitored, and they were rewarded or punished in accordance with their level of compliance. It seemed to me like a form of manipulation which did not respect the patients’ human dignity.

I lived in a ward of the hospital. The nearby friary in Church Street, with twenty-three bedrooms, did not have place for me, so there was no choice. I was in Unit 3A, an assessment unit, with a room to myself, but opening onto a corridor where the usual hospital activity passed up and down. It was a large culture shock from life in Ards; I missed my peers, and life in the country. I found the friary community distant, and, I felt, uninterested, in

how I fared. On Sunday afternoons, when I had time off, I would go there for a visit, but usually find the house empty, with everyone away at football or hurling matches, or visiting friends. The message I got was, 'You're on your own; fend for yourself.'

I received great support from the hospital staff, male and female. They were warm, friendly, and welcoming, and I found the contrast noticeable. The nurses were mostly kind and caring to patients also. They grew to know each other well, as both were there for the long-term, and there was an almost family-like bond between them. I noticed this especially on the occasion of funerals of patients. It was not uncommon for few, if any, relatives to come, and no one but nurses, either on or off duty, would be present to join in a prayer for the deceased. I remember one such funeral particularly well: it was my first funeral after ordination, and the name of the deceased was Owen O'Sullivan! That concentrated my mind. He had died alone, and had what was called "a pauper's burial", that is, it was paid for by the Corporation as there was no one else. It was done at minimum cost, and the grave-diggers were careless in handling the coffin, so that it slid off the ropes, went head-first into the grave and had to be dragged back up again in an undignified manner.

There were new developments. The chief psychiatrist, Dr. Ivor Browne, was beginning the process of moving mental health services into the suburbs, with the focus on out-patient care with home and community support. It has come a long way since, and, although perhaps

motivated substantially by the desire to reduce the huge wage bill for an institution like Saint Brendan's, it seems to have worked reasonably well. At the least, it helped to diminish the fear and stigma that surrounded mental illness at the time, as if it were a moral fault, and forced people to face the challenge of such illness and not try to wash their hands of it by bundling someone away into an institution, out of sight and out of mind. Dr. Browne encountered much opposition; there was plenty of institutional lethargy and deadweight, of people who were comfortable with the *status quo*, with an eye to their own interest more than that of the patients, but he stayed with it and succeeded in the end. The Psychiatric Nurses' Association was just beginning, under its new leader, Des Kavanagh, who had broken away from the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, which he saw as uninterested in nurses' affairs.

There were risks in introducing change, and critics were not slow to draw attention to them. Opening previously locked wards and giving patients greater freedom of movement brought risks with it. (I used carry around a 700 gram bundle of keys in my pocket.) In one two-week period, there were four suicides: one man set fire to dry leaves in a garden shed and suffocated himself; one drowned himself in the nearby River Liffey; one threw himself under the wheels of a passing truck; another smashed a window, and slashed his throat with the broken glass. I found it difficult to cope with these situations. I sometimes felt panic and helplessness, thinking, 'I was taught how to cope with the *errores* of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, but what do I do here?'

Ards, and all it represented, seemed a million miles away.

Snapshots from The Gor

One day, at the start of Mass, I unthinkingly began by asking if someone would start a hymn. Straightaway, about ten different hymns started up from different parts of the church. Would anyone give way to anyone else by dropping out? Not a bit of it. It became a clash of egos: 'I'm not giving in to that one; I'm going to sing *my* hymn.' A cacophony of discordance followed, with me struggling to keep a straight face, and silently swearing to myself never to make that mistake again.

The altar had not been turned to face the people, so it meant that I said Mass with my back to the congregation, as was the practice in pre-Vatican II times. It was disconcerting at times, when there was a commotion of some sort behind me, and I didn't want to look over my shoulder to see what it was. One day, during Mass, I heard the sanctuary gate being opened, followed by the sound of approaching footsteps. I felt uneasy. Then, I saw standing beside me, a female patient with a cigarette in her hand, which she calmly lit from one of the candles on the altar! She was grinning from ear to ear – it was pure bravado on her part!

There was another female patient who could have won a Ph.D. *summa cum laude* in attention-seeking. In her ward, from time to time she would take up a fire bucket or two of water or sand and fling them over the other

patients' beds. The mess led to the angry question, 'Why?' to which she would reply, 'I don't know. I just can't help it.' Another patient became tired of this, and quietly decided on a plan of action. The next time her ladyship threw the tantrum and flung the buckets, she remained silent and waited until she was gone. Then she went to the *Prima Donna's* bedside locker, and took from it a new *báinín* sweater of which she was very proud and had displayed on occasion. She got down on her knees and used the sweater to clean the wet floor, mopping up the water, dirt, floor polish and sand with it. She then carefully replaced it in its locker. After that, there were no more bucket throwings.

The woman who knew how to silence the *Prima Donna* could herself create her own drama when she took a mind to it. On one occasion she boarded a bus, but refused to pay the fare when the conductor approached her. This led to an argument, but the lady was not for moving. The conductor threatened to throw her off the bus. To this she replied, 'You try that, and I'll send your teeth on a mystery tour!' She won.

Coming up to Christmas, I was very busy with confessions. They could last straight and steady for eight to ten hours a day. It was tiring but satisfying. For the most part, confession touched on something real in the person's life; people were taking responsibility for themselves. 'It was my fault; I was wrong' is one of the most liberating statements a person can make. I can't help but contrast it to the situation where it sometimes

seems that no one takes responsibility for anything, but is ready with an accusing finger to blame someone else.

Going round from ward to ward with Holy Communion was mostly without difficulty, but could occasionally be challenging in unexpected ways. I was in the admission ward one morning and the prayers before Communion were going ahead in the normal way, until a lady, high as a kite on drugs, was carried away by fervour, 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.' And then, in top gear, 'But my f...ing arse won't be healed; it's all lumps from the injections those bitches gave me last night!' A young nurse ran from the ward, unable to control her laughter, while I nearly strangled myself trying not to. And, in a male ward, the men had lined up in a queue, when one of them, standing in front of me, kept flicking his tongue in and out. (There was no Communion in the hand at that time.) I asked him to keep it out. He began to berate himself, 'Didn't you hear what the priest said to you? Put out your f...ing tongue and keep it out!' Eventually he calmed, and so did I.

Occasionally I was asked to say Mass in the friary church on a weekday. There used to be four, perhaps, five daily Masses there at the time, and the church would be anything from one- to two-thirds full for them as a matter of routine. No one thought it was anything special.

From time to time I used to go to the friary for lunch. One day, in January 1971, walking along the bottom

corridor, I met the then provincial as he left the refectory. He was a shy man, and muttered under his breath rather than speaking. I heard him mumble, 'Father Owen, how would you like to go to New Zealand?' I said, 'I would.' 'Well, go and see the mission secretary about a ticket. They'll expect you there for the end of February.' And that was that; thus was the appointment made. I was excited by this new venture on the other side of the world.

Part 3: NEW ZEALAND

Aotearoa, the Land of the Long White Cloud

I arrived in Wellington on 17 February 1971. I had left Ireland on the 8th, and stopped along the way in Rome where I was welcomed at the friary on Via Cairoli by Fathers Columban McGarry, the guardian, and Denis Keogh, who was mission secretary at the order's general administration. They each took time to show me some of the sights of Rome, drawing on their many years' experience in living there. Sadly, Denis did not have long to live: a chain smoker, he died of cancer just three years later. Columban had an endless supply of charm – some might call it *plámás* – with the people who mattered in Rome: porters, gate-keepers, ticket collectors, and others who might be persuaded to stretch a point in our favour if we didn't fit into the official regime.

I flew from there to Tel Aviv and spent a few days visiting the Christian holy places. The Israelis were still flush with their spectacular victory over Arab nations in the six-day war of June 1967, and I found them arrogant and rude. They liked rubbing it in about their victory; destroyed Jordanian armoured vehicles had slogans painted on them in Hebrew and Arabic, saying in effect, 'Come this way again and you'll get the same again.' A group of visiting priests – an Indian who had converted from Hinduism, two Italians, one of them a scripture scholar, and myself – hired a *sherut*, a shared taxi which, at low cost, took us around this small country in just

three days. I had mixed feelings: on the one hand, a sense of reverence and awe at seeing places and buildings associated with the life and ministry of Jesus; on the other, irritation at some of the cruder commercialism of the place and the simply unbelievable claims made about some places. Was this really the roof of King David's palace from which he saw Bathsheeba bathing? Pull the other leg. I was disappointed by the friction, even hostility, that was evident between Christians in places like the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The place which should have been a focus of unity was a cutting edge of division. The Israelis had done good work in opening up access to all the holy places, and keeping them clean and secure. I was glad to be able to see the mosque of the tomb of Abraham in Hebron, and the Al-Aqsa mosque (the *Dome of the Rock*) in Jerusalem. The buildings that impressed me most were the relatively simple ones, like the mosque in Hebron and the church of the beatitudes on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

We visited what was said to be Jacob's well in the town of Nablus, formerly called Sychar, on the West Bank. (See John 4.5ff.) There we met a friendly Greek Orthodox priest, Father Philloumenos, who was on his own in the church. We teased him about how it was easy to be superior of the house when there was no one else. Not many years later, he was approached by local Jewish settlers who wanted to buy the church garden for use as a car park. He refused. They became insistent, demanding, and, finally, threatening. His bishop urged him to leave but he asked to be allowed to stay as he felt he should

not abandon the people when they, too, were under pressure. The end came when a group of men entered the church one evening, tied him up, binding a belt of grenades around him, the firing pins linked by cable. Someone then pulled the cable and Philloumenos was blasted to pieces.

I flew on to Singapore after a re-fuelling stop in Tehran where we were not allowed to disembark, even to the transit lounge, and had to be content with a distant view of snow-capped mountains.

My eldest sister, Una, was living with her husband and family in Singapore, and I spent eight days with them. It was my first taste of the east, and it was hot and humid. We went to the Jurong Bird Park, the Tiger Balm Gardens, Change Alley, Bugis Street, the Kranji War Cemetery with its seemingly endless rows of crosses bearing the names of men, mostly in their late teens and early twenties, who had died in the months following the Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1941. The Gardens had been put in place by Chinese businessmen, said locally to have been drug dealers who created Tiger Balm, an imported cure-all ointment, as a smoke-screen to conceal their activities. True or not? I don't know. Change Alley was famous for wheeling and dealing in foreign currencies with few questions asked; it wasn't surprising that the strict regime of Singapore's long-serving prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, shut it down after some time. Bugis Street was famous as a place of display by transvestites, transsexuals and trans-everything. I found it confusing: were the people I saw men trying to be

women, or women trying to be men, or what? We also crossed the causeway for a short visit to Johore in Malaysia.

I flew from Singapore to Melbourne where I had an uncle, John Ed, a brother of my father's, who had been there since the 1930's. He had gone to Australia in the hope of making his fortune, but laughingly told me of how he lost what money he had to a fellow Irishman, a swindler, who sold him a way of making quick money with sheep. John Ed was fleeced. He also had become engaged to an Australian woman, but, after eight years of postponement of the big day, they had mutually decided to call it off. But he continued to live with her and her sister for the rest of their lives. They were very kind to me and took me to the Healesville Bird Sanctuary, the Dandenong Mountains, Port Philip Bay, and the city centre with its painting of the famous horse, Phar Lap. The heat – it was about 42 Celsius – was tough going for an Irishman, but I enjoyed it all.

And then came the last lap, a flight from Melbourne to Wellington. The New Zealand coast was brown in the summer heat, and I was impressed by the steepness of the hills, not thinking that I would spend many happy days climbing them. I was met at the airport by Matthias Murphy and Kieran Garvey of the local Capuchin community.

The Irish Capuchins had an early history in Wellington, its first resident priest being an Irish Capuchin, Jeremiah Joseph Purcell O' Reilly, a

Corkman, who ministered there alone from 1843 to 1880. (Some years later, I wrote a biography of him, *Apostle in Aotearoa*, Word Publishers, Auckland, 1977.) The more recent arrival of the Capuchins dated from 1958, with Matthias Murphy being the first; he went there to be chaplain at Victoria University of Wellington and the Teachers' Training College. The friars were also given the care of the small parish of Saint Vincent de Paul in Northland and Kelburn. In the community at that time were also Eustace McSweeney and Cronan Fahey. They exercised an active ministry in preaching parish missions and retreats, conferences to religious communities, as well as the other ministries. We were a young community, with an average age of thirty-five.

I had expected to begin work in the college chaplaincies straight away, but that proved not to be the case. I was asked instead to give retreats to groups of religious and, sometimes, laypeople, to preach parish missions, and to help out as "a bush in the gap" in parishes here and there. It was a good way of getting a feel for the country, as well as learning basic facts and information about it. I found the clergy throughout New Zealand to be very hospitable and friendly. There was a real sense of fraternity among them. I heard for the first time the phrase "a brother priest," and experienced its truth.

One could easily gain the impression that New Zealand was a religious country, as there were churches everywhere. It was about 11% Catholic, mostly of Irish, Polish, Dutch and Croatian origin. In the far south,

Presbyterians of Scots origin were dominant. Over much of the rest of the country, Anglicans were.

Marist missionaries had been the founders of the Catholic church in New Zealand and in Oceania. They had made a good start with the indigenous people, the Maori, from the 1840's onwards, but were unexpectedly disrupted by an Irish bishop, Thomas William Croke, later Archbishop of Cashel, co-founder of the Gaelic Athletic Association, and the man who gave his name to Croke Park in Dublin. Shortly after arriving in Auckland in 1870, he demanded that all the priests in his diocese who were in religious orders – 30 out of 37 – leave them and become incardinated in the diocese. When they refused, he expelled them, leaving himself with just seven priests. Unable to sustain what was there, he solved his self-inflicted staffing problem by closing the Maori missions and focusing on the Europeans (the *pakeha*). Left with no Catholic clergy, the Maori turned to the Anglicans, who filled the gap. Croke spent only five years in New Zealand before returning to Ireland to become archbishop of Cashel. It was said in Ballyclough, his home place in County Cork, that he had done a deal with Rome, which was broke at the time, agreeing to become bishop in New Zealand for a few years, and to pay his own expenses and that of the mission – he was wealthy, having inherited from a rich uncle – in return for becoming an archbishop in Ireland after a few years. That's what was done.

But New Zealand was, and is, largely a secular society. “Kiwis”, as New Zealanders sometimes call themselves,

say they worship the trinity of rugby, racing and beer. They are a hard-working people, with a strong sense of social justice and fair-play. They are generous to those in need, and have a good community spirit. They have been described as ‘a passionless people’, but they are capable of being passionate about justice. They are law-abiding, plain-spoken, and with a blessed intolerance of corruption, trickiness or double-dealing. This was expressed in their language; they used the phrase “Give someone a fair go” to express the idea of treating people decently. They have self-respect as a people, with a healthy pride in themselves. Uniquely, perhaps, they have built a First World society and economy on primary produce, mainly agriculture. They were the first country in the world with pensions for the elderly and the blind, with votes for women, an education system which was free, compulsory and secular, a state health care system, and state insurance against accidents, war and earthquakes. Not bad for a country which would have collectively fainted if anyone had described it as “socialist.” They built their society, not on ideological foundations, but as an expression of neighbourliness and/or Christian charity in the most practically comprehensive way possible, that is, through the medium of the state. Much of this welfare state has since been demolished in favour of private enterprise. They were inventive in technology, especially in agriculture.

There were downsides to New Zealand life. One that irked me was that it was insular, sometimes extremely so, and seemingly by choice. (On a recent visit, I was delighted to find that this had changed substantially,

perhaps in association with increased immigration from the Philippines, Indonesia and Taiwan.) The country could be bureaucratic, too, where nothing could be done without lots of committee meetings, even though this seemed so out of sync with a pragmatic people. And it sometimes seemed to regard excellence as elitist and undemocratic. I believe it has changed for the better since then.

Victoria University of Wellington

I was chaplain at the university in Wellington from 1973 to 1977. In some respects, it might have been a hundred years ago. About halfway through that time, there was a debate as to whether the university should or should not get a computer. Those against said this was just one individual's hobby-horse, that he was into empire-building, and wanted to have everyone go to him on their knees for access to it; no way, José. Those in favour said that this was the wave of the future; if the university didn't get a computer, it would be left behind. The argument raged back and forth before the university took a leap in the dark and bought a computer. A giant leap for mankind! I came to learn something of a computer's limitations when I received a letter shortly afterwards sent by it, addressed to Fr. and Mrs. O'Sullivan.

There was a Nigerian priest studying at the university whom I came to know fairly well. One day, he raised with me, discreetly and cautiously, a question about money. He was staying in a presbytery in a city parish,

and helped a little in parish work. Each month, the parish priest gave him what he said was a curate's salary – I don't remember the figure. The Nigerian priest asked me if this figure was really correct; he couldn't help feeling that he was being ripped off. He was astonished when I told him that what he was getting was indeed a curate's salary, and he replied that he had received more at home.

There was a dark side to university life which I'm sure is not exclusive to New Zealand. Staff relations were pretty bad at times: in one department, the head and the deputy head did not speak to each other. But in the Student Union, they could be worse. A Trotskyite group, Socialist Unity, had taken over leadership of the union, and relations in its office were pretty poisonous. A woman employee, an excellent person from my knowledge of her, who had little time for student politics, was accused of stealing. I didn't believe a word of it, feeling that she had been set up as an excuse to get rid of her. She was fired, and I heard that she had taken the dismissal badly and had become depressed. I tried repeatedly to contact her over a weekend. The university wouldn't disclose contact information, and attempts through other channels came to nothing. I felt a sense of foreboding about the situation, but, returning to the college on Monday morning, was still shocked to hear that she had taken her life. Each year about six students took their lives, usually by jumping off the top of a university building; it mostly happened around exam time.

The Catholic Society in the university was a lively and active group. Without prodding from me, they challenged the student union policy of support for abortion, and succeeded in over-turning it. I was delighted.

I was asked for an interview by a student radio station about the work of a chaplain. The interviewer first explained to me that, under broadcasting legislation, the station was not allowed to say anything about religion; it was required to be secular, that is, to exclude any reference to religion. How to speak about the work of a chaplain without saying anything about religion? Like a doctor speaking about his practice while prohibited from saying anything about medicine. I decided to go ahead anyway, and answered the questions as I would have done in any event. I don't think it was broadcast, but I couldn't help wondering how tender this plant of secularism was that it needed such careful protection. In the name of being neutral and pluralistic, it seemed to be exclusive and to claim for itself an Establishment status.

There were two other chaplains in the college, an Anglican and one called the ecumenical chaplain, that is, one appointed by the other Protestant denominations. We worked from the same building, met regularly to pray, to exchange ideas and experiences, and, occasionally, to plan shared projects. One project we shared year by year was a series of lectures on aspects of the Christian faith which we called the *Tertiary Christian Studies Programme*. This was an attempt to bring Christian teaching into a secular environment. They were well

received by town as well as gown, and some were later published. *Church and Society in History* was one of my contributions, published in 1977.

I organized a study group among Catholic staff members, using the 1965 document *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II as a text. It's a wonderful document, a bit dated now in some respects, but nonetheless broad-ranging, positive, easy to read, full of hope, and helping people link the Christian faith with the joys, hopes and challenges of society. (That hopefulness is now derided by some in the church as an example of what they called "the over-optimistic anthropology of Vatican II.") The discussion came as an eye-opener to me. The staff members were annoyed and disturbed by one phrase in it, where it stated, 'The church guards the heritage of God's Word and draws from it religious and moral principles, *without always having at hand the solution to particular problems.*' (n.33; my emphasis) It was the second part of that sentence which was the stumbling-block. I thought it expressed a little basic humility, not to mention common sense. But they were hurt, disappointed, and even outraged by it. They felt the church should have answers to particular problems. Isn't that what it was for? What use was it if it didn't? And so on. I was stunned: here were university lecturers and professors who seemed to have been infantilized in matters of faith. In their disciplines, they could hold their own with their peers. But in matters of faith, they were like children, wanting Mother to tell them what to do. It was disappointing, and raised questions in my mind about what we were doing in Catholic education, and in

the attitudes and structures vis-à-vis clergy and lay people in the church.

Snapshots from New Zealand

On another occasion, I went on holidays to the South Island, to Queenstown, a small town on the shores of Lake Te Anau, at the foot of a mountain range appropriately called the Remarkables. It is probably the most beautiful place I have ever seen, and I have seen many beautiful places in countries where I have worked or visited. I took a cable car and went part-way up the mountain. There was a viewing point with an outlook over the full length of the lake, and the snow-capped mountain range running parallel to it on one side. Its beauty was breath-taking, the memory lasting, and the impact unforgettable. It often struck me since then that, if a person asked for an argument for the existence of God, I would leave aside reasoning and intellectual processes, and simply bring them to that viewing point, but with one condition: I would ask them to sit in silence for fifteen minutes.

Once, when I was travelling on a suburban train in the Hutt Valley, some graffiti caught my eye. On a free-standing wall in a station, someone had sprayed, 'Get up in the morning, go to work, come home, watch TV, go to bed, get up in the morning, go to work....' and so on and on. It went round and round the wall so that you could keep reading it forever. I thought it expressed well the sense that burdens many people of living life on a treadmill.

Listening to the radio one day, I caught a news bulletin. It gave statistics for unemployment: eighty people were out of work in Auckland (with a population of about a million), and six in Hamilton (with a population of about 150,000). Great days!

Wellington is at the southern end of the North Island and is known as Windy Wellington because the prevailing westerly wind from across the Tasman Sea is funnelled between the North and South islands. The heaviest rain I experienced in my life came one day there when 28 cm. (11 inches) fell in twenty-four hours; it really deserved to be called torrential. There were floods everywhere, especially in the low-lying Hutt Valley. What was remarkable was the way the whole country responded to the challenge. Tradesmen came from everywhere to help people restore their flooded homes; people contributed money with great generosity, and there was a real sense of a people pulling together to help each other. The Met Office said it was a once in a thousand year event, and people were re-assured. Two weeks later, it happened again!

There was a convent of sisters not far from Wellington where one of the community found to her annoyance that the light bulb in her room blew just as she was about to settle into bed with a good book. She went to look for a spare, but found there was only one, which was intended for use in the chapel sanctuary lamp, and it was red; that was no use. She had a bright idea, and removed the bulb from over the front door of the house and fitted it into her bedroom socket. Problem solved. Then it occurred to

her that a person might trip in the darkness outside the front door. So she took the red bulb and inserted it there. For a week or so afterwards, the sisters noticed that men were gathering on the street across from the convent, looking at it, and talking intently among themselves. The sisters couldn't understand why, until someone suggested it might be the red light. They changed the bulb.

On one occasion, in the far south of the South Island, I spent a little time on a sheep station. Out on the land with the farmer one day, I saw something which made me wonder if I was "seeing things", or just simply going crazy: I saw what appeared to be a mountain-side moving. That sounds crazy, but I was there looking at it. It was in front of me, some distance away, and seemed to be moving from right to left as I looked at it, though still remaining in the same place. I knew it wasn't a landslide because they don't move sideways. But it looked like one in slow motion. The farmer asked me if I knew what I was looking at. When I said I didn't, he told me I was looking at 30,000 sheep, moving together on the mountain-side. They covered it so completely they created the impression that it was moving. It was what New Zealanders call a "mob" - not a flock - of sheep.

One another occasion, there was a sea-quake which created a tidal wave off the north-east coast. No one knew in which direction the wave might move, but scientists warned that if it came ashore it would be a *tsunami* about five metres high and moving at a speed of about 650 km. an hour. It would sweep all before it and

no building could withstand its force. We have a good understanding of the power of a tsunami since the Indian Ocean sea-quake of 2004. But people's reaction then was unbelievably different. Instead of heading for the hills as advised by radio, they went down to the sea-coast to watch the wave coming and take pictures of it. Police drove along the beach pleading with them to go to high ground for safety, but the people ignored them. Fortunately, the tidal wave ran parallel to the coast and didn't come ashore.

Earthquakes were frequent, as often as one a day on average, but usually not more than one or two on the Richter scale, and so barely noticeable. On one occasion, when giving a parish mission in Hawke's Bay, I went to the church early one morning and was surprised to find pictures and the crucifix hanging at odd angles. There had been a quake the night before which rattled the place. In Wellington, I slept peacefully through a 4 on the Richter scale.

I was at a gathering of priests attended by the Cardinal, Reginald Delargey. He was new to the diocese, and, among other things, said his wish was to increase the ratio of priests to Catholic people to one to every nine hundred. I was astonished. Even by the standards of the time, that was a high ratio. The church in New Zealand was well staffed at the time, and it surprised me that he wanted to increase it further. I asked whether the diocese might not undertake a missionary venture. The suggestion was politely brushed aside.

The Catholic school in the parish of Saint Vincent de Paul which the Capuchins served was staffed by Sisters of Saint Joseph, popularly known as “The Black Joeys” because of their black habit. They were a branch of the congregation founded by Saint Mary McKillop, the mighty Australian woman who faced enormous opposition from bishops, including excommunication, (perhaps more than once) in founding a Catholic school system in Australia and New Zealand. The other branch wore a brown habit, and was known as “The Brown Joeys.” They both suffered a decline in vocations in my time there, and most of the young women who joined them did not stay. As a result, the sisters had to withdraw from the school. What was disappointing was that when the vacant positions were advertised, no Catholics applied for them, and, for my last year there, the “Catholic” school was run by an entirely non-Catholic staff.

Giving retreats was a fairly large part of my work during the college holidays. On one occasion, I had finished giving one in Wanganui and was returning by bus to Wellington. I passed the time by reading a novel. Suddenly, entirely out of the blue, the thought came to my mind that there had been an accident on the road outside the friary. I have no idea where it came from; it just came. I put it out of my mind and continued reading. On arriving in Wellington, I was met at the station by the guardian of the community. As he drove me back to the house, I asked him if there was any news. He said there had been a road accident outside the friary the previous night. I was amazed. I don't think I am in any way

unique in such matters; I believe that most, if not all, people have similar experiences, including “God experiences”, but that our culture devalues them, perhaps because it doesn’t understand them, and so we keep them to ourselves, as I think I did on that occasion. I have had several other similar experiences but it is significant that I cannot now recall them. Without being written down, they are forgotten. It is easy to describe such events as coincidences, but that doesn’t explain them. What significance have they? What are they about? I don’t know. Perhaps it was a way of waking me up to the non-rational, to the “voice” of the subconscious.

New Zealand is a country of wonderful beauty, varying from the Alpine in the far south to sub-tropical in the north. Places like the Bay of Islands, Hawke’s Bay, the Waitomo caves, the Punakaiki Rocks near Westport, Tapuaenuku Mountain (“the Footsteps of the Rainbow God”) near the north-east coast of the South Island, Stewart Island, Lake Taupo, Ruapehu, Tongariro and Ngauruhoe, Rotorua, Cape Reinga, the Coromandel Peninsula and many other places leave a happy mark on my memory. With a very good friend, Trevor Brooker, I kayaked down the Wanganui River from Taumaranui to Wanganui in 1975. It took us five days. By choice, we left our watches at home; we woke when the sun came up, ate when we were hungry, slept when we were tired, and paddled at whatever pace we were comfortable with. Our prior experience was no more than one afternoon’s messing around on the beach at Petone near Wellington, and we started off when the river was in flood after heavy rain. Our equipment was mostly home-designed

and made, and we had little idea of what to do if – or rather, when – the kayak capsized, except to hold onto a cord that ran the length of the kayak on either side. We had a wonderful time, fishing, hunting and simply enjoying the river. Although mid-summer, it was cool when the sun was not directly overhead, as the steep sides of gorges blocked it out. I felt great admiration for earlier generations of Maori paddlers who had cut holes into the rock walls of the sides for use in poling heavy canoes upstream. We spent a night along the way at Belfast and at Jerusalem, where the poet, James K. Baxter, had lived for a time.

It wasn't all holidays and days off, of course. Mostly, it was routine work. For me, from Monday to Friday, that was the university and the teachers' training college in Karori. Both were secular by charter, and tolerated rather than welcomed the presence of a chaplain. It wasn't easy even to make contact with students. On one occasion, I said Mass in the training college and only two or three students came, none of them Catholic. I happened to mention this to the archbishop, Peter T. B. McKeefry, and he said to me - as consolation (!), I think - 'Father, in pastoral work, one must never expect one hundred per cent success.' There are times when I feel like strangling bishops! But, in the university, the Catholic Society was a big start in that regard, and having Ramsey House, the Anglican chaplaincy centre, as a base was a help, too. I used to visit students in their flats in the evenings, and one contact led to another. I said Mass there daily. On Saturdays, I gave lectures to group of trainee sisters in convents near the city, and, on Sundays, helped in the

parish. On one occasion there, a woman parishioner said to me after Mass, ‘Father, I listened very carefully to your sermon, and I could repeat it all word for word.’ I was beginning to lift off in ecstasy at her praise. She continued, ‘But I won’t, because you probably wouldn’t like to hear it.’ Ouch! Occasionally, as everywhere, people could be nasty: returning to New Zealand from home leave in 1976, I picked up a bundle of letters awaiting me, and opened one. Its first sentence read, ‘You are not welcome back to New Zealand,’ followed by a tirade. That was far from typical, most exceptional, in fact. New Zealanders were welcoming and hospitable.

Marriage problems

I was a member of the diocesan marriage tribunal, which looks into applications for declarations of nullity from people who believe their marriages were invalid from the beginning. I went into the chancery office one Saturday morning in connection with this work, and counted eleven priests there, also working at it. I thought to myself, ‘This is crazy; it can’t last. Eleven priests working on this!’ And I’m sure it didn’t last.

In examining some cases, I couldn’t help asking, ‘Why didn’t someone speak up before the wedding and raise questions about it? Why did people remain silent and allow an obvious mess to develop?’ But there were other cases where one could equally well ask, ‘Why didn’t So-and-So keep their mouth shut, mind their own business and keep out of it?’ Hindsight offers easy answers.

I had a problem with the process. Although the tribunal was a good one, professionally run, some of the criteria on which it operated, taken from the Roman marriage tribunal, the Rota, seemed to me to be open to question. Some applications for a declaration of nullity were made on the grounds of what was called “lack of due discretion” on the part of one or other of the couple. If this applied, it would mean that that person was incapable of undertaking and fulfilling the obligations of marriage. It seemed to me that the idea of “lack of due discretion” was being elasticated, so that it could apply to many couples, including some who were happily married with no desire for an annulment. If we were to be consistent, then, when a young couple approached us in a parish saying that they wished to marry, we should examine whether they had due discretion, as understood in the nullity process, for a valid marriage. But I don’t think we were doing this. If we had, we would, I think, have had to say to quite a few such couples, ‘Sorry, but I don’t think you have due discretion, and if you were to marry it would be invalid, so I can’t do it.’ Much against my will, I felt obliged to resign from the tribunal.

On one occasion, a couple came to me in the University asking me to perform their wedding ceremony. As I went through the process of preparation with them, I felt that the young woman was highly immature, if not actually unstable. After much discussion, I said that I could not in conscience perform their wedding ceremony as I believed the marriage would not last. To say that this was not well received is an understatement. They complained to the chancery

office, which dealt with such matters. It told me I didn't have the right to refuse. I questioned that, but it insisted. I said I wouldn't do it, and refused to budge. Things quietened down for a while, and then I received a phone call from the intended groom. He thanked me profusely for my stand and said that, if the marriage had gone ahead, it would have been a disaster. I felt vindicated.

An answer to prayer

On one occasion, I took a break for a few days and went climbing in the Tararua Mountains north of Wellington. But there was a problem: I had difficulty in starting the car. The electrical points needed replacing, but going to a garage would mean a delay. I knew from experience that if you don't use the opportunity of a break when it comes, you lose it; so I went.

Arriving at the mountains in a fairly remote area a few hours later, I was worried about the problem of starting the car for the return journey. The weather was likely to be wet - it very often was in the mountains. If it was difficult to start the engine when it was dry, how was I going to manage when it had been out in the open air, probably in the rain, for a few days?

I knew what was needed to solve the problem. If I had a heavy duty file I could scrape away the build-up of metal on the points, making a good contact for the electrical current. But I had no file.

The thought of this kept nagging at me and was beginning to spoil what had promised to be an enjoyable few days. Finally, I decided to pray about the problem for a moment and then put it aside. So I did.

After spending the night in a mountain hut, I set off for some climbing the next day. I really enjoyed it. New Zealand is a very beautiful country – I don't think there's any part of it that isn't - and I found myself stopping to admire the scenery from time to time. The following day was the same, more climbing and more scenery. About midday I sat down for something to eat and was taking in the beauty of all that was around me when the question occurred to me, 'Has any person ever been where I am now?'

The question was not unrealistic. New Zealand is a country of just four million people in an area equal to Britain's, and was almost uninhabited until relatively recent times. I was in a remote area, far from any town and high up in the bush country. It could be that I was indeed the first person ever to sit in that particular place and enjoy that particular view.

I was musing on this when I happened to turn to one side and glance at the bush beside me. There in its branches was a heavy duty file, lightly rusted, but very usable. To say that I was astonished is an understatement.

The next day I returned to the car, fiddled down the points and turned the key in the ignition. The engine

started on the first turn. My prayer was answered and so was my question. Someone had been there before me. Thank you, God, and the human angel who left the file there.

Home leave

Home leave to Ireland in 1976 left me with two particular memories. One was the changed attitude of Irish children to school. Where before, school had been a place of fear, now children looked forward to it and liked it. That was scarcely believable to me coming from my background in school, but it was really good to see. I think the change of attitudes came about because of the abolition of corporal punishment, less rote learning, smaller class sizes, more varied teaching methods, and smaller family sizes so that a child who might have no one to play with at home looked forward to school for companionship and play. (But today's classes seem at times to be an unending series of interruptions to such an extent that I wonder how children learn anything!)

The second was that my experience as a mountain climber in New Zealand came into play on Ireland's easier mountains. I was fit, able to leave the friary in Ards after breakfast, climb Errigal, descend, climb Muckish and be back in the friary for lunch. I climbed Croagh Patrick from its base in Murrisk in forty-five minutes and continued to do so for many years after.

Back in New Zealand - Inter insigniores

Sometimes, in memory, I associate an event and a place. For example, I was in the study hall in Saint Bonaventure's in Cork, when news came of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I was working in the library in Limulunga in Zambia when I heard of the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, and I was driving down a road called the Rigi to Glenmore Street in Wellington in 1976 when I heard a radio report that Pope Paul VI had published a document rejecting the ordination of women in the Catholic church on the grounds that Christ chose only men. I didn't believe the report. It made no sense that I could see to rule women's ordination out on that ground. I assumed that the radio station had simply got it wrong.

When I later read the document, called *Inter insigniores*, I found that the radio report was, in fact, correct. The document offered two grounds for rejecting women's ordination: the first, that Christ had not ordained women; and the second, that Christ was a man.

On the first ground, the pope stated that 'The Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination (Introduction), and 'The Catholic Church has never felt that priestly or episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women.' (n.1) He stated the reason: 'This essential reason, namely, that by calling only men to the priestly Order and ministry in its true sense, the Church intends to remain faithful to the type of ordained

ministry willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the Apostles.’ (n.1)

On the second ground, it argued that ‘if the role of Christ were not taken by a man... it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ.’ It spoke of a ‘natural resemblance’ ‘which must exist between Christ and his minister.’ ‘For Christ was and remains a man.’ (n.5) (How does a male priest naturally resemble Holy Mother Church?)

I noticed that the document referred to the non-ordination of women as a *discipline* in the Introduction, a *practice* in n.4, and a *norm* in nn.4 and 5. Disciplines, practices and norms are not definitive. The use of such terms seemed to be creating wiggle room for possible future escapes from a (self-imposed) tight corner.

If a woman could not act *in persona Christi*, that is, in the *role* of Christ – *role* is the original sense of the word *persona* (n.5) - how could she baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, as women have done since the beginning of the Christian church? The document seemed to re-work its own argument to take account of this by referring to ‘actions which demand the character of ordination’ with the Eucharist especially in mind. This line of argument sounded to me like someone shooting off an arrow, following its course, marking the spot where it hits the ground, drawing a circle around it, and then announcing “Bull’s eye!”

The argument seemed to come down to saying that the church could not do other than Christ did. But Christ chose married men as his priests; the church not only has not done so, but, except in limited cases, has forbidden doing what Christ did. Similarly, Jesus said, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matthew 15.24); the church, however, considers itself authorized to admit gentiles to the community of faith without requiring them to accept the law of Moses.

The argumentation struck me as a re-run of *Humanae Vitae*’s. It wasn’t based on scripture: the Pontifical Biblical Commission had stated that the scriptural arguments brought forward against women’s ordination could not bear the weight of the burden placed upon them. Its foundation in tradition rested on grounds expressed in the textbook I had studied in Ards, a standard seminary manual, ‘The reason why a woman cannot receive holy orders is because the clerical state demands a certain superiority since it involves ruling the faithful; whereas a woman by her very nature is inferior to man and subject to him, even though at a personal level she can excel a man in her natural and graced giftedness.’ (Noldin-Schmitt, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, Vol. 3, n.465) Was that the basis on which the church was resting its case? If there is a two-tier humanity, what does that make of the unity of God, in whose image male and female are created? And the third element, *magisterium*, meaning the bishops, had not been consulted; indeed, at synods, they had been forbidden to discuss the topic. Like *Humanae Vitae*, *Inter insigniores* was another papal solo run.

I couldn't help feeling that the pope didn't find his own argumentation convincing and was falling back on a simple papal *fiat*: 'In the final analysis, it is the Church, through the voice of her Magisterium, that, in these various domains, decides what can change and what must remain immutable.' (n.5) What does 'the Church' mean in such a sentence? It appears to be reducible to the pope. Vatican II taught that, 'Magisterium is not superior to the word of God but is its servant,' and that, 'In the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others.' (*Dei Verbum*, n.10) Cardinal Ratzinger was later to write that, 'All teaching in the church is ultimately exposition of scripture.' (See his article "Anglican-Catholic Dialogue—its Problems and Hopes", in Hill and Yarnold, *Anglicans and Roman Catholics: the Search for Unity*, SPCK/CTS, London, 1994, p.256.) The papal argument seemed to say that the teaching authority is self-validating, self-justifying. If papal authority presents itself as a *deus ex machina*, a kind of Delphic oracle, permitted to leave to one side scripture, tradition, the teaching authority of bishops, theologians and the faithful, excluding dialogue, then it can hardly claim to speak on behalf of the church. In addition, it is gearing itself up to shoot itself in the foot. The church has increasingly placed all its ecclesial eggs in the papal basket; if that falls through over-reaching itself, or for any other reason, what will be left? Not much.

I wondered if it was not more than merely possible that old-fashioned male chauvinism might not have much to do with the teaching. Did fear also have a part to play, fear that women might simply do the job better than men?

I haven't heard a convincing case against the ordination of women; that is not to say that there may not be one. I think a good case *for* the ordination of women was provided by Pope John Paul II – unwittingly, I'm sure – in his *Letter to Women* of 29 June 1995, where he wrote that, 'It is only through the duality of the "masculine" and the "feminine" that the "human" finds full realisation.' (n.7) A priesthood based on both sexes will necessarily be better able to represent the full humanity of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, than one based on only one sex. This argument would hold equally good if the present situation were one in which only women were admitted to ordination and the debate was about admitting men.

Peter Thomas Bertram McKeefry

He was archbishop of Wellington for most of my time there. An exceptionally tall, thin, reserved man, he looked cold and distant, like an iceberg on legs. In reality, however, he was a warm, emotional person, who cried easily. When he was at a gathering of priests on any occasion, he would often be unable to finish speaking, overcome with emotion at being with his brother priests, whom he loved. It was as simple and beautiful as that.

He sometimes said foolish things. Once, he said of the charismatic movement, that, 'Nothing but evil can come from it.' That ran the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, and that is, in fact, what happened. Catholic charismatics found the church largely unwelcoming, not only in New Zealand but in Ireland, too, and those I knew in Wellington have left it for other denominations. The charismatics had energy and enthusiasm; they brought a breath of fresh air to an institution grown tired and stale. They believed.

The cardinal used to visit us in the friary on occasion, and could be lovably indiscreet after a whiskey or two. He would regale us with stories from Vatican II, giving candid assessments of some of his eminent brothers in the college of cardinals. Of one, he said, 'He was a bastard, and I apologize to the genuine bastards for including him among them.' He let slip too that, when he was stuck for a quotation to support something he wanted to say, he would invent one, and attribute it to Saint Augustine, because the saint had written so much that no one could possibly know if the attribution were true. He added that the reason why Augustine was honoured as a doctor of the church rather than condemned as a heretic was that he contradicted himself so often that no one knew what he really thought about anything!

At home in his own house, he would have lively discussions with the priests of the parish. After one such late night session, as they were going upstairs to bed, the administrator, a short, small man, said to him heatedly,

‘You’re wrong, your Eminence, you’re wrong, and you know it, but you haven’t got the humility to admit it.’ His Eminence, not usually stuck for words, replied with, ‘Go to bed, you stupid little shit!’ Thank you, PTB, for your humanity and humour.

Secularism

New Zealand was largely a secular society. It wasn’t formally atheistic; in fact, in a census while I was there, three-quarters of people declared themselves to be Christian, but fewer than one in six were regular practising members of any Christian denomination. (For statistical purposes, “practice” was defined as monthly attendance at church.) People carried on as if God did not exist, or didn’t matter. Nonetheless, they had created a society with much to commend it. I believe, though, that the good human qualities on which that society rested and depended were themselves the by-product of Christian faith and would not have existed without it. How long will those qualities continue in existence if the links with Christian faith are allowed to lapse? The late Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary, who knew a lot about spreading the Gospel, said, ‘An inert body of believers is only two generations removed from non-practice. And non-practice is only two generations away from non-belief.’ Perhaps New Zealand, and the rest of the Western world along with it, is like the prodigal son in the gospel (Luke 15.11-32) who squandered the inherited wealth of the past and had to go down into the mire before coming to himself and making his way home.

Secular society has much to its credit: constitutional recognition of rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and worship are examples; others include the ending of slavery, the development of universal primary education, of democratic institutions, and of trades unions. The separation of church and state, and separation of constitutional powers are significant. Those were real gains for humanity, and it was often people of a secular mindset which brought them about, usually in the face of opposition, some of it from the church. (If the Christian church had been more liberal would liberals have been more Christian? Probably, I think.)

Secular or religious: we share a common humanity. We live on one planet, one that is increasingly endangered as the environmental sins of our past and present catch up with us, where the future agenda of humanity may perhaps list just one item: survival. Pope John Paul II, at a gathering of world religious leaders in Assisi in 1986, said that, 'The demands of peace transcend those of religion.' I think he might say the same of the demands of survival. The need is for dialogue. Retreating into a devotional ghetto, as we seem to be doing in the church at present, is not the way forward. I like what Jews say about themselves and wonder if Catholics could say the same: -

'I am a Jew because my faith demands no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew because my faith demands all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because, wherever there is suffering, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because, whenever there is despair, the Jew hopes.

I am a Jew because the message of our faith is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because the promise of our faith is a universal promise.

I am a Jew because, for the Jew, the world is not complete; people must complete it.

I am a Jew because, for the Jew, humanity is not fully created; people must complete it.

I am a Jew because the faith of the [Jewish] people places humanity above nations, above Judaism itself.

I am a Jew because the faith of the [Jewish] people places above humanity, which is the image of the divine, the Oneness of God.'

(Siddur Sim Shalom, A Prayer-book for Shabbat, Festivals and Weekdays)

The Christian faith has much to offer a dialogue. It has an understanding of the human person; it offers teaching on relationships such as those the person has with God, with others, with oneself and with nature; it knows how to educate in conscience and to motivate. It has a comprehensive and integrated body of teaching on matters of human concern. It has experience in community building. Recognizing that humanity is neither self-explanatory nor self-sufficient, it is able to widen a dialogue to larger horizons than the temporal and the local.

Adrian B. Smith has written on this subject. I'd like to be able to claim the following as my own, but it's his. Here it is: -

'I propose five approaches the Church needs to take towards today's secular spirituality if the Good News of Jesus is to make any contribution in the Western world to humanity's future.

The first is to recognize the many directions in which the Holy Spirit is blowing these days, beyond and sometimes, despite the Church. Our evangelization priority must be with Kingdom-realization before Church-growth. We should enable spiritual searchers to appreciate how much God is active in their lives without their being aware of the source of their spiritual drive. Raimon Pannikar would call this phenomenon, as he did Hinduism, "Christianity in potency". He wrote: "The Christian attitude is not ultimately one of bringing Christ in, but of bringing him forth, of discovering Christ".

We need to acknowledge that in our multi-cultural societies - a resident of Dublin may be seen wearing a shamrock in his turban - searchers no longer believe Truth is monolithically laid down. The variety of world views have become living options. This should spur us on in our inter-faith dialogue.

Secondly, we need to recognize and appreciate that classical spiritualities are regarded by many lay-people as world-denying and body-denying. In secular spirituality, on the other hand they are drawn by a sense of wonder for creation and a feeling of

interconnectedness with all aspects of it. Planet Earth is not just our home but “we are Earth”, related genetically to everything that contains the DNA molecule.

Thirdly, not to regard spiritual searchers with a superior attitude, giving the impression that we have something we think they ought to have. The values by which so many of them live can put us “practising” Christians to shame.

Fourthly, “inculturation”, a key word among missionaries, is taken to mean announcing the Good News in the thought forms of different cultures. But it has not only a geographical dimension: equally it has an historical dimension. If God, religion and the Church have no appeal to so many people today it is because they are spoken of in concepts that have remained unchanged since the Middle Ages and bear no relation to the world as people experience it today. The problem is linguistic. The way we address God in prayers, hymns and the liturgy and propose a belief in divine realities urgently needs to be “inculturated” if the Church is not to remain on the margins for an increasing number of people.

Lastly, we need to learn from secular spirituality: -
to delve into our own mystical heritage, especially to rediscover the ways of deep meditation that were taught;
to appreciate our responsibility for the future of the planet, our role as co-creators with God;

to move our liturgy from the head-centre to the heart-centre, from the mainly cerebral to the variety of ways in which spirituality can be expressed;
to introduce the imaginative, the spiritual into our education system - to value intuition and creativity;
to return to respect for religious experience;
to recover the primacy of right action (*orthopraxis*) over right belief (*orthodoxy*). The depth of our love, not the amount of our knowing, is the true measure of spirituality;
to place more emphasis on the future than on the past. In Carl Jung's words: "We are still looking back to the Pentecostal events in a dazed way instead of looking forward to the goal the Spirit is leading us to," and thereby restore hope to people's lives.'

Smith ends with the words of Teilhard de Chardin which were quoted in the Second Vatican Council, (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.31): 'The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide future generations with reasons for living and hoping.' (His article, "Secular Spirituality?" is in *Spirituality*, (May-June 2000), pp.131-135; the above quotation is from p.134.)

Formation

One of the objectives we had in mind as Capuchins was to "implant" the order in New Zealand, to recruit local members so that the order would become self-sustaining there. We started during the seventies with one or two candidates who presented themselves with an

interest in it. I was given the job of initiating them into the Capuchin life. I had no training for this work; the order, like the church, is a great believer in the omnicompetence of the willing amateur. It was another of those ‘Do your best and you’ll get better’ appointments.

The fact that it was one-to-one training took a great deal of time, and that meant time taken from something else. I don’t think we considered alternative models, but tried to replicate what we ourselves had experienced in our days in formation. The young men who came, though few, were willing enough, but none of them lasted long. I often think it would be a good idea, if possible, to interview those who left us, at whatever stage, and ask them to help us to understand if or how we had failed them in some way. Perhaps, in some instances, we did.

As I write now, fifty-five years after the first foundation of the order in New Zealand, only one local man has stayed with us. Looking at it from our perspective, I think that the deficiencies of our community life may have been a major factor in that.

Meadowbank, Henderson and Gore

Two new friars came from Ireland about 1973, Flann Lynch and Maitiú Ó Cléirchín. At about the same time, a decision was made to expand into another diocese. The reason for moving into another diocese rather than opening a second house in the same one was to let the archbishop know we had other strings to our bow and

weren't dependent on him! These are the games we play. Negotiations began with the bishop of Auckland, Reginald John Delargey, and it was agreed that we would take temporary charge of the parish of Meadowbank, and, if that worked out alright, we would be given a larger parish on a permanent basis.

Cardinal McKeefry died in November 1973, and was succeeded by Bishop Delargey. When this was announced, Bishop Delargey wrote in *Zelandia*, the diocesan newspaper, that there would be plenty of consultation with priests and people about the choice of his successor. On the following day, the pro-nuncio, Archbishop Raymond Etteldorf, announced the choice of successor, John Mackey. Archbishop Etteldorf, a short man with a predilection for fishing, was known to the clergy as Idle Dwarf, or as Archbishop of Lake Taupo. He wasn't liked, and many people felt he had shafted Delargey by making his announcement when he did. He wasn't let away with it, and, at a clergy reception in Wellington for Delargey, with Etteldorf present, a priest pointedly asked the nuncio to open all his mail at the same time. Then, referring to the nuncio investing the new archbishop with the *pallium*, a woollen stole used as a symbol of the office of metropolitan and draped over the shoulders, he remarked that the nuncio had pulled the wool over the archbishop's eyes! He was applauded by the priests for both remarks. (That reproof was tame stuff compared to other occasions. In 1935, when Archbishop Redwood died, the diocesan clergy had been hoping that his successor would be one of their number. Instead a Marist, Thomas O'Shea, was appointed. The diocesan

clergy boycotted his consecration, and issued black-bordered invitations to an alternative function at the same time. Just making a point!)

Bishop Mackey, new to the job in Auckland, came to his first diocesan clergy appointments. It was known that he found decision-making difficult, and, as a new bishop, his first appointments were watched with special interest by the clergy. He had continued Bishop Delargey's discussions with the Capuchins, and agreed that we would take charge of the parish of Henderson. On that basis, he made his first appointments. At that point, the provincial of the Irish Capuchins got cold feet about the venture, and decided to defer a decision until the next Irish provincial chapter. (A chapter is a gathering of religious, held every three years or so, which elects new leaders and make policy decisions.) That meant the friars would be staying in Meadowbank. As a result, Bishop Mackey had to re-make his appointments. The clergy of the diocese, unaware of the reason, were irritated, and blamed the bishop, seeing him as a bungler. The Caps had landed the bishop in the soup! He, very graciously, did not disclose the reason.

It wasn't the first time we had messed things up on a bishop: in the early sixties, the Irish Capuchins had committed themselves to providing staff, twelve friars or more, for a college in Gore in Dunedin diocese, only to withdraw abruptly in 1962, leaving the bishop with a new college, waiting students and parents, and no staff. The withdrawal was decided without consulting or even informing the friars in New Zealand. There was much

anger among the clergy – understandably – against the Capuchins, and the men on the spot got the blame, as no one believed them when they said they had not known about it. Two of the friars were so angered by the decision that they applied to Archbishop McKeefry to leave the Capuchins and become incardinated in his diocese. He advised them to wait and let the storm pass. Mutual relations between bishops and religious orders can be difficult, and I often felt sympathy for the bishops. I was to see more of the same in Zambia in later years. Orders are often inward-looking, with little sense of the needs of the wider church.

The two friaries in New Zealand were houses of the Irish province of the order, on the same basis as, let us say, Kilkenny or Ards; there was no local autonomy. Every decision beyond the routine had first to be approved by Ireland, and our experience was that provincials did not often answer letters. It made for considerable frustration. We felt we were out of mind as well as out of sight.

Domestic problems

We had a problem in the friary – money, or rather the lack of it. The house, built in 1958, was in debt, and we were not able even to meet the interest payments. We had to do some serious thinking. One step was to ask the diocese to pay for the chaplain who had worked at the colleges for sixteen years. He had never been paid – the colleges themselves, being secular, did not offer anything, and that was to be expected. But the diocese,

seemingly by error, had not paid either, though his was a diocesan appointment, and the community of five were, in effect, subsidizing him. The chaplain himself had not raised the matter with the diocese, not wishing to be seen as pushy. (!) When the matter was drawn to his attention, the cardinal was most apologetic about it, and immediately reimbursed us. The salary during the sixteen year period, and for my subsequent four years, was NZ\$600 a year (£300), a pittance, even by the standards of the time, but the payment of the back money owed was a start in reducing the debt. We lived a simple life, we took every bit of work we could get, and gradually we started making inroads on the principal, and, with help from the friars of the Western American Province, did eventually clear it.

But the achievement came at a price, which I did not immediately notice at the time. We were becoming materialistic, valuing the man for his work and the work for the money. We were also losing a sense of community, as we were not very often together. This was something that crept up on us unnoticed, but was in contradiction to our Franciscan charism. I found myself feeling isolated and lonely.

The friary in Wellington was becoming like bachelors' digs, with a housekeeper who made life difficult for all but the man in charge, whom she cultivated carefully. The atmosphere at meals, which she attended, was frosty, and she controlled conversation through her moods. With a kind of gallows humour, we used to say we had all the difficulties of marriage and none of the

pleasures! I raised these difficulties with the guardian, but to no avail. I raised them again when we gathered at Kopua Cistercian monastery in Hawke's Bay in 1977 for a meeting of the two communities, but again to no avail. In order to be able to have a meal in peace, I ate either in the college, or from a take-away, sitting in a car. I gradually came to believe that, if things continued in that way, I would probably end up by leaving the order and the priesthood. I was being hollowed out inside for lack of community. So I made the decision to ask to leave New Zealand and go to Zambia for which I had volunteered in 1970. This was approved, late in 1977.

Why Zambia? Since my early childhood days, when I first saw the word Barotseland on the family atlas, it had attracted me. Friars returning from the missions told us of their experiences, and, even though we learned to take some of what they said with a grain of salt, the idea of living in a rural area, with simple, ordinary people, preaching the gospel, and helping to build up the church appealed to me. If life were to be basic and down-to-earth, so much the better. Capuchins had been there as missionaries since 1931, in an area twice the size of Ireland, less than fifty of them at the peak times, and had accomplished a great deal. I felt I wanted to be part of that. I was in love with my idea of Africa, but I had to learn how it related to the reality.

Part 4: TO AFRICA

Zambia in the sun

I arrived in Zambia on 12 March 1978, having passed through Perth, and spending a night in Mauritius.

On the way to the friary in Lusaka, the capital, from the airport, my first impression was of warmth. The climate was indeed beautiful; the Western Province, where I spent most of my time, has an average of eight hours sunshine every day. The people were slim; no obesity here – it's a luxury of the rich. Everywhere people were walking; not many could hope to own a bike, much less a car. Women seemed to do most of the work. And it felt strange to be the odd man out, an uncommon white face in a sea of brown ones. But that quickly ceased to matter, because people were friendly, courteous, and hospitable, sometimes putting us to shame in such matters. There were billboards bearing the government slogan "1978 - Zambia Take-Off Year." It wasn't; I saw nothing but decline in the country, in almost every respect, until new hope emerged in 1992 with a changed political system. People were poor, sometimes very poor, yet you would see more smiles and hear more laughter in a day there than in a month in Europe. The children were a delight: well-mannered, happy, relaxed, content with simple things, and welcoming to a stranger. I used to think, 'This is how children should be.'

I was appointed first to Lukulu, a place of extraordinary beauty on the east bank of the Zambezi, with the most wonderful sunsets imaginable. After a few days there, the regional superior of the Capuchins in Zambia changed his mind about the appointment and transferred me to Sioma, on the west bank of the Zambezi, much further south. So off I went. Appointments are often a mystery! Sancta Maria mission in Lukulu was a place dear to the heart of the Irish Capuchins. The first missionaries had succeeded in opening there in the face of much opposition, and it was the great love of Bishop Timothy Phelim O'Shea, the first bishop of what was to become Livingstone diocese, which had an area about twice the size of Ireland. It was a canonical foundation of the order. A great deal of work had gone into it, with thirty-six Mass centres, a hospital, a secondary school, a leprosy treatment centre, and, for a while, a teachers' training college. In the early eighties, the friars were shocked when Bishop O'Shea's successor, Adrian Mung'andu, the local diocesan bishop, without consulting the friars or even informing them after the event, transferred the mission to another congregation; it wasn't his to hand over in the first place as it belonged to the friars. There was nothing authoritarian, much less devious, about his action; he was just clueless. The friars followed the injunction of Saint Francis, when he said that if the bishop throws you out, you just go.

At this time, the church in Zambia had reached a fairly healthy level of development. First attempts in the nineteenth century had come to almost nothing as

missionaries succumbed to malaria and other tropical diseases. Then a new start was made in Barotseland (the Western Province) by the Capuchins from 1931 as a result of a mistake by the apostolic delegate, Archbishop Mathews. Italian Conventual Franciscans were supposed to have gone there, and the Irish Capuchins to the Copperbelt, where, since they spoke English, they could work with the large English-speaking expatriate population. If the Italians had gone to the Western Province they would have had to learn only one language, not two.

When the Capuchins arrived in the west, they encountered opposition from already established Protestant missionaries who had considerable influence with the colonial administration - Zambia was a British colony - and blocked applications for permission to open missions, except in isolated places without a population. For years, the friars were frustrated, being isolated and often with little to do. But official attitudes changed when the friars began to open schools and train local people to be teachers, even if at a rudimentary level. The schools came to be the main instrument of evangelization, although not without ambiguity. Was a child asking for baptism because s/he wanted to be a Christian or because of wanting an education? The mission school system went ahead and expanded over a period of thirty years until it ran close to two hundred primary schools.

Protestant missionaries had already done a lot of important pioneering work. They had translated the bible

into Silozi, an immense achievement. Working with the colonial administration, they had succeeded in having slavery outlawed in 1906 and gradually eliminated in the decades that followed. They had been successful in challenging some local customs, such as infanticide in cases where a mother died in childbirth but the baby survived, and the custom was to bury the baby alive along with the mother, or in the case of twins, where custom required that only the child which cut its teeth first would be allowed to live, and the other would be suffocated. In some places, when a chief died, young men and women would be rounded up and buried with him to be his servants in the next life. And if a girl became pregnant, and her mother disapproved of the father, mother and grandmother would sometimes make the girl lie on the ground while they jumped on her abdomen until she aborted; this led to her death in some cases.

Witchcraft ran like a cancer through society, creating fear, suspicion and mistrust, and being responsible for many murders. A local proverb said, 'Those who take their own life are not mourned', and sometimes would not be buried. Catholic missionaries, who mostly came later, pioneered education for girls, a hard, slow slog in changing public attitudes. Why did a girl need education, people said, when she could learn from her mother, grandmother and the village women how to be a mother, housewife and farmer? What else did she need? (Would Western "liberals" who decry missionaries for allegedly not respecting local culture prefer that missionaries turned away in silence from those issues? Invoking

“culture” is often no more than an excuse for refusing to examine long-standing attitudes and practices.)

Small Christian Communities (SCC)

Independence came to Zambia in 1964, and, in 1965, the Catholic bishops decided to hand over the mission school system to the state. Missionaries were happy to be unburdened of the responsibility, but disappointed with the result. It was freely acknowledged by everyone that the system declined year by year from there on. For a time, missionaries felt disorientated and directionless.

There was a convergence of factors at work, among them: -

- *political*: people wanted transparent and accountable decision-making;
- *psychological*: the human need for community;
- *theological*: church documents called for full, conscious and active participation;
- *sociological*: the number of priests was declining, as vocations from the Western world dried up, while those from within Africa were as yet coming forward only in small numbers. In Zambia, between 1973 and 1983, there was no increase in the number of local clergy, ordinations being equalled by deaths and departures. And also religious education in state schools fell well short of what was necessary.

In 1973, the bishops of six East African countries met and decided on a common pastoral policy for their countries. They based it on Small Christian

Communities, which would be self-ministering, self-supporting and self-propagating. The idea was that church life needed to be based on the communities in which everyday life and work takes place, those social groupings whose members experience real inter-personal relations and have a sense of belonging, in living and in working.

The Christian life is a call to community, and the church, at its best, is a communion of communities. A parish is often too large in area or numbers to be a community in anything more than a nominal sense. SCC's were seen as the most appropriate way to embody the idea that the church is a communion of faith, hope and charity, reaching out to the world in mission. They were not another rung on the hierarchical ladder, or even a new organizational structure or movement, or a new pastoral strategy or technique. They were the church renewing itself and fulfilling its mission; they were a new way of being the Christian community of faith.

An SCC is a group of about twelve people, who live or work near each other, and come to know each other on a personal basis. As a rule, they meet once a week, and the heart of the meeting is a period of shared prayer and bible reflection, the leadership of which is taken in rotation. At their best, SCC's were ecumenical: Catholics and Protestants have much to learn from each other about Bible-sharing, faith-sharing, spontaneous prayer, and lay evangelism. In addition, part of the SCC's mission is to cater for local human and material needs.

Community presupposes communication, and dialogue is the key to that. Leaders needed to learn to work *with* people more than *for* them, in structures that were participatory, transparent and accountable. Leadership needed to move: -

- from patronage to partnership,
- from dictation to dialogue,
- from control to trust,
- from playing it safe to a willingness to take risks,
- from the institution to the community,
- from law to love,
- from being self-centred and worrying about survival, to being outward-looking and concerned with humanity.

A useful approach was to start simple and build up.

SCC's called for a change of mentality on the part of clergy, such as overcoming the fear of losing control. If people could see that responsibility for something they cherished rested with them, and that they were trusted, there was a more than good chance, especially with training and encouragement, that they would shoulder that responsibility. Once people link faith to life, they see the church as "their" church and get involved.

How well did the SCC idea work? In some places, it didn't work because it wasn't tried. In others, people applied the new terminology of the SCC to old structures such as the "outstation" and expected something new to happen; it didn't. In others again, leaders recognized that the SCC was not a magic wand; so they put work into it, especially in training local leaders, and good results

followed. Regular training and peer review were necessary. In time, trainees became trainers. Out of the SCC's have come two generations of people trained for leadership in church councils, and also vocations to ordained ministry and religious life. They form the small, solid core of people who more than pull their weight in a parish. Probably the biggest single human factor in the "success" or "failure" of the SCC is the quality of its leadership. As is normal in human affairs, this will go through periods of strength and weakness; dying and rising are inseparable from the Christian story.

Sioma, March-July 1978

Sioma is beautiful, and became my favourite among the missions. I was there twice, first in 1978, for five months, learning the local *lingua franca*, Silozi, and then, from 1984-89, helping in the parish, among other things.

It had taken almost twenty years of applying and re-applying by the friars for Government permission before it was granted. The mission began in an isolated place without a population, but when the friars established schools, and sisters staffed a clinic, the population came. Came for what? Was it for the faith or for education and nursing care? No one could give a definitive answer to that question, but both-and might be the nearest.

Like the other missions, Sioma was in transition when I went to in 1978, but I was unaware of it at the time. There was the pastoral transition from schools to small

Christian communities, which was also a transition from child- to adult-orientated work.

There were just two friars there: Andrew O'Shea, an elderly Corkman, who had married, worked as a radio operator in the Caribbean for some time, and then joined the order after his wife's early death. An amateur archaeologist, he had discovered Stone Age axe-heads near the Sioma (Ngonye) Falls, and had written about them in professional journals. The other was James Connolly, ordained with me in 1970, a Cavan man with sparkling blue eyes that people were afraid of. They weren't afraid of him – far from it; he had a knack in dealing with the many people who came to the door looking for anything and everything under the sun, and could send them away empty-handed but laughing; it was a great quality to have. We had good times together, and enjoyed simple pleasures: a walk, a swim, listening to the BBC world service. The loneliness and sense of isolation I had experienced towards the end of my time in Wellington simply disappeared. Andrew and James were well read, better than we were in New Zealand; I think the reason was that they had no TV.

My job was to learn Silozi, the language of the Lozi people. I made a mistake at the start by taking a bookish approach to it instead of taking the plunge and going out among the people. They were helpful to a beginner; they tried to understand and to help, and didn't ridicule mistakes. But, despite a slow start, I gradually got the hang of it. Silozi, a Bantu language, linked to Sitswana, the language of Botswana, but different from other

Zambian languages, is remarkably logical, with an extraordinarily flexible verb system which enables someone who knows the root to adapt it to many uses. Its spelling is consistent, and, with a few exceptions, pronunciation is easy, especially to anyone who has some familiarity with Latin-based languages.

1978 was a year of exceptionally heavy rains, the rainy season being from October to March. So had 1968, while 1958 created the father and mother of all floods. In 1998, when I was back in Sioma, people wondered if the pattern would continue, but it didn't. But, in 1978, it was difficult to get around the parish because roads were often impassable; they had become canals and bridges were either submerged or washed away.

Shangombo

Despite these problems, James and I set out for a small place called Shangombo on the border with Angola, a boundary formed by the Mashi river. Most of the people who lived there were Angolans who had taken refuge in Zambia from the war of independence against the Portuguese from 1962 to 1975 and the civil war which followed.

Like most refugees, these people came into their new situation penniless. Their herds of cattle had to be left on the west bank of the Mashi, their other possessions mostly abandoned in the rush to get away in dug-out canoes. Some never made it; crocodiles got them. Many had witnessed atrocities committed by Portuguese forces

in the name of defending Christian civilization against communism, and have seen or experienced more atrocities in the civil war from 1975 to 1994.

One possession they had not left behind was their faith. They received it through Portuguese Benedictines. They set up the mission of Santa Cruz in the town of Rivungu, later destroyed in the civil war, and abandoned. The people gathered for prayer and religious instruction. The refugees, Kwamashi and Mbukushu by tribe, had sent a delegation to Sioma and asked for help in building a church. The then parish priest, Father Philip Connor, from Meath, shared the work with them, and in 1974 the church, dedicated to Saint Anthony of Padua, was opened.

For the refugees, the completion of the church was not a signal to rest on their laurels; it was a starting-point for greater efforts. A priest could visit them at most three or four times a year because of road and weather conditions, so people had to become self-reliant. They chose a church council, appointed people to various tasks, and got to work. For example, some led a prayer service on Sundays; some prepared adults or children for the sacraments. Perhaps most importantly of all, others went out to the villages in the surrounding areas and began to spread there the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A lasting memory of my visit there with James was of an elderly voluntary catechist, Nicolao Chabiye, taking him to task for admitting to baptism people who were not properly prepared. Nicolao was one of those proven

men, those *virī probati*, whose work had enabled the Christian community to go from strength to strength.

And then, it seemed, things began to go wrong. The South African army and air force, engaged at the time in a guerrilla war against SWAPO (the South-West Africa People's Organization, seeking independence for Namibia), began to strafe the roads, to bomb vehicles, and to lay land-mines. They helicoptered troops into an area south of Shangombo and set up camp, carrying out raids on villages and destroying canoes so that guerrillas could not cross the rivers. The people advised the priest not to come to them because of the danger, and so they had remained without one for about four years.

But the Holy Spirit had been at work. When I returned to visit the area for a month in 1982, the number of churches had grown to twenty-one. In each case, a church council had been chosen by the people, and the work of instruction in the faith had begun. In some cases even the leaders themselves were catechumens preparing for baptism. Few of them were literate, and the few books available to them were almost all in languages other than their own, making it necessary to translate the text as they used it. They had one New Testament and one catechism in their own language, and just one man in the entire area had attended secondary school.

All of this was the work of grace and the also the work of human hands. The churches were built by hand - literally. There are few shovels and no block moulds in the villages, much less cement. Walls were built of mud

dried in the sun and smoothed out to form an even surface on a framework of wattles. The water for this was carried by women and children by the bucketful on their heads from a stream or well which could be up to a kilometre away. Then the roof was built of grass, long shoots of two or three metres, tied to laths with strips of cattle hide, or the inner bark of trees.

None of this is to pretend that they were perfect Christians; they weren't. They had problems stemming from their culture, such as polygamy and divorce, which were widespread. Sometimes there was friction between the different tribes, or between the refugees and the settled people. And the fear engendered by witchcraft ran like a raw nerve through their lives. And yet, through it all, there was growth. The power of God was there.

Shangombo and its hinterland brings back memories and emotions. I remember a small girl offering to share her supper with me - a rat; a Kalahari bushman who gave me his hut to sleep in for the night and the bed was so short that my legs from the knees down dangled out over the end, even when I lay diagonally across it; the magnificent sunset looking across to Santa Cruz; the choir-master who led the congregation through a Latin Mass, using a dog-eared, coverless *Liber Usualis*, probably left behind by the Benedictines; the night the people put on a dance for me, that pitch black night when the only brightness seemed to be the reflection of firelight on eyes and teeth, until a messenger from the twentieth century, a satellite, cut an arc across the sky; the violence of a sand-storm so enveloping that even the

lights of a vehicle could not penetrate it; the faith of men who spent five days walking 150 km or so to go to a course to improve their Sunday services. Shangombo, whatever its name means, was surely a place of blessing. When James and I went there, I was unaware of much of the above. I could not have known that Shangombo was to become for me a place of special significance, a high point in my life.

Stuck in the mud

James and I made another long-distance trip to two centres called Sibukali and Mwanamwalye on the eastern side of the Zambezi River. The first part of the journey was the trickiest: it involved crossing the river on a paddle barge, and it was in spate, with powerful whirlpools that could draw in a barge and pull it under water. (The Silozi word for a whirlpool is *libuu* – onomatopoeia!) The paddlers were nervous and ill-at-ease, but they worked hard, and, under a capable coxswain they brought us safely to the other side. We spent that night in a school, sleeping on the floor of the headmaster's office. We had only just begun preparing supper when two boys of about twelve years old knocked at the door. Each had an egg in his hand, and they shyly offered them to us for our supper. It was an awkward moment: to decline could easily have been seen as offensive; they might feel we thought it wasn't good enough; to accept meant they might not have a supper. What to do? We accepted their gift with thanks. Sometimes I thought that what we should have done was to accept their gift, and then invite them to share our

supper together. Our trip was uneventful until the return journey when we became stuck in mud. The “road” was simply a track across the plain, and it was flooded. Wet sand is firm, but wet clay clogs the treads of the tires and so they spin without traction; revving the engine makes things worse, just digging the vehicle in. We were so deep in mud that the under-body of the vehicle was resting on it. And it was getting late in the afternoon. There was nothing to do but find a bit of dry ground and camp for the night. James was a bit bothered about all this, but cheered up immensely in the tent when I produced a bottle of port wine which I had nurtured for such emergencies. He was in great form after a glass or two!

The next day, the hard work began. We cut branches from trees and used them to make a platform for the jack. It had to be strong as otherwise the jack would simply push itself into the mud. Then, one by one, in turn, we jacked up each wheel, and packed more branches underneath them. Then we tried, in first gear, low ratio, but didn’t move. A local farmer came to our help bringing a team of eight oxen. He harnessed them to the front of the four-by-four, and tried again. But there was one stubborn ox that wanted to do its own thing - definitely not a team player - and it messed things up again and again. It had to be unharnessed, and then we tried again, the oxen and the engine in tandem. Slowly, the vehicle edged forward onto firm ground. There were a few more near escapes on the way back before we reached the river and made it safely across and home. The generosity of the farmer in spontaneously helping us

was something that I and other missionaries experienced again and again from the Zambian people. I began to understand then, and was taught it many more times, that mission is as much about receiving as it is about giving.

Not long after, we were joined at the mission by a newcomer from Ireland, Father Kieran Shorten from Dunmanway in County Cork. He was a man of extraordinary talent: a linguist, a musician, a theologian, a potter, a sculptor, and a man who could hold an informed and engaging conversation on any topic under the sun.

Snapshots from Sioma

There were five sisters in the convent: Sisters Hilda, Nora, Teresa, Michael and Julia, a sister of Father Philip Connor. Several of them had been in Uganda until thrown out by Idi Amin. They looked after the clinic, and its functioning was a continuing miracle of skill and ingenuity. They ran it, and the mobile clinics in outlying centres, on a shoestring, working very long hours as well as being permanently on call. They trained the local staff, and kept the water pump, generator, ambulance, paraffin fridges and supply system going through shortages of everything, and the difficulty of being on the “wrong” side of a river with no bridge. The sisters were women of extraordinary generosity, and tenacity, too; they let nothing stop them from serving. I sometimes think that they were the real missionaries: they said little, they didn’t need to; their actions did the talking.

I was in my room one day, working at Silozi, when I heard an unusual sound – an aircraft engine. I saw a light plane flying not very high overhead and following the course of the river south. It seemed odd and out of place. I felt uneasy about it, but put it out of my mind. The following day I heard that it had crashed at Sesheke airfield, close to the border with South-West Africa (now Namibia), and that all aboard, a party of seven Italians, had been killed. But the full story was actually worse than that. It seems that they had lost their way, but sensibly decided to follow the river, as the airfield was almost on its banks. The pilot found the airfield alright and made as if to land, but, for some known reason, changed his mind at the last minute and pulled up, turning across the river to head for another airfield in the Caprivi Strip in South West Africa. There had been tension at the border between Zambian and South African forces. When the Zambians first saw the plane approach, they prepared anti-aircraft missiles, but decided not to do anything when the plane made as if to land. But when it then changed and headed for South-African controlled territory, they opened fire and shot it down. Had there been communication with the control tower? I don't know, but seven people lost their lives.

The priests in Sesheke at the time were Fathers Paul Chuwa and Daniel Macha, Tanzanian Spiritan missionaries. Their house was beside the river and right in the line of fire between the two armed forces. There had been artillery exchanges during which they had taken shelter in a bunker of sorts near the house. On one occasion, as they crawled into it they found another

“refugee” sheltering there before them – a cobra! What to do? - a cobra in the bunker, and artillery shells outside it. They took their chances, crawled back to the house, sheltered under a table, and lived to tell the tale.

Having acquired some degree of fluency in Silozi, I was transferred to Sichili, arriving there on 4 July. I was to learn that the more you become proficient in the language the more you realize how much you *don't* understand the people – but that realization was a long time in coming.

Sichili 1978 – 1980

Sichili is a small cluster of villages in Sesheke district about four hours' drive north-west of Livingstone. The mission was founded there in 1936, and had grown to include about fifteen “outstations” or Mass centres, a network of primary schools, a trade school, a 120-bed hospital run by the Holy Cross Sisters, mostly from Austria and Germany, a leprosy clinic, a hall, a home-craft centre, an orphanage, and a boarding school for girls. It had a twenty-four hour water supply powered by a hydraulic ram on the Namakala stream. A two km long canal had been dug to generate a sufficient head to operate this. Without a theodolite, or technical training, it took three attempts to get the canal right, but, once completed, it operated reliably for decades at no cost other than the occasional cleaning of the canal.

The people of the surrounding area were subsistence farmers: they grew maize, sorghum, millet, and cassava.

Agriculture depended heavily on the rains: if they fell consistently, at intervals of every three or four days in the growing season, then a good harvest was reasonably assured. But often there could be longer, even much longer, intervals between showers, and crops would simply dry up. If rain was too heavy, it could wash soil away from the roots, leaving them exposed to the sun when the rain stopped. In farming, the people usually hedged their bets by having two or even three plantings in the hope that at least one of them would get the right rain. The soil was light and sandy, but, with the use of animal manure, and good rains, it could grow almost anything. But on average, about one harvest in every three failed. Much of the Western Province had, at one time, been part of the Kalahari Desert, and the average depth of sand in it was about sixty metres.

Maize was the preferred crop; if you asked people how the harvest had been, their answer usually referred to it. It was rare for people to admit to a good harvest; even in the best of seasons, the most they would say was, ‘Lu kutuzi’, literally, ‘We harvested.’ When shelled and pounded, maize flour made a nourishing, if not very appetizing, meal, which needed a sauce or gravy of some kind to give it flavour. Millet or sorghum was used for brewing beer. Cassava was a famine food when other crops failed. It made a thick, glutinous “porridge” that looked and tasted like putty, and wasn’t very nutritious. For protein, people had a little meat occasionally, or eggs, or, if near the Zambezi, fish. They had vegetables: okra, cassava leaves, cabbage, carrots, peas, tomatoes, onions, chilli, eggplant (aubergines), groundnuts, sweet

potatoes and “Irish” potatoes. For fruit they had oranges, lemons, mangoes, passion-fruit, guavas, bananas, paw-paws (papaya), avocados, and a variety of forest fruits in season. They also grew tobacco, mostly for their own use. But malnutrition was common and infant mortality high. Tractors were unknown, and few farmers had even an ox-drawn plough. Cultivation was almost entirely by hand-held hoe, and a family could not farm much more than two hectares.

Change was in the air, not all of it an improvement. I was reminded of a former Irish Capuchin provincial who used to moan, ‘All changes, no improvements!’ The school system was falling into a state of near collapse. The government had ordered the closure of the trade school, seeing it as a colonial relic. The treatment of leprosy patients was moving from institutional to out-patient care, but major problems were patient non-compliance, and cultural obstacles such as fear of leprosy and the isolation of lepers. The move from pastoral work based on schools to small Christian communities had begun only fitfully. My pastoral “initiation” was close to non-existent, but at least I had a free hand. I was parish priest after just four months in the country, recognition, not of any pastoral talent on my part, but of the shortage of priests.

I didn’t find the bishop a help. For example, parents used to give their children baptismal names which had no connection with the Christian faith, such as Tractor, Vote, Bomb, Machine Gun, Air Force, Six Months (a jail sentence or premature birth?) I tried to help by

compiling a list of Christian names for people to choose from. When the bishop heard of this, he took me to task for it, saying, 'What are you doing? Are you trying to start a new church?' He was known for habitually saying no to everything, so it was best not to ask. I think he may have felt that it was easier to turn a no into a yes, than a yes into a no, so no was his starting point. He later became archbishop of the capital, Lusaka. There his reputation had preceded him, so nobody asked him for permission or let him know what they were doing. After a while he saw this and took to making lightning raids on parishes to try and catch them out. It didn't make for good relations. In one parish, he forbade the parish priest to build a series of projects, mostly in the field of education. The priest ignored him and went ahead anyway. But, at the opening ceremony, the archbishop arrived and happily took credit for it all!

My priority was to move away from schools and into local churches. Using the school as the venue for Mass reinforced the impression that the Christian faith was for children, and it made teachers feel that perhaps we were still in charge of the schools. I found that when I engaged with people, listened to them as well as speaking, things happened. In 1979, eight churches were built by the people: they chose the site, gathered the materials and built them with their own hands, using their own skills. These churches were simple and basic, but they could be repaired or replaced by the people using their own resources. And, more importantly, it gave people a sense of ownership; they could truly say, 'This is our church.' They could not have said that if I

had raised money in Europe and put up a concrete block building, with a galvanized iron roof and steel window frames, and maintenance of such a building would have been beyond them. I was learning that there is a world of difference between working *for* people as the man in charge, and working *with* people as an equal partner. If the latter relationship is in play, there is almost nothing that cannot be done.

In the mission itself, I found that relationships were not good. There was a mentality of dependence and helplessness among people. It was as if they were saying, 'I have a problem; what are you doing about it?' People liked to take you on a guilt trip. There was lots of passive aggression, as when people would express agreement with everything you said, but with no follow up. The chairman of the local church council - a Methodist with eleven wives - how did that happen? - said to me at our first meeting, 'We'll promise you anything, but we'll do nothing.' He was right. I often asked myself what was at the root of it, and learned - very slowly - that, quite often, what missionaries saw as service, the people saw as control, and therefore resented. But that realization came later.

The joys of air travel

I needed a new four-by-four and had arranged with the diocese to buy one in South Africa where they were half the Zambian price. Two other missionaries were doing the same thing, so we decided to fly south together. We went to the airport in Livingstone at the right time, but

no plane appeared and no one knew why. We returned the next day – the same again. We returned the following day and listened to a harried and hassled Zambia Airways ground staff member on the phone trying to get information about what was happening. He was told that the plane had left Lusaka but they didn't know where it was. After waiting a few hours – waiting was a large part of life – we were told a plane was coming. It flew in low over the runway, but then pulled up and disappeared off over the horizon, not to be seen again.

Then, out of the blue, another plane appeared which, it seems, no one had been expecting. It was an Air Botswana flight to Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. That wasn't where we wanted to go, but at least it would bring us a step closer, so we decided to take it. But matters were not so simple; it was full. An African solution to an African problem was found. Parents on the flight were asked to make room for us by taking their children on their lap – too bad about IATA rules! We were given seats.

The flight had been described to us as Air Botswana but I noticed that the plane bore no markings, so I asked a hostess to whom it belonged. 'Royal Swazi,' came the reply. Then the pilot welcomed us aboard our flight to Selebi Phikwe. Where? We had never heard of it. We were told that it was a re-fuelling stop in the Kalahari Desert. But, after a while, we were told that we were not going there after all, but straight to Gaborone. And so we did. By the time we arrived, the airport was closed. We walked into a deserted terminal – what about the control

tower; had there been anyone in it? – and wandered around, not knowing what to do. I amused myself by going to immigration where the rubber stamps lay on a desk, and stamped myself in and out of the country.

An Irish-looking face appeared. It was a man from Aer Lingus, seconded to Air Botswana, and we told him our tale of woe. He exploded, telling us that he was fed up with Zambia Airways dumping passengers in the middle of nowhere, and expecting someone else to deal with them and honour their tickets. So he said he would hire a private plane for us and send the bill to Zambia Airways. That suited us just fine. He was preparing to do that when another plane arrived, also unexpectedly. It had seats to spare and was happy to accommodate us, so we finally made it to South Africa, three days late. I thought back to the company slogan I had seen in Livingstone: ‘Zambia Airways – we’ll show the world how good an airline can be!’

On another occasion, I was returning home on leave and had booked my tickets through Eagle Travel, a subsidiary of Zambia Airways. I was to fly to Nairobi, and there catch an El Al flight to Tel Aviv as I wanted to visit the Christian holy places. But when I went to the El Al office in Nairobi I discovered that the weekly flight to Tel Aviv had left the day before. The staff there was sympathetic but could do nothing. The travel agent had written the wrong dates on the tickets. Fortunately, the Spiritan community in Nairobi were hospitable and gave me accommodation for the week.

Much later, in January 1991, I had booked a Zambia Airways flight from Lusaka to Frankfurt and a connecting flight to London. It didn't look promising. The plane belonged to Mozambican Airlines, the crew was from Royal Jordanian Airlines, and we were told we'd be going to Rome instead. Then we were told we were going to Rome only for re-fuelling before going on to Frankfurt. Some time after take-off, we were told that President Kaunda was on board and so the plane was being diverted to Oslo to enable him to attend the funeral of the King Olav V of Norway. (Norway was a major aid donor to Zambia.) We would not be stopping at Rome and would return to Frankfurt after Oslo. And so it was. We actually flew over Frankfurt airport on our way to Oslo where we landed at a military base outside the city. By the time we returned to Frankfurt our connecting flight was long gone and our luggage was lost. Had it been unloaded in Oslo? I don't know. We were given seats aboard a Lufthansa flight to Heathrow. On arrival, parents with small children had no warm clothes to put on them as they were in the baggage, and the children were cold and crying. We were directed to a customs office to fill in a declaration about our baggage. It was at the end of a long corridor, and a friendly and warm-hearted British customs officer greeted the group as it approached, saying, 'You must be from a Zambia Airways flight. You have that shell-shocked look about you!'

Poor Zambia Airways! It could have been alright, if it had not had to suffer constant political interference. It had four planes, and twelve staff with the rank of general

manager. It was a place of cronyism where sons and daughters of the high and mighty could get safe, well-paid jobs with free foreign travel thrown in. On one occasion a Boeing 707 was sent empty from Lusaka to Mauritius to pick up the wife of a member of the Central Committee of UNIP. One of the *Wabenzi* (the Mercedes tribe), she had been so busy shopping that she never noticed the time passing and had missed her flight home, so the plane was sent back again to collect her. And Rome airport had barred Zambia Airways from landing because of unpaid fuel bills. On its final flight before the airline collapsed in debt, only thirteen people out of about 250 on a DC10 had paid for their ticket.

But at least it was better than the Air Force. Zambia had bought a squadron of Mig fighters from the Soviet Union, and an officer recounted their fate to me. One crashed, killing the pilot, who had taken it up while drunk. Another was wrecked when the pilot, bringing it in to land, forgot to lower the landing gear. Another crashed because the pilot had forgotten to check the fuel and it ran out. And so on it went. I don't remember the rest, but all were destroyed. What a waste of money for a poor country!

Gratitude and happiness

I was returning to the mission one evening after a long day visiting a distant church. I was tired, sweaty, hungry, and anxious to get back home for a shower and something to eat. As I drove along I saw a woman standing on the side of the road waving for a lift. In a

country where transport of any kind scarcely existed in rural areas, you always gave a lift when possible. I stopped and waited for her to climb in. She made no move, but stayed there at the roadside looking vaguely at the car.

I became irritated, wondering why she wouldn't get in. I opened the door - still no move. 'What's wrong with her?' I thought. 'She asks for a lift, and when she's offered it, she just stands there.' I think my mind turned to the remark of Joxer in *Juno and the Paycock*, 'The vagaries of the female is well knowen.'

Regretting that I had ever bothered to stop, I climbed out and went round to ask her what the problem was. Before I spoke a word, I saw it. She was blind and had been afraid to step forward not knowing where the car was. As if that wasn't enough, she was also a leper and had no fingers to lift her bags or open the door. She had no toes either, and so could only shuffle forward. Feeling ashamed of my impatience and glad that I hadn't said anything, I greeted her with the lengthy process of handclaps and shakes and enquiries about the health of relatives. In Africa, where there's no greeting, there's no meeting.

I helped her into the four-by-four. It was difficult for her, and I discovered that it was her first time in a vehicle. We got into conversation, and she struck me as being one of the happiest people I had ever met. She poured out joy like a fountain, contented with the world and delighted at her good luck in being saved a walk. I

asked her about her family, and she went through them, one by one. She had had four children, and ended each one's story by saying, 'And s/he died.' All of them were dead. I wondered how much suffering one human being could take. She also told me about her grandchildren and considered them her greatest blessing. She was a glad and grateful woman.

'How can she be so happy?' I thought, almost resenting her. If I were in her place I would have been full of self-pity, with a chip on my shoulder against the world for my misfortunes. I spent the next two weeks or so ruminating about her before I came to understand that gratitude is not the result of happiness, but happiness is the result of gratitude. Thank you, Leper Lady, for your wordless lesson.

Buying and selling

In Sichili, as in many rural missions, there were few, if any, local shops, and those that were there had great difficulty in keeping going. The government had imposed price controls, and these made it uneconomic for a rural shop-keeper to stay in business. He could not cover the cost of transport which was heavy. (In a mission it was usually the biggest item of expenditure.) If a local trader charged a price which covered his costs and have him even a modest profit, he could be charged in court, and some were fined and/or jailed. In Zambia, with a Marxist-Leninist government, profit was a bad word, seen as inherently exploitative. As a result, basic necessities such as sugar, salt, soap, mealie meal (made

from maize, it is the staple food), cooking oil and matches were commonly unavailable. Some friars responded to this by buying those goods when they went to town and then selling them at cost price to the people, who were very glad to get them.

But there were many ambiguities in the situation and we often queried our involvement in it. The case for it was clear enough; it met a need. But business operates to a different dynamic from pastoral affairs. The priest-parishioner relationship is very different from the shopkeeper-customer one, and even more from the creditor-debtor. A simple example is that if a person bought goods on credit, as many did, or borrowed money, and did not have the means of re-paying, he or she might avoid Mass because of not wanting to meet the priest. The fact of our doing it also made it impossible for a local businessman to start up, as he could not compete with our non-profit system. Neither did he have the advantage of radio contact with the towns, and the capacity to import necessary spare parts to keep vehicles on the road. Most friars were unwilling to press the point when bills and loans went unpaid. That created the image that we were a soft touch (we were!), and some exploited it. The above also applied to the absence in rural areas of public transport, road haulage, or banking services. In the latter case, when the government changed the currency notes, as it did on several occasions, the people looked to the friars to be a de facto bank exchanging old notes for new. All this could take up a lot of time and that meant less time for pastoral work.

I remember seriously considering putting up a notice in Sichili stating that this was a mission and not a shop, a bank, a bus service, a haulage company, etc. But should we opt out of it all and just look after ourselves? The situation was ambiguous, and we all knew it and were ambivalent about it. On visiting outstations, we would be reminded of that, when the first question on the arrival of the priest was often, ‘Mu lu shimbelzingi?’ (What have you brought us?) and it wasn’t Mass or the sacraments that people were talking about. I kept out of it, and, on balance, I think it was the better course of action.

Nanga

I went to visit a Rural Reconstruction Camp at a place called Nanga. These camps were a well-meaning attempt to improve agriculture. They were part of the national service required of secondary school leavers. These first had six months' military training, followed by eight months in an RR camp, learning about agriculture. The idea was borrowed from the agricultural communes of the People's Liberation Army of China. The theory was that the well-educated would learn about farming and take away its image of being the work of the uneducated and the ignorant. The camps would be self-sufficient and produce a surplus for processing industries. They would help to slow the drift of the rural young to the towns, promote a cash economy in rural areas, diversify agriculture by introducing new crops including cash crops, equalize rural-urban incomes, and improve the general level of agriculture in their areas by the introduction of new techniques. The unreality of this was

expressed in the Latin (!) inscription on the cap-badge of RR members: *Sudor et Sanguinis pro Patria*. (*Blood and Sweat for the Fatherland* - with a misspelling: it should have been *Sanguis*.)

The reality was something else. The programme was compulsory and was seen by young school leavers as something to be endured. City youngsters, in particular, disliked it. Since it was part of national service, it was under military discipline that could range from easy-going permissiveness to outright brutality. For the most part, officers had no interest in it; they were military men uninterested in agriculture. A joke went the rounds about the air force squadron leader who commanded a flight of broilers - the military men were not amused. Another problem was that many of the girls went home pregnant and infected with sexually transmitted diseases. When I visited Nanga, they told me there were 53 young women in the camp. I expressed surprise, as I had not noticed many. I was told that there were now only six. 'What happened to the others?' I asked. 'We impregnated them', was the reply.

Standards of sanitation dropped to a low level, with some of the trainees dying of typhus. Since some of these were the sons and daughters of influential people, their deaths accelerated a review of the scheme. After some eight years, the idea was dropped, though, for PR purposes, it was said to have been merely suspended. In their time, the RR camps had failed to feed themselves; on the contrary, they were a drain on the rest of the economy. Their military discipline discouraged contact

with the local people; members were not taught how to maintain machinery; and with officers more often absent than present, there was no direction or management. It was less the failure of an idea than of its implementation.

One another visit to Nanga, the workers showed me the tracks of a lion which had wandered through the encampment the previous night. It looked like the real thing, although it is possible to make a passable imitation of a lion pug by clenching a fist and pressing it into the sand; but I think it was the real thing. I'd say it had been hungry, because game had been nearly all killed by poachers, either by shooting or snaring. The workers also, without much fuss, showed me the dead body of one of their number, and explained that he was a thief and had been killed by lightning. I understood them to mean that he was killed by lightning *because* he had been a thief. I asked what the evidence for the lightning was, and they pointed to a circular depression in the skin of his forehead, about 3 cm in diameter, and perhaps no more than 3-4 mm deep. There were no signs of burning to his body. Just the mark on the forehead, no more. I'm no detective, more Clouseau than Poirot, but a single strong blow with a hammer seemed to me a more likely explanation. He was buried quietly and that was the end of the matter. No post-mortem.

On the way to Nanga I had to pass through a tsetse control barrier. Tsetse flies are carriers of sleeping sickness which can kill humans or, more commonly, animals. A simple barrier was placed across the road, and you had to stop for an inspection of your vehicle so

that you wouldn't carry flies from an infected to a non-infected area. The vehicle would be sprayed, and then you would be free to go. Whether the tsetse flies would cooperate with this procedure was doubtful. But the official greeted and welcomed me like a long-lost friend, explained that he had run out of fly spray, but he still walked around my four-by-four waving the empty aerosol can in his hand, saying, 'Shiiiiish, shiiiiish, shiiiiish,' in imitation of a spray. Even the tsetse flies must have been laughing!

Snapshots from Sichili

It was while I was in Sichili that Pope Paul VI died, on 6 August 1978. I held him in great esteem and affection. He had been pope at a difficult time, as transitions always are. I think he was faithful to his vision of the church. His successor, John Paul I, lasted only thirty-three days, too short a time to make an impact. With no disrespect, I had an impression that he was perhaps a lightweight, and wondered why, before electing him, the cardinals had not done their homework better with regard to his health problems. Then Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope John Paul II on 16 October 1978, the feast of the Polish Saint Jadwiga. He was young, only fifty-eight. He looked like a man who represented hope; he was a man's man. Where Paul VI could seem hesitant and uncertain – he was sometimes called Pope Hamlet – this man seemed confident and assured - a good start.

I was not very long in Sichili when I had to go to Livingstone for a driving test. I already had Irish and New Zealand licenses and had hoped the Zambian authorities might accept them and simply issue me with a license - all three countries drive on the left. But I was told I had to do the tests, oral and written. When I had finished the driving, the examiner told me my driving was very good, so I was feeling hopeful. Then came the oral test; after it he told me I had failed; I had given the wrong answers to several questions. One was why a driver should always look under his car before starting it. I had no idea why; the idea was daft, but I did my best and said you should do it in case a child had crawled underneath. The examiner said no; it was in case *a dog* had gone underneath. He had also asked me what I would do if my car broke down on a railway level crossing with a train coming. I said I would get out of it and move away. He said no; I should put the car in reverse gear and push it off the track. I knew that was impossible; no one could do it, but I kept quiet. And, when he asked me the meaning of the sign which depicted a boy and girl with books in their hands, I said it meant that you might encounter school-children. He said no; it didn't matter whether the children were going to school or not. He told me I would have to come back and try again. Since that would involve another round trip of 560 km, mostly on bumpy dirt roads, I was not too happy. But I had to put up with it, because any protest would likely make matters worse for myself on my return. So, two weeks later, I came back and he asked me again the questions I had failed. I gave him the answers he wanted, no matter how silly they were, and I

passed! I suspect that the examiner may have been holding out for a bribe and just gave up when he saw he wasn't going to get one. In Zambia, I was only very occasionally asked for a bribe, indirectly and most discreetly, by public officials. I always refused and still got the service I was looking for. I think they respected me for refusing. It disappointed me that a good number of Europeans did not wait to be asked, but took the initiative in offering the bribe first. They sometimes tried to justify this by saying it was only "a gift", and then they were often the first to complain about Africa's corruption!

On my first visit to a place called Mulauli – the name means Witch-finder - I lost my way. Or rather I think I was helped to do so by a man to whom I gave a lift. I think he misdirected me to go to the place he wanted to reach; he disappeared immediately after I dropped him off, and villagers told me I was a long way from Mulauli and actually going further away. There was nothing I could do but retrace my tracks and try again. I got there alright, but then ran out of petrol on my way back to the mission because of the long detour. Fortunately I had had the presence of mind not to run the tank dry, but to switch off the engine before that happened. But I was still a long way from anywhere, and the afternoon was turning towards evening. I prayed a kind of blackmailing prayer to God, roughly along the lines of, 'Here I am, God, working my ass off for you, and now I'm in a mess. Are you going to help me out or not?' After waiting no more than a few minutes, I heard the unmistakable sound of an approaching vehicle. It came

in to sight and I recognized a store-keeper whom I had helped at the mission with fuel when he was stuck. He stopped, I told him my story, and, without hesitation, he offered me the spare jerry can he carried with him! Thank you, store-keeper, and thank you, God, as well. And sorry for the telling off!

Mulauli was difficult to reach but was always proved eventful. On another occasion, I had decided to spend a few days there and had brought a tent and camping equipment with me. I wanted to spend time training the local church council. But, shortly after arriving, a man brought his son and showed him to me as if to say, ‘You have everything, you know everything, you can do everything, so fix him up!’ What was the problem? The boy, about twelve years old, walked like a moving statue; in fact, he couldn’t walk without being helped. When I shook his hand, the flesh was hard, and he looked really unhealthy. I had no idea what was the matter with him, but it was clear to me that he was ill, and maybe seriously. I was reluctant to abandon my project before it had even begun, but felt I had no choice. I packed up everything, turned round and headed back for the mission. I brought him to the hospital, and there the doctor, an Italian woman called Maria Elena Pesaresi told me he was suffering from blood poisoning, perhaps from an infected cut in a foot - most children went barefoot. She said that, if I had delayed, the boy would probably have died. That kind of incident was not uncommon, and the other missionaries had similar experiences. One of the friars was bringing a pregnant woman to hospital when she gave birth on the way, and

the accompanying local midwife cut the umbilical cord with an axe, and then “sterilized” the cut by smearing it with cow dung! How to drive was often difficult to decide. Should you drive as fast as you could on bumpy roads, or slow down, with less discomfort to the patient, and take more time? You did whatever seemed best in the situation. The “ambulance” was a four-by-four pick-up truck with the patient lying in the back, on a mattress or reed mat.

Once I was travelling to Mulauli across a large, open plain. Feeling hungry, I stopped for something to eat. Some distance away was a man herding cattle; he came over to say hello. I was surprised that he spoke English so well, and, as we got into conversation over our now shared lunch, I asked where he had learned it. He told me he had been in the British Navy during World War II, and had served on ships of the Murmansk convoys, bringing supplies to the Soviet Union following the Nazi invasion. As we sat under the baking sun he told me of how, apart from attacks by German submarines or surface vessels, the sailors' greatest fear was that the weight of ice encrusted on the rigging would make the ships top-heavy and capsize them. There was something surreal about this experience: the initial picture of the man herding cattle on the plain was part of the European's image of Africa; but the reality was of something else. That bizarre mixture of old and new, African and European, rural calm and modern warfare, combined to add up to an *Alice in Wonderland* zaniness. Life in Africa was often surreal.

I was driving north from Sichili to the Mongu-Kaoma road when I saw a sight that greatly puzzled me. On my right, about fifty metres from the road into the bush, I saw the remains of a bus, and then another, and another, and another. I got out to have a look. There were perhaps twenty of them, obviously old. They had been burned many times in grass fires and were caked with rust. What were they doing there? How had they got there? The road was blocked in a number of places by fallen trees, but that was a minor obstacle. The real difficulty was that the road was just a track in soft, fine sand. In some places it would have been firm enough to take the weight of a bus, but in others I don't think it would have been possible. But how else could they have got there? There was no one in the area to ask, and those further afield whom I questioned didn't know.

I stopped to eat beside the road near a place called Machile. As I was eating, an eagle, or perhaps it was a vulture, I'm not sure, swooped down close to me and landed. I was surprised, but stood and watched. It began to flap its wings in an odd way, bringing them round in front of its body, swinging them against something. It took me a moment or two to see what it was – a snake. The bird was slapping it in the head with the back of its wings, seemingly determined to provoke it to anger. The snake struck, but bit only feathers. The bird kept this up until the snake was really angry and made a determined drive at it. This was what the bird wanted; it reached out, caught the back of the snake's neck in its beak, and flew off. It went high in the sky, the snake dangling beneath it, helpless. Then it dropped the snake, in a fall which

would surely have killed it, and, out of my line of vision, presumably tucked in to dinner.

Two men called to the mission one day to ask if I would bring the body of a dead relative of theirs home from the hospital mortuary. Requests of this sort were not uncommon, especially if the distance was long. In rural areas, transport was somewhere between scarce and non-existent other than at the mission, so I agreed to go. We went to the mortuary and they loaded the coffin onto the back of my four-by-four pick-up. Off we went, following a track which was barely recognizable as such; it had not been used by a vehicle for a very long time, only by pedestrians. It was about the month of June; the rains had ended in March so the grass would be a metre high in most places and very dry. As I drove along I was “harvesting” a fine crop of grass seeds on the grill of the vehicle and was watching the temperature gauge rising, as the radiator became covered in seeds. I had to stop from time to time, remove the grill and brush the seeds away from the radiator, even though many had lodged between the cooling blades. After what seemed like a long time, we arrived at the village, and straightaway everyone began screaming and crying. People were doing things I had not seen before, nor since either: they were throwing dust in the air, and banging their heads off the walls of houses. Then suddenly it all stopped. I was wondering what was happening, when one of the two men came over to me looking very embarrassed. ‘What is it?’ I asked. ‘We brought the wrong body,’ he told me. It seems they had gone into the mortuary and taken the first coffin in front of them, without checking

it. There was another one behind the door which they had not noticed – it was theirs. So there was nothing for it but to repeat the journey all over again, which I wasn't thrilled by. When it was all over, the next job was to remove the radiator and clean it by whacking it off the surface of a river so as to drive the grass seeds back out and let it "breathe."

Along with Brother Dan O'Brien, a fellow Irish Capuchin, I had with me in Sichili a priest from the diocese of Rimini, in Italy, called Marzio Carlini. He spent about two years in Sichili and ten in Zambia altogether. He was a great companion, warm-hearted, kind, generous and loving. The people liked him very much. We camped together when visiting the out-stations and, on the occasion of his birthday, we were serenaded by Luvale drummers who kept us awake much of the night.

I met Marzio again in 1987 when he was back at home. I found him, and a confrère of his, as disappointed as I was with the direction in which the church was being led.

I was driving along a plain called Lingulyangulya - pronounce that if you can! – when I stopped at a village to talk to the headman about something. He called a boy to him, and said, 'Go and call a man, or a woman with intelligence - if you can find one!' Another day, I saw a man and woman fighting. He was drunk and took wild swings at her with his fist, but she saw them coming and ducked. She waited for her moment and then stretched

him out flat with a punch. If I had intervened, the likely outcome is that they would both have turned on me! Visiting the hospital in Sichili, I saw a man lying on his stomach with a cage over his bottom to keep the bed-covers off it. When I asked him what had happened, he began to laugh. He went on to explain that he came home one evening, drunk as usual, and his wife decided it was time for direct action. She caught hold of him, pushed him down onto the fire and held him there for a while. Another man, with some embarrassment told me of his situation. He said his wife became fed up with his extra-marital affairs, so she waited until he came home drunk one evening, put him to bed, and then, when he was asleep, began to cut off his scrotum with a razor-blade. She was about half-way through when pain overcame the anaesthetic effect of the alcohol, and he woke up screaming and pushed her away. He had lost one testicle, but was relieved when Dr. Pesaresi assured him he could still function on one. And, like the other man, he thought it was funny!

Part of the mission complex included a large and beautiful grass-roofed hall. We used to hold dances there on Sunday evenings. One evening a fight broke out, and one young man threatened another with a knife. Fortunately nothing had come of it, but he had taken off and disappeared. I heard about it later, and thought about what I should do. Doing nothing didn't seem like a responsible option. I went to the young man's father, who said that his son was now a man and responsible for himself. Then I went to the village headman who said that the Party (UNIP, the sole political party) had taken

all power from the headmen and he could do nothing. I considered going to the police, but I knew what the likely answer would be. They would say they had no transport, so could I lend them a vehicle? If I gave them one, I might not see it again; if I did, it might be months later and with a lot of damage to it. So I tried the Party. They said the matter was most regrettable, but they were very busy with elections and nothing could be done until that was all over in a few weeks' time. I got the message. Nothing would be done.

Smoking *dagga* (cannabis) was not uncommon among young people. I remember a young man who, after smoking it, attacked his mother with an axe, breaking her jaw. When his father came to his wife's rescue, the boy killed him, and then tried climbing a paw-paw tree. Being made of soft fibrous material, it collapsed under his weight as any normal person would have known, and he then proceeded to set fire to his parents' house. When the effect of the cannabis wore off, and he realized what he had done, he went insane and was committed to Chainama Mental Hospital in Lusaka, where he remained.

One Christmas Day, just as Mass was ending, a vehicle pulled into the yard, and everyone rushed out of the church to see it. There was a man in the back, bound tightly; it seems he had killed his wife with an axe, and he was being brought to the police station at Mulobezi, about forty km away. I heard later that he received an eighteen month prison sentence, while a man who stole a

loaf of bread, a litre of milk and a blanket received twenty-four months.

I had a visit one day from a young South African mining engineer working for the De Beers mining company. He was going to prospect for diamonds near a place called Nawinda. He showed me a few samples of uncut diamonds; they looked like lumps of broken glass to me. A week or two later, he came back, as pale as a sheet and very stressed, with only one thought on his mind – getting out of the country as fast as possible. He told me that his camp had been attacked by South African air force planes and blasted off the face of the earth. Luckily, he and his team had been away from it at the time, and no one was hurt. It seems the South Africans had mistaken it for a SWAPO camp. While feeling sorry for the engineer, I thought it highly ironic that the South African air force should destroy a prospecting camp belonging to De Beers, the *crème de la crème* of South African mining!

The South African air force used to fly over the mission from time to time dropping leaflets intended for SWAPO guerrillas, though we rarely saw any of them. The leaflets focused on the comfortable life-style of the SWAPO leader, Sam Nujoma, who was living in exile, and spending much time at international conferences. In particular, they claimed he was having a high life, and asked the guerrillas whether it was as good for them – did they have cool beer and hot women in the bush?

Some weeks later I was visiting churches in that area, and saw the camp. It was a scary sight, especially to see the engine of a four-by-four shredded like a piece of paper and chunks strewn around the place. There was a water tower, too, which looked like a pepper canister. What chance would the human body have, I thought? One morning there, the people told me there had been a gun battle in Sesheke the previous night. I asked how they knew and they said they had heard it. Sesheke was about 80 km as the crow flies from the area, and I found it hard to believe that sound could travel so far especially through almost constant forest. I asked what they heard, and an old man imitated the sound of a machine gun. When I returned to the mission, I found that there had indeed been a gun battle there on that night. I felt uneasy at times when on the road, driving a green, military-looking Landrover, especially as South African ground forces in Zambia had said to one of the friars, Father Macartan, 'You needn't think the Red Cross on the roof of your Landrover will save you.' The nearest I ever came to feeling under threat in Zambia was at that time: when I went into a village one day, the headman, an elderly man called Captain, brandished a spear at me, undecided whether to throw it, but relaxed when I greeted him in Silozi and explained who I was.

Others were not so lucky, and, returning to Sichili from Livingstone one day, I met a long stream of refugees from Sesheke carrying their possessions on their heads, wheeling babies or the elderly in barrows, and leading their children by the hand, lining the roads as they fled from another battle there. And then there was a family of

shopkeepers near Sioma who owned a green Landrover and whose house was bombed by the South African air force, killing three of their children.

The first of several Polish diocesan priests came to help in the diocese. Father Stan Siwiec, he made a big impression with his prayerfulness and commitment to work. He was followed by others, not all of whom were as impressive. One thing became clear after a while, which was that, for many of them, there was only one way to do anything, and that was the Polish way. And it seemed to be like that at the top, too.

There was a general election while I was in Sichili. Zambia was a one-party state along Leninist lines since 1973. Only members of the ruling party, UNIP (United National Independence Party), could stand. The four local candidates had no transport, so they asked me if I wouldn't mind driving them around the area on their campaign. No. Could they just come with me wherever I went on my visits to the churches? No. Frosty feelings, but too bad. One of the candidates told me confidentially, 'H.E. has chosen me for this seat.' What was he talking about? The only H.E. I knew about was high explosive. Oh! His Excellency, of course - the president. 'He has *chosen* you?' The candidate just smiled and said no more; he was elected. In the presidential contest at the same time, there were also four candidates. The incumbent president, Kenneth Kaunda (KK), changed the rules so as to disqualify the other three, and, for good measure, put them under house arrest for three weeks before the vote. Zambians

understood well what was going on; one said to me with grim humour, ‘One man, one vote; what could be more democratic than that?’ During all his years in office, the Western media had bestowed on KK the persona of a gentle, liberal Christian democrat. What was their agenda? I think it may have been that they wanted to present an issue in simple, good guy/bad guy terms, angels against devils. By making KK the angel, it was easier to present apartheid South Africa as the devil.

A curfew was imposed after a series of Rhodesian air-raids just before the elections. Casualties were heavy. A doctor told me that she was in Lusaka when three hundred men were brought into the University Teaching Hospital with burns over ninety per cent of their bodies after one raid. At the time there happened to be an international conference in Lusaka on medical responses to mass emergencies. The attending doctors and nurses went to assist the wounded, but then the planes returned and bombed them, too. All that happened a long way from Sichili. For us, curfew meant nothing, as people didn’t go out at night anyway.

The party and the church

The party, UNIP, was always known simply as the Party, with an upper-case P like the C in Church. It represented the people, so, by definition, any other party was anti-people. Outside the party there was no revolution; the party was not accountable to anyone but itself; it was united around one leader, Kenneth Kaunda (KK), who led it from 1958 until 1992. It found its

theoretical base in *Das Kapital*, and in Kaunda's *Principles of Zambian Humanism*, the legitimate interpretation of which was entrusted to the guardians of orthodoxy, the ideologists, grand inquisitors of the Leninist citadel of power.

The party had its heroes and martyrs, the revolutionaries who died in the struggle for independence. It had its annual festivals such as May Day, and it used ceremonial and ritual to cement loyalty to itself. It had its rites of initiation, such as entry into the party's Youth League. It placed a high premium on conformity and compliance. Criticism was equated with disloyalty, uniformity was seen as the guardian of unity, and passivity preferred to active, thinking minds. For the party, "authority" and "power" were synonyms. To question or challenge the authority (i.e. power) of the party was the sin against the Holy Spirit. Anything else might be forgiven, but not that.

The result was a loss of personal freedom and initiative. The system operated on collective non-responsibility. No individual was responsible for anything. Since decisions were made collectively within the framework of an ideological strait-jacket, and new ideas were not welcome - quite the contrary - issues were not examined on their merits, but only by reference to what "authority", namely, the party and its government, (discreetly known as PIG, perhaps after Napoleon of *Animal Farm*!) had previously decided. Unquestioning acceptance of the party line was the sure sign of loyalty.

This could lead to farcical situations. Where the ideology was in conflict with the facts, the latter were suppressed and it was considered disloyal or subversive to draw attention to them. For example, where a rigid, centralized economic policy was driving the country into bankruptcy, the fact was simply denied. When the economic shambles had outrun the reserves of plausible deniability, a scapegoat was found, and the president had a fixed ritual of denunciation, ‘Colonialism, capitalism, Zionism, racism, fascism, imperialism, and the exploitation of man by man’, with the IMF and the World Bank occasionally added for good measure. When the conflict between ideology and reality was so great that it could no longer be denied, then the party responded with a mental flip in which a new line was promulgated, while affirming that there was perfect continuity between the old and the new. People were told that there had in fact been no change at all.

Party ideology was, on the surface, fully democratic, always referring to The People who, supposedly, were the source of power and the beneficiaries of the system. The reality, however, was that an authoritarian, hierarchical power structure held full control. An example of this was that the president was head of state, head of the party, head of government, chief of staff of the armed forces, and head of a holding company which controlled most of the country’s industry, mining, commerce and agricultural marketing, and he controlled the communications media. He held office as a result of elections in which he was the only candidate.

The country's parliament was a rubber stamp which did what it was told. From time to time the president would remind it that it had no decision-making authority. Its function was to implement party decisions and no more. Only party candidates could stand for elections and the results were decided, in some cases at least, before the election took place.

The country was officially styled a 'one-party participatory democracy'. In reality, people's participation was limited to saying yes to what the party had already decided in their name. The party was fond of pointing out human rights abuses outside the country's borders, and proclaiming its commitment to those rights at home. It was the 'Yes, of course, but...' type of commitment. For example: -

'Should there be freedom of expression?'

'Yes, of course, but...'

'But what?'

'But subject to public order and morality.'

'Who decides about public order and morality?'

'Well, the party, of course. Who else?'

The party did not accept that the best answer to criticism was an intelligent, well-articulated argument. It counted instead on its ability to ensure, either through control of the media or by silencing the critic through intimidation, that criticism would not be heard in the first place.

What was involved in this process was not simply political or even economic control. It was an attempt to

control people's minds through the manipulation of language. Words were voided of meaning, mere sounds made with the mouth. Perhaps the best example of this was the use, or rather the abuse, of the term 'The People'. Everything was done in the name of 'The People'. The phrase 'The People' was over-used to the extent that one no longer listened; the mind was numbed by boredom. The implied equation - the party is the people - fudged the fact that real power lay nowhere with the people, but with a self-perpetuating elite at the top, who lived in a closed circle immune to the ordinary pressures of life. When they said 'The People' they meant the party; and when they said the party they meant the president, and he was the subject of a personality cult.

In the end, the pretence became unsustainable. The point came when even those who professed to believe in the system could no longer stomach the lies, the hypocrisy, the sycophantic toadying, the empty sham of it all. The more power was concentrated in the hands of one person, the greater the impact of his errors of judgment. Nothing could be done about any government policy without political change, because everything was politicized, and everything depended on one man. He had no intention of changing anything of substance lest he risk losing control. As a result, the system ground down to immobility.

However, the situation had gone on for longer than it need have done, because the people had become accomplices in it. The people, in a referendum, had

abolished the need for future referenda in constitutional changes. They had also abolished the multi-party system in favour of a one-party system. For the sake of a quiet life, perhaps, the whole country had become involved in the lying and self-deception that were the indispensable props of the system. There were no prophets to speak a word of truth, to say openly what everyone knew to be true. Absolute power had corrupted the party, and the people had allowed fear to corrupt them. Dictatorships demand and depend on censorship, either the self-censorship of “prudence” (‘It might be wiser to say nothing’), or the censorship imposed by the power elite.

Marxism, despite its avowed atheism, has often been regarded as a substitute religion and in particular as a form of parasite on the Christian faith - a parasite, and a parody, too. For example, Marxism parodies the messianic element in Christianity by the hope it engenders in the future - after the next five year plan, the workers’ paradise; things will always be better in future, so don’t be distracted by the failings of the present. If Christianity had never existed, would Marxism have come into being? Probably not: a cancer cannot grow without a living organism as its host.

In Zambia, as elsewhere, the Marxist party appropriated to itself religious language, symbols, and concepts. For example, the party’s annual conference at a place called Mulungushi, came to be called the *Mulungushi Rock of Authority*, with the party’s decisions handed down with quasi-divine authority as from a political Mount Sinai. And those who fell afoul of the

party, but later grovelled their way back into favour, used to make what was in effect a public confession: they spoke of having “repented” and being “forgiven” by the president.

Clearly, it is not Christianity’s fault if Marxism steals some of its ideas, distorts them, and then uses them for its own purposes. But I find it unsettling that there is such similarity between the two systems of governance, the party’s and the church’s, that such mimicry becomes possible, plausible, and even, to an extent, persuasive. If one reads again the last few pages, substituting the word church for people, the Vatican for the party, and the pope for the president, it comes too close to the bone for comfort. The one-party state was a failed system; I don’t think a one-party church can be otherwise either.

Limulunga 1981-83

In December 1980, the regional superior of the Capuchins in Zambia asked me to go to Limulunga, on the edge of the Barotse Plain, to take charge of the postulancy there. This was a house of training for young men who had expressed a wish to join the order, but had not yet been admitted; it is the first stage of their “formation.” I have never liked that word: it suggests to me that those being “formed” are passive objects, whereas the reality is meant to be active and participatory. I also have never liked the noun *religious* for members of religious orders; it seems, implicitly, to insinuate the idea that people who are not members of

religious orders are not religious; I avoid it when possible.

Saint Lawrence's, Limulunga, had been a minor seminary, that is to say, a secondary school for boys with some interest in priesthood or religious life. It never fulfilled its hope. It was seen simply as a school, no more, and, in fifteen years, only one of its pupils joined the order. It was widely felt by the staff, and later admitted by some of the boys themselves, that few of them gave serious consideration to becoming a priest. A further weakness was that priests in parishes not uncommonly sent to it boys who had not reached the required academic level for entry or, in some cases, were not even Catholic. That undermined the work of the staff, which was itself too small, and compromised the process. I feel that the concept of a minor seminary is flawed; it implies a level of understanding and commitment which is not present, and cannot reasonably be expected to be present, at the age of twelve or thirteen, when boys go there. It was not a surprise that, in 1976, it closed as a seminary.

Limulunga was a place of great natural beauty, often with wonderful sunsets that leave the sky a deep, glowing red. The Barotse Plain stretched east-west for about one hundred km, and north-south for perhaps two hundred. It is very flat, with rich, black soil and grazes large numbers of cattle, many of them belonging to the *Litunga*, the chief of the Lozi people. Towards the end of the rainy season, usually in March, often on Good Friday, the chief moves from his palace on the plain at

Lialui, to his winter palace at Limulunga. This is necessitated by the flooding of the plain as the Zambezi bursts its banks and spreads out over the countryside. This is a ceremonial occasion as well, and hundreds of canoes accompany the large barges of the chief and his wife and retinue as they are paddled by ndunas and court officials. It's a relaxed and happy occasion, called in Silozi the *Kuomboka* (meaning, to come out of the water).

When the friars met in Lusaka at the end of 1978 for our first chapter, we took the decision to “implant” the order in Zambia. It wasn't in fact a new decision but the re-activation of a policy that had been in place for decades. In the late 1940's, a pre-seminary had been set up at Lukulu, from which a small number of men went to Chishawasha seminary in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to prepare to be diocesan priests; none was ordained. And the first Zambian Capuchin novice, Barnabas Malundu, had been received into the novitiate in Tanzania in 1974.

In addition to being asked to be director of postulants, I was appointed promoter of vocations (“head-hunter”), parish priest, guardian, director of the simply professed friars, chaplain to the Holy Cross Sisters' convent in Malengwa, and asked to write a history of the mission for its fiftieth anniversary in 1981. It was a busy time but - mostly - a happy one. The work of vocations' promotion involved a great deal of correspondence. I had twenty to twenty-five files of letters, with all the typing done on a small Olivetti portable manual typewriter.

Ribbons for typewriters were unavailable, so, when they dried, I re-inked them with endorsing ink, which, for some reason, was available. You learned to adapt.

There were nine postulants in that first year. They came from all parts of Zambia, from Malawi, and from the Caprivi Strip in Namibia. English was the language used as it was the only one we had in common, as well as being the first official language of the country, and the language of instruction in educational institutions. I found the postulants pleasant and easy to get on with, and I think they fitted well together as a group despite differences of tribe and language.

But being nice guys did not mean they had a vocation. Had they had any kind of conversion experience? Had they been involved in their parish of origin? Had they a sense of service to people? What level of knowledge of the Catholic faith did they have? Motivation is always difficult to discern. A young man who came to us was given a roof over his head, food on the table, an education, with the prospect of more to come, including travel and education overseas, if he had the ability. His basic needs would be met, and health care provided. That was more - in many cases much more - than they could have hoped for in ordinary life. At that time unemployment in Zambia was sky high, village life was stagnant and suffocating for a young person with energy. Living conditions everywhere were poor; for example, only 6% of homes in Zambia had electricity at the time. So, were they there for the God of gifts or for the gifts of God? Only time would tell. I was to learn by hard

experience that some were able to live a double life, being models of good conduct until the day after their final profession or ordination, and then a new, different, and altogether unappealing person would appear. It was a Jekyll-and-Hyde situation.

Father Godfrey Sinvula, a native of the Caprivi Strip, was in Limulunga, as a priest in the parish. I asked him to do the work of parish priest; he agreed to do so, and did it very well; he was committed and hard working. Brother Xavier Cox looked after the running of the household. With a community of thirteen, we had a budget of K13,000, and average of K1,000 per person per year. The weekly shopping for the community usually cost under K100. (On a different note, the value of the Zambian currency, the kwacha, deteriorated so quickly that, fifteen years later, the cost of posting a letter to Europe would be K1,500.) Water supply was a more or less permanent problem, with a pump delivering water of questionable quality erratically from a pond in the *mukulo*, the edge of the plain. It was out of operation for one seven month period, and we had to draw a drum of water daily from Malengwa, about 12 km away, and that drum had to meet all the needs of the household. It was a time when spare parts of any kind were almost impossible to obtain - "spare parts" was a constant topic of conversation – and a mechanic who "lubricated" the engine with cutting compound (grinding paste) didn't help either! But, somehow or other, we managed most of the time, and, when we didn't, we put up with it. In addition to Godfrey and Xavier, there was a friar in first vows, Patrick Chinyama.

Xavier and I, with occasional help from others, taught the young men about the bible, prayer, and the life and ideals of Saint Francis. They were given catechesis on Mass and the sacraments, and learned how to say the *Divine Office* (the breviary), the official prayer book of the church. They also engaged in manual work such as gardening, and had time off for personal interests. It wasn't ideal, but we felt it was the best we could do in the circumstances.

As a newcomer to formation work, without training, I read official documents of the church and the order about the topic. Broadly speaking, these laid down general principles, mostly common sense, and left it up to people to apply them in the local situation as they felt best. On some occasions, I was able to travel and compare notes with the staff of religious houses of study and seminaries in Zambia and elsewhere in Southern Africa. I saw formation as a partnership of four: the young men in formation; formation staff; the ordinary friars; and the superiors of the order. Each had a part to play; and, if the partnership worked, it created an environment which was positive and up-building.

To my disappointment the partnership didn't work well. The least problematic area was the young men; they were OK. Despite the cultural differences between Irish and African, where problems might have been anticipated, we got on well. As far as formation staff was concerned, we were too few in number, had no training, and no planning or provision was being made for it, despite a chapter decision to that effect. The ordinary

friars I did not find very supportive: I think they wanted the finished product delivered to their door ready to begin work, but without sharing in bringing that about. Most did not reply to letters asking for a reference for a candidate from their parish; some sent candidates without making a background check.

But the biggest problem for me was from my own Capuchins superiors. The regional superior had laid down some policies on formation: he specified that I would have no decision-making authority in it; it rested with him alone. That was difficult but not impossible to live with; but, having reserved decisions to himself, he would then neither make them, nor, if he did, communicate them. This meant that I had responsibility without authority, and he had authority without responsibility. He further said that I should make sure to have some candidates going through the system each year, and I should not examine their motivation too closely. I saw motivation as being the heart of the matter, and felt that this was asking for trouble; and we did indeed get it.

I believed those policies needed to be changed, that we were getting off to a bad start, and that this would create unnecessary and avoidable difficulties for those in formation, both staff and students alike, in the years to come. A further problem compounding the above was the lack of communication. The regional superior didn't answer letters, whether from me, from the community, or from the Formation Council, a body set up to bring a wider range of opinions to bear on the process. If we

recommended that a particular postulant not be allowed to continue because we thought him unsuitable, we would not receive a reply, and we did not have the authority to act on our own. That person could go on to do damage to the rest of the student body. When I called on him personally to discuss problems he said he would need time to think about them, and usually that was the last I would hear of the matter.

There was a bizarre interlude when a definator general, that is, a member of the general council of the order, came to conduct a visitation (a kind of inspection) of the order in Zambia. When I met him, he told me he had a request to make of me on behalf of the Minister General of the order. It was that I would use my influence with the regional superior to ask him to please reply to correspondence from him (the General). The General had written to him many times to ask for progress reports on the union between the Irish and New Jersey friars in Zambia in a Vice-Province. This had been agreed at the chapter in 1978 but had scarcely moved since then. The regional superior didn't like the idea and so he did nothing; it was his way of stalling things. In reply, I had to say that I had no influence with the man and that my correspondence went unanswered like everyone else's.

The regional superior had said on a number of occasions that he did not accept Vatican II, believing that its decisions had been manipulated by a liberal minority imposing their will on the majority. He added that he believed the changes in the liturgy made by the Council were undertaken to placate Protestants.

Looking back on it, I wonder why it took me so long to see what was staring me in the face, namely, that the superiors, despite statements to the contrary, were into the numbers game, and not concerned about the quality of the candidates going through the system. I was to discover, through contact with other formation personnel, that this was the case throughout Southern Africa. One seminary rector of twenty years' standing told me that, in his time, no bishop had ever acted on a recommendation from the seminary staff that a particular student be sent away as unsuitable. The rector of a seminary in another country had the same experience. I remember attending an ordination when, in accordance with the ritual, the ordaining bishop asked the question, 'Has this man been recommended for ordination by those responsible for his formation?' The answer given was yes. It was not true, and the bishop knew it wasn't. The truth was that those responsible for his formation had recommended that he not be ordained, and had communicated that to the bishop.

These decisions had unfortunate consequences: one was that the people, delighted when one of their own was being ordained, and who put all their whole heart and soul into making the ordination a joyful community celebration, were let down and hurt when scandals would arise not long afterwards. Then questions would be asked about the seminary: 'Why was this man ordained? Why didn't they see these problems? What standards have they?' etc. The seminaries got the blame, or were scape-goated, for problems which were not of their making. I could not help thinking of all this in

recent times, when, following the apostolic visitation of the church in Ireland because of the child sex abuse scandals, the staff of the Irish college in Rome were summarily dismissed and replaced; it seemed like similar scape-goating by somebody.

A particular problem

From the beginning we had had problems where accusations were made that some postulants had children at home before coming to the order. The regional superior had laid down as policy that the fact of an applicant being the father of a child did not necessarily make him unsuitable for admission to the postulancy. To me, this raised questions of justice vis-à-vis the mother and the child, as well as potentially creating psychological problems for the father, and creating ambiguity about a commitment to celibacy. In short, it was inviting trouble.

The formation council discussed the matter twice, and made recommendations to the regional superior and his council. No reply or acknowledgement was received. In one particular case, a young man was recommended by his parish priest, a Capuchin. When the parish priest wrote the recommendation, he knew that the young man was said to be the father of a child, but said nothing about it. I asked the regional superior for permission to investigate the matter, but was instructed to make no enquiries. I tried many times to persuade him to allow enquiries to be made, but he refused. He went on to state that even if it was perfectly clear and beyond doubt that

the young man had a child, that was not an obstacle to his joining the order. He laid that down as a policy to be followed in future cases, and repeated this position several times. I appealed to the provincial for a ruling on the matter. He asked the regional superior to discuss the matter with his council and to formulate a joint policy on the question, rather than formulate a policy by himself. The regular superior did not do this, and his policy remained in place.

I found this demoralizing. I felt it didn't have to be like that; we could do things much better if we got our act together. I worked through the channels of the order and the church to try to have a coherent formation policy put in place and implemented. It was an exercise in frustration. I was to learn, not for the first or last time that the church's internal processes don't work well; indeed sometimes they just don't work.

Snapshots from Limulunga

Towards the end of my time in Limulunga, the bishop came for confirmation. By this time, I had already been given a date for my departure for Livingstone. My replacement, Father Noel Brennan, a Kilkenny man, who had been parish priest on the west bank of the Zambezi in Nalionwa, near Kalabo, had come to replace me. When the confirmation ceremony was over, the bishop asked if someone would bring him out onto the plain to enjoy the scenery. Noel was free, and so offered to take him. Out on the plain, they were both relaxed and enjoying themselves. Some distance away, Noel saw a

cattle herdsman whom he knew, so he drove over to say hello to him. A conversation ensued which went something like this: -

Herdsmen: I hear you're leaving Nalionwa.

Noel: That's right; I've been appointed to Limulunga. Father Owen is going to Livingstone, and I'm taking his place.

Bishop: What?!?

Noel: Is there a problem?

Bishop: There is indeed. I know nothing about this. It's the first I've heard of it.

It turned out that the regional superior and the bishop were not on speaking terms, and so he had not asked the bishop's agreement to the transfers, even though the bishop alone had the right to make them. Nor had he informed the bishop about them even after the event. Everybody knew before the bishop did. He was not pleased, and I couldn't blame him.

A local man came to me in considerable distress one day to say that he had been driving his pick-up from Mongu, about 12 km away, and had stopped to pick up a group of primary school girls walking home from school. It seems that the older girls picked on a younger one, telling her that the man was a witch, would kill her and eat parts of her body, in particular her heart, liver, and sexual organs. She believed them, most likely having heard that such things did in fact happen. She panicked, jumped out of the back and landed on her head, dying almost immediately. He was afraid that the

family would blame him, and quite possibly kill him, so he went into hiding for a day or two until things calmed down, and then went to see the parents and explained the matter.

Our community cook, a man I'll call Ngete, had three visitors at his house for a few days; they were distant relatives. When their visit came to an end – in Zambia visits tend to be of long duration – they took the bus to Mongu after breakfast. On the way, one of them became ill, and died. Then, a little later, the same thing happened to another. And, before very long, the third of his guests also died on the bus. By now, everyone had fled in terror, leaving only the driver with three dead bodies. He drove to Liwanika Hospital and called the police. They came, and sent a message to the relatives to come and pick up the bodies. There was no police investigation or inquest and the bodies were buried the following day. As far as I know that was the end of the affair. Ngete was understandably terrified that he would be blamed for their deaths, accused of poisoning them. He left the job and went back to his home village, where he died of natural causes about a year later.

Shortly before I went to Limulunga, there was a catechist, a religious teacher employed by the parish, whom I'll call Bo Mundia, though that wasn't his real name. His wife died while he was still a young man. Then he made a serious mistake: he re-married less than a year after her death. Re-marrying was not the problem; the timing was. It gave an impression of callousness – or worse. And it seems the latter was how her relatives saw

it. One morning, Mundia woke up and walked out of his house. In front of him, impaled on a pole, was the disinterred head of his late wife, looking straight at him. He became ill, was taken to hospital, and died of natural causes about three months later.

I had begun keeping a daily diary in 1956, and had maintained it until 1981. Then, and not for the first time, someone close to me, who should have known better, read extracts from it to others in what was supposed to be a joke, causing me embarrassment. I decided then to make sure it didn't happen again: I destroyed the diaries, twenty-six years of them, and have not kept one since - a decision I do not regret.

Some time after I left Limulunga the postulancy and former minor seminary was turned into a diocesan pastoral centre where courses would be run for the training of leaders of small Christian communities and other leadership positions in the church. I felt it was a mistake. In the church we have a long-standing practice of responding to every challenge by creating institutions and putting up buildings. They have, perhaps, the value of stability and continuity, but even that is open to question at a time of falling numbers of clergy and religious. Institutions are often cumbersome and inflexible; they carry a lot of baggage. I was in favour of bringing the training to the people rather than the other way round. Having a team travel to local centres and running training courses there changes the dynamic of the operation. It means the local people are the hosts, and the team the guests, and, in a sense, operating on the

hosts terms. A visiting team literally as well as figuratively goes more than half way to meet them, and that is quite different from people being in a centre where they may not feel very much at home. It also means that a much larger number of people can attend a course rather than just a few, who run the risk of being seen, on their return from a centre, as people who are full of themselves because they've done a course. The leaders don't become isolated from the general body of the people. Doing a course locally also means learning to operate within the framework of local limitations. A pastoral centre may have computers, overhead projectors, photocopiers and so forth, while a centre in a rural area may not even have electricity or many literate people, and yet those are the limitations within which local leaders will have to work. Keep it local; it will also cost a lot less.

The perils of publishing

I had been asked to write a history of the Capuchin mission in Zambia from its beginning in 1931 up to 1981. I put a lot of work into it. Pretty good records had been kept by the order, the diocese, and the offices for education and social development, especially in the early years, and they were mostly available nearby, so the research part of the job did not involve too much hunting. Time, of course, was a constraint, but, nonetheless, I enjoyed the task, and it gave me an appreciation of the hard work that had been done in the past, especially by the pioneers. The book, under the title

Zambezi Mission: A History of the Capuchins in Zambia, 1931-1981, was published in 1982.

Before long, I began to hear murmurs and whispers around it, but nothing clear-cut. I knew that what some friars had wanted was an uncritical success story, a propaganda piece, but I was not prepared to do that. Then, one day, in a nearby mission at Malengwa, I picked up a letter from the diocesan office lying on a coffee table, and started reading it. I was surprised to find that it was about the book. Though the critique was generalized, I had the impression – correct or not – from reading between the lines that UNIP, The Party, did not like it. And the diocesan office instructed that it should not be distributed. I was angry when I discovered that the letter had been circulated to every mission in the diocese, but neither to me nor to the house in Limulunga, nor had anyone spoken to me about it personally. It was not a good way to do things.

Not long after starting work as director of postulants I came to realize that we missionaries were using a substantial vocabulary of religious terminology which, at least in some cases, was not well understood by those in formation. I set out to draw up a word list which they could use, beginning with the names of items in a church or sacristy. It grew from there; one thing led to another, and, after some time, I had a small word-book or dictionary of some 3,500 entries. I decided to sound out potential publishers. One, a Catholic publishing house run by a religious congregation, replied saying it was just what they had been seeking for some time, and asked if I

was interested in a contract. I said I was, and, after some negotiation, mostly about the name, we signed. I had hoped to call it *A Basic Catholic Dictionary*, and that a design artist would use the letters A, B, C and D for a catchy cover. But that title had already been used by someone else, so I had to settle for *A Concise Catholic Dictionary*.

Time went by and nothing happened. I wrote to ask why. After a long delay, the publishing house wrote to state that they no longer wished to go ahead with the project. I reminded them that we had a contract. To my astonishment, they denied this. I gave them chapter and verse, dates and names. After another long delay, they said that what was signed was not a contract, but an agreement. I challenged this distinction and pointed that the wording was similar to that in standard publishing contracts; they did not reply. I wrote to ask if they would accept mediation by the Society of Authors of which I was a member; they did not reply. The Society, to which I had sent copies of the contract and of our correspondence, was emphatic that what had been signed was indeed a contract and that the supposed distinction between a contract and an agreement was spurious. I sent the publishers a copy of the Society's letter; they did not reply. This one-way correspondence lasted several years.

I wrote to the general superior of the religious congregation concerned. His reply surprised me: he said that, at a recent general chapter of their society, they had laid down a policy that they would observe their contracts. I asked myself whether the observance of a

contract was not a matter of moral and legal obligation in any event, whatever a general chapter might say. And clearly there must have been a history behind the decision; perhaps I was not the first person to find myself in this situation vis-à-vis the congregation.

The provincial of the Capuchins came on visitation, and I discussed the matter with him. He advised me to let the matter drop, and assured me that, if I did so, all the friars would be full of admiration for my humility. I felt that his response was an example of mealie-mouthed humbug, and it evoked a different reaction from the one he wanted! Shortly after, a more senior friar came to the country and I raised the matter with him. His response was simple, ‘Take them to court.’

I wrote to the publishers notifying them that I would do this, and received an immediate response, promising to print the book. They did so, and I received a copy in the post soon after. The battle for publication, from contract to production, had lasted seven years.

In the time since then, I have dealt with several “secular” publishers. Without exception, they were more professional, including more ethical, than the Catholic religious congregation. I was not surprised to hear soon after that it was in trouble for alleged breaches of copyright obligations.

In order to help the postulants understand the way of life they were entering upon, I wrote a booklet called *The Early Capuchins*, which was intended to give some

understanding of the origins of the order and its relation to the Franciscan family of which it is a branch. It was published in 1983, and subsequently translated into Japanese. At the same time, and for a similar purpose, I also published a booklet called *Capuchin Saints and Blesseds*.

Livingstone 1983-84

In 1983, I was asked to go to Livingstone to set up a new house there for the training of student friars when they returned from the novitiate in Tanzania. For me, it turned out to be a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire.

From the beginning, the situation was impossible. As the sole staff member, my responsibilities were the provision of a philosophy course, the running of a parish, the formation of those who were not clerics, and the day to day running of the house. Although it had been evident for several years that provision would need to be made for those who had passed from postulancy to novitiate and into simple vows, nothing had been done to get staff for the house. I had raised the matter on many occasions with the regional superior, but without result. One province of the order had spontaneously offered us staff, but the regional superior had not followed up on it; he told me it had not occurred to him to do so! When the order's *Office of Formation* wrote asking what was our situation regarding formation personnel, the reply sent by the regular superior was misleading: it listed a series

of offices which were filled, not mentioning that it was one person who filled them all – me.

We had already seen what happened when proper provision was not made: some years earlier, a Zambian who returned from Tanzania after his profession was left without direction or support. Nothing had been prepared for him, no one took responsibility for his further formation, and he gradually drifted away from the order after only about two years in vows. There were others in temporary vows, but provision for their formation was a series of temporary arrangements, renewed from year to year on an *ad hoc* basis, with no overall direction or plan. The young men were given vague promises that something would be arranged for them, but, a year or two later, they would find themselves still waiting, with no formation or professional training. It did not escape their notice that it was a hit-and-miss affair, and, not surprisingly, they felt let down by the order.

When the temporary vows of some friars were close to elapsing, the decision to admit them to perpetual vows was made by the regional superior alone, without reference to the formation community and without the necessary “votation”. This was done shortly before the introduction of the new code of canon law in 1983, which would have invalidated such a procedure. (A votation is a vote taken in the community where the men live on whether they are considered suitable for life-long membership. The process is two-way: the young friars make their judgment and so does the order.) When I protested in writing to the regional superior that church

law and the constitutions of the order required a votation, he dismissed this out of hand, saying that he knew the two men sufficiently well. One of them left the order soon after his final vows.

My response to the above was to draw up a policy document setting out basic principles of formation, and the aims we had in mind for it. I sent it to the regional superior for his consideration, but received no reply. We had held mission chapters in Lusaka in 1979, 1982 and 1983. On each of these occasions, formation was discussed and policies adopted. The policies were satisfactory, but they were not implemented; policy and practice lived in separate houses. I raised all these issues with more senior members of the order, and the local bishop. The latter acted on it, even if in a limited way, and raised the issue with the order, but there was no follow up. I went to the nuncio in Lusaka and spoke to him about it. He was busy at the time, and asked me to send him a written report, also suggesting that I write to the Vatican's Congregation of Religious about the matter. I did so, but received no acknowledgement from either.

At a chapter in Lusaka, there was a heated discussion, with the superiors coming under criticism for disobedience to the church and the order, and ignoring in practice the policy document they themselves had approved. Two points received particular mention: firstly, that the superiors did not seem to know what the church and the order said about formation, and secondly, their practice of receiving men who did not meet the

standards that they had stipulated. The bulk of opinion in the chapter favoured the idea of the superiors having a day of study on formation documents and policy. This was opposed angrily by the new regional superior, who questioned the right of the chapter to make any such decision. When the proposal was carried by the chapter, he agreed to abide by its decision, but, once in office, did not do so.

I had held on in the hope that when the outgoing regional superior's term of office ended, things might improve. But I was not optimistic, because I had a fair idea of who his likely successor might be, and he was, in fact, elected. In his first decision on formation, he admitted three men who did not meet the educational standards which the chapter had just approved. He said this was being flexible, deciding each case on its merits, and that I was a perfectionist. I felt it meant that we had no bottom line, that flexibility was a code word for lack of principle, that the exception was becoming the rule and the rule the exception. We were making decisions on the basis of rules of thumb which we made up as we went along, and that was a formula for a continuing mess. I saw this as wrong in principle and self-defeating in practice. In our formation work, we repeated the same mistakes year after year, as if we were determined to learn nothing from them. We had a firm commitment to mediocrity. Of those students whom I worked to "form", none remains in the order today and many, perhaps half, have died. I sometimes had the feeling that they had been better men joining the order than they were leaving it. All the above was compounded by non-

communication. Since the situation was clearly a problem of more than one regional superior, and I could see no prospect of improvement, I resigned.

Snapshots from Livingstone

After arriving in the town in October 1983, I decided to get the house painted before the students arrived. I hired a local man whose name was Bishop on a “work only” contract. I supplied paint and brushes, and he supplied labour. We agreed on a sum. The first thing he did was to sub-contract most of the job to another man. Bishop came to work occasionally, and gave himself the easy jobs, like painting the walls. His deputy he gave the hard parts, like the ceilings and the fiddly bits around burglar bars. When the job was done - and it was well done - I paid him as per our contract. Then the deputy came to me to say that, for doing most of the work, Bishop had paid him just one-fifth of the money!

In 1978, President Kaunda had declared bread to be a luxury. Our food, though good and nourishing, was often monotonous. I used to go across the border into Zimbabwe to buy bread. It was a strange process, going through the whole rigmarole of immigration and customs in both directions, all for the sake of a few loaves. On one occasion, Zimbabwean customs confiscated 300 Greek drachmas from me, notes which I had found in a book and kept in my wallet for decoy purposes. They didn't realize they were valueless, bearing the head of King Constantine, though Greece had become a republic and the monarchy's currency was no longer legal tender.

I didn't mind the "loss" as it diverted their attention from some real currency I had which I very much wanted to hold on to.

Basic commodities were often unavailable in Zambia. Brother Vianney Holmes, from Yorkshire, who was working on building a house for the students, on one occasion, drove to Lusaka and back, a round trip of about 950 km, looking for roofing nails, but returned empty-handed. They were unavailable in the capital also. Since then, roles have reversed and, in recent years, Zambia had bread and Zimbabweans crossed the border to buy it.

Once, as I was returning from Lusaka, I was driving up a hill with a truck and trailer some distance ahead. As I watched, I noticed something that seemed strange, though, at first, I couldn't understand it. Then I realized what it was: the trailer had become disconnected from the truck and was beginning to roll back down the hill towards me. At first, I didn't know what to do. Fortunately, the road was clear of traffic, and I was able to avoid a crash by crossing to the other side and let the trailer roll past me till it went off the road.

On another occasion, also returning from Lusaka, the road was blocked by an overturned petrol tanker, which, fortunately, was not leaking, but the engine was still running, and that made me uneasy. There was no sign of the driver. I managed to drive around the truck, and reported the matter to the police at Monze. I spoke to a senior officer, whose response was to blame me for the

accident! With difficulty I managed to persuade him that I was reporting something that had happened before my arrival. I was dumb-founded, but learned later that it was common for police to accuse a person reporting a crime of having committed it. The logic of that escapes me, unless it was to give themselves a quiet life by putting people off going to them in the first place.

Driving to Lusaka, I came across a road accident one day. A light pick-up truck, or vanette, as we often called them, had overturned, and one man who was in the back had been thrown out and suffered a compound fracture to his leg. It was pretty horrible. The other people asked me to bring him to hospital in Monze, and I agreed. When I arrived there, I immediately became aware of a strong sense of hostility towards me, and people began to gather round, making a sound that was a strange blend of hissing and humming. I understood what it meant: they had concluded that I had caused the man's injury and they were going to punish me for it, by a beating, or worse. Then one man walked around my vehicle, examining it. Finding no dents or blood-stains, he "exonerated" me, and the matter ended there. But, if the vehicle had been dented, as our vehicles usually were, from driving on narrow bush roads and being struck by branches along the way, the outcome might have been very different.

A project I made time for in Livingstone was to research the origins of the church in Africa. I already knew a little, but was aware there was much more I didn't know. I felt it would be worthwhile to research it

and make it available to the students. Most of them thought of Christianity as European and as having come to Africa in the nineteenth century, and, of course, that Jesus was a white man! As I worked at it, I learned that North Africa had been the leading centre of learning in the early church; that it was in Africa that the canon of scripture had been decided upon; that there had already been African popes, and that the practice of holding regional church councils had been commonplace during the early centuries there. All this had been swept away in the Muslim Arab invasions of later centuries, aided by internal weaknesses in the church, such as the lack of inculturation of theology and liturgy, a mistake which the church in our time was repeating. I offered the course to the students and found that they were both surprised and delighted. Word got around about it and I was asked to give it to parish groups as well; their reaction was similar.

Back to Sioma, 1984-89

I was transferred to Sioma in June 1984 and was happy to go there. I felt a great sense of relief at being among ordinary people. The four years I had spent in formation had been difficult, all the more so as the principal source of difficulty came from where I had expected support, namely, the order's leadership. Instead it had undermined me. I was glad to see the last of the work. Had I known what lay ahead, I would have been happier still.

At the mission in Sioma there was Brother Hugh Davis, a Waterford man. He had a quiet, gentle presence and people found him easy to relate to. A welder by trade, his work was constantly in demand in Sioma and elsewhere. When based in Kalabo, he had built a barge for transporting goods across the Zambezi which he named Arkle, after the race-horse! The other friar was the parish priest, Benignus Buckley from Kilkenny, a human dynamo of energy.

While based in Sioma, I spent a good deal of time visiting churches in an area bordering on Angola. It was remote, and the roads were just dirt tracks, often impassable in the rainy season. I used the small settlement called Shangombo as a base of operations and travelled from there with a group of local men who had led their churches for several years with only rare visits from a priest. We would work out a programme of visits together, and then follow through on it. They told me that, in each church, there would be lots of people asking for baptism, having prepared for it for a long time beforehand.

I asked them to form teams which would interview each candidate, examining them in the basic prayers such as the Sign of the Cross, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory be to the Father the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments. They were also given a list of questions to put to each candidate from the catechism, focussing on the fundamental teachings. This was not an ideal way of doing things; it would have been better to have had a more integrated programme of preparation

such as that in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. But, in the circumstances, I think it was the best we could do. (In later years, I couldn't help contrasting this with the baptism-on-request pastoral practice in Ireland, where the sacrament is given to any child whose parents ask for it, even if their level of practice of the faith is almost non-existent.)

In each area, we were welcomed with great enthusiasm by the people. They were poor, but so welcoming they made us feel like lost and found brothers. While I heard confessions, the teams of men would start examining the candidates for baptism. Most had done the work of preparation and knew the basic prayers and teachings, and were admitted to the sacrament, and, in the case of the adults, confirmed also; those who did not, were urged to work at it and try again on the next visit. Then would come the Mass: it was truly a celebration; everyone joined with the prayers and hymns. People brought local produce for the presentation of the gifts (the offertory), and I would be given a large supply of fruit and vegetables, eggs, and sometimes a live, protesting chicken. In the sermon I would usually speak about the role of church leaders and encourage them, because, humanly speaking, they were the foundation of the church. In the Mass, there was singing and dancing; nobody was worried about time, and I often felt that this was how it was meant to be. The enthusiasm people had for the Mass was in inverse proportion to its frequency; that was not only my experience, but that of other priests as well. On one extended visit to the border area I baptized about six hundred people. It reminded me of

what is written in the *Acts of the Apostles* about the early days of the Christian community; it was the best time in my life as a priest. It was a pointer to what we could have in the church if we had leadership with imagination and the courage to insist that believing was necessary for belonging.

I saw my role principally as that of a trainer of church council leaders. Using materials from the Lumko Institute in South Africa, which I adapted substantially, I constantly ran short courses for leaders with the aim of bringing them to the point where trainees became trainers. One of the challenges was to move people away from the political model of leadership which they saw before them in national life and in the model they had inherited from the chiefs. It was to lead them to see that Christian leadership takes Jesus as its model, that it's about service, not domination, and that it involves work, not grandiosity. Many clergy and religious needed to make the same move. There were courses on running Sunday services, conducting funerals, and teaching Christian doctrine to catechumens (those preparing for baptism). In addition, there were courses designed to help local leaders become agents of human development in their area.

We were blessed with a shortage of priests. If vocations had continued to come from Ireland and elsewhere in the seventies and onwards as they had in the fifties and sixties, lay leadership would probably never have developed. We would have said that people didn't want it, or weren't ready for it. We would have

said, ‘What’s your hurry; there’s no rush; take your time’ and kept control of everything in our hands. What I found repeatedly in doing this work is that if you trust people’s intelligence and goodwill, if you work with them as an equal partner, if they have a real role in decision-making, then there is almost nothing you cannot achieve, even in circumstances as limited as theirs. In an area where the state hardly functioned, and had ignored the local population, probably because they were refugees, people developed self-reliance and changed their situation for the better, using their talents and resources. They dug wells to give themselves clean drinking water; they built schools and clinics, and shamed the government into recognizing and staffing them.

Mission, I learned, is about receiving as much as it is about giving. I learned, too, that, if people understand their situation, face the truth about it, and if responsibility for their future is placed on their shoulders, they will rise to the challenge, take direction of their lives and fight and win the battles that need to be fought. I also saw that spoon-feeding people belittles them; doing so in the name of kindness doesn’t make it any less demeaning. The same applies to doing things *for* people rather than *with* them. A mentality of helplessness and dependence – ‘I have a problem; what are you doing about it?’ - is fostered where leaders have a Santa Claus mentality, and, wanting to be wanted, start giving out goodies in the name of helping people. That has sometimes reduced self-respecting people to

scroungers, truthful people to liars, and honest people to thieves. What good does that do?

Books

There were lots of problems in the church in the border area. The language was Sikwamashi, also known as Mashi for short, but almost the only religious books available were in Silozi, and everything had to be translated as it was used. They had one New Testament and one catechism in Sikwamashi; these had been prepared by Benedictines in Angola who had originally come from a monastery near the town of Santo Tirso in the north of Portugal. Only one person in the entire area had been to secondary school, and not many adults had attended primary school. Outside of Shangombo, there were no schools in the area. I contacted the Bible Society to ask if they might have copies of the Mashi New Testament, and was delighted to receive a reply from them, saying that they did and sending me a copy. But my delight quickly turned to disappointment when I looked at the text: I couldn't understand it at all. It turned out to be another language, based in Zaire, which had the same name – Mashi – but which was incomprehensible to the Mashi people of Zambia.

There was nothing for it but to make a start. A team of local men took as a basis a prayer book, *Buka ya Litapelo*, and a hymn book, *Litoko*, published in Silozi by Father Kieran Shorten, and translated them into their own language. The combined book of 140 pages was published by the Mission Press in Ndola in 1986 under

the title of *Divuru di'Erombero no Membo*. The team did likewise with another of Kieran's publications, a *Catechism* in Silozi based on the Apostles' Creed. Under the title *Katekiseema ko Sikwamashi* this book of 320 questions and answers was published in 1989. Funding for it came from a generous gift by the Missionaries to Africa (the White Fathers). By-products of my work with the team on these projects were English-Sikwamashi and Sikwamashi-English dictionaries, a short Sikwamashi grammar, and a Silozi-Sikwamashi dictionary.

An entirely unanticipated problem arose along the way. I had received the *imprimatur* (the licence to print) from the bishop for both books, something which had a touch of humour about it, as he didn't know either of the languages involved, and I was the only one who knew some Sikwamashi. That was OK, but then came a message from the blue. I was told by the regional superior of the order that I should "sound out" the Party (UNIP), about the publication of the books. I was stunned and angered that a leader of the order, a church official, was actually taking the initiative in handing a political party a potential veto over the work of spreading the gospel. That's what it was.

UNIP was a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship. Like other ineffective and incompetent dictatorships, it chose to show its muscle in negativity; it was great at being obstructive and saying NO. I had little doubt as to what it would say. Handed such an opportunity, and with its record, what else would it do? I felt we demeaned

ourselves by going cap in hand to it to ask for its blessing. But I had been told to sound them out, so, with great reluctance, I did exactly as it said on the tin. When I met the UNIP Provincial Secretary, it came as no surprise that he said no. That left me in an entirely foreseeable but unnecessary quandary. How could I go back to Shangombo and show my face if I had to say to the team of translators that all their work, done freely for the sake of the gospel, had been for nothing? But if I went ahead anyway, I could be landing myself in trouble. So I did exactly as directed: I had been told to “sound out” the Party. I had not been told that, if it objected, I should comply with its wishes, though I’m sure that’s what was meant. So, having “sounded out” the Party, I went ahead, and had the books printed. There was no come back about it.

This experience was unsettling. It reminded me of how the church seems ready to let the institution walk on the individual, and finds itself more at home with dictatorships than with democracies. Birds of a feather? I saw it also as an example of the bogus “prudence” which is common in the church, a “prudence” that has nothing to do with the gospel. I have learned to be suspicious when I hear the word mentioned in church circles. (Bankers and finance ministers are the other groups who use it.) Like being “wise,” the word usually signals some mix of cunning, calculation, cowardice and cop out, not a cardinal virtue but a clerical vice. It is often a substitute for action, or an excuse for inaction, instead of a guide for it. It has about it the smell of the cute hoor, and some of them smell from a long way off. (For those unfamiliar

with Irish English, a “cute hoor” is roughly the equivalent of a Tricky Dicky, or an artful dodger, whose idea of leadership is to cover his arse.) In the church, “prudence” means caution; what’s missing is the element of *carpe diem* (seize the day), having the imagination and courage to see and seize an opportunity. I recalled that, at about the same time, the bishops had written a collective pastoral letter to the church but first submitted it to UNIP for its permission. UNIP had called for amendments and the bishops had complied.

For some time, mindful of my own difficulties in learning Silozi, I had also been working on compiling an English-Silozi dictionary. The idea came to me from Brother Daniel O’Brien, from Bandon in County Cork, with whom I had lived in Sichili. A man of many talents, a self-taught engineer, mechanic, electrician and linguist, he had begun the work some years before but not continued with it. I started it early in 1985. I now smile as I recall my naiveté in imagining that I might complete the task in a year; it took nine and a half. Local people were invaluable in offering assistance, correction and encouragement. There were no personal computers, and, in any case, no electricity except for a short time in the evening. I did the first stage of it by writing the entries in long-hand and gradually filling nine shoe-boxes with wafer-thin slips of paper. When that was completed, I used my ancient but strong Olivetti portable manual typewriter to type up the text for publication. The Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) provided funding. A book of 360 pages, with about 8,500 entries, it was published in 1993. I was later told

informally that the *Litunga*, the chief of the Lozi people, and his Kuta (court), had decided to make me an honorary chief in recognition of this work. But, as this was said only informally, I didn't take much notice. Later, an *nduna* (an official) from the *Kuta* told me that this had in fact been decided. I was very pleased, even thought that was the last I heard of it. What made me happiest about the dictionary, and my principal satisfaction from it, was that it helped give the Lozi people a greater pride in their language; it helped them feel that it could hold its place among the languages of the world.

A new bishop

At about this time, the need arose for a new bishop of the diocese. In 1950, when the first bishop of the diocese was appointed, every priest, sister and brother in the diocese was asked for their opinion, and the result had changed the outcome. The Prefect Apostolic, a kind of "sub-bishop" who had been the church superior for the previous fourteen years, had virtually been promised the job by the pope's representative, the apostolic delegate. But, as a result of the consultation, another man was appointed instead.

In 1975, when the incumbent had been appointed, there had been a process of consultation whereby the priests of the diocese had been asked if they had any objections to Father So-and-So being appointed. Since he was from outside the diocese, and was known to only a few, they could hardly object to him. To have raised

questions about the procedure itself would have been seen as insubordinate and probably evoked a homily on *communio* from the nuncio. As far as was known, no laypeople or religious sisters or brothers were consulted, though it is impossible to be certain, since anyone who was consulted was told that the entire matter was *sub secreto pontificio*, a kind of three-line whip of secrecy. I know one priest who, on being asked for his opinion, said he would give it only if he could send a copy of his views to the priest under consideration, since he was not prepared to say something about him without letting him know what it was. He was told that this was not permitted because everything was covered by pontifical secrecy; so he offered no opinion. The process of appointment – it is officially known as an *election!* - was tailor-made for back-stabbing and back-room deals.

This time round, the process of consultation was narrower still, with perhaps only six priests in the diocese asked for an opinion. Some of them felt that the appointment had already been decided upon before they were asked. It was ironic that the process of consultation had steadily narrowed according as the theological basis for it had expanded in Vatican II's teaching on collegiality, of priests and bishop together forming a *presbyterium*, a kind of college, and of *communio* being the guiding principle of the church's life and operation. The theology of consultation and its application operated in inverse proportion. Truly, you can't speak in one sentence of openness, transparency and accountability and the Catholic church without evoking a hollow laugh of derision; we don't do them. Not to do so is to show a

lack of respect for people. I thought to myself: is it any wonder the church is dysfunctional?

The bishop thus chosen was a quiet man who could hardly be heard even in a one-to-one conversation. He was a poor communicator, except in writing – he wrote well. I attended one of his first meetings with the council of priests, and noticed that the agenda was missing several items which the priests had put down for discussion. We were told that the bishop did not want them discussed, we were a consultative body only, and that was final. The reality is that there is nothing in the constitutional structure of the church to stop a bishop from being a dictator if that is what he wishes to be. And there are quiet dictators as well as those who strut and shout like Mussolini. The bishop had a finance committee because canon law required it, but he took no notice of it. He spent money freely and foolishly – not corruptly – mainly on offices and cars, until he had drained a reserve that had been built up over decades, and he then turned to the finance committee to think up new fund-raising ideas.

There was one element of light relief in this: there had been considerable rumour for the previous year or so that our bishop was going to be transferred to Lusaka and become archbishop. One day, an African sister, tongue in cheek, asked him, ‘Bishop, if you were asked to go to Lusaka as archbishop, would you accept?’ He answered, ‘Of course I would; I have to do as I’m told; I’m not a religious!’

Another side to relief and development

Many of the people in the area between the Zambezi and Mashi Rivers in the Western province lived close to the edge. If a harvest failed, it would mean hunger, the diseases of malnutrition, and, in some cases, death. Many were refugees and were at rock bottom levels of subsistence. This was worsened when a parasite affected cassava plants, the traditional famine food, and killed them. I sometimes sat with people in a village and reflected that, apart from a few plastic bowls and some cotton clothing, we could be in a village five hundred or a thousand years before. Soap was a rarity, so there was plenty of scabies. Sugar, salt, soap, maize meal, cooking oil and matches were items needed daily but mostly absent. The most pervasive symbols of Zambia's socialism were, in urban areas the queue, and, in rural areas constant scarcity, or simply the absence, of the essentials.

While I was in Sioma from 1984 to 1989, there were good harvests and bad ones. Sometimes there was real hunger, and food aid was necessary. A report by an Indian agronomist caught the attention of development workers at the time. He had advanced the theory that there aren't famines in democracies. That made no sense to me: after all, weather conditions are independent of political systems. But then I saw the point he was making, which was that, if there is, let us say, a drought or a flood, democratic governments can be made to respond effectively to meet the resulting need, whereas, in dictatorships, public pressure would be regarded as

subversive and likely ignored or even crushed. In the situations of need that arose, there was no point in looking to UNIP or the government for action. They were indifferent and lethargic. I had already had that experience in Sichili, when there was a serious food shortage in one area. I had contacted the local MP and asked for help; he replied with platitudes, but did nothing.

Benignus Buckley, the parish priest, was always active in finding ways of doing good. He saw the need and responded to it by contacting the Catholic Secretariat and asking for help. The secretariat is like a mini-Vatican, a kind of civil service of the Zambian bishops' conference. It had various departments, including one for relief and development. It responded and sent food, and the operation began. UNIP, true to form, was not merely obstructive, but predatory. Simply put, it wanted a slice of the cake, and made it clear that, if it didn't get it, it would block the relief effort. It presented this as a great concession on its part, as if it was wonderfully magnanimous in "allowing" us to feed hungry people – the people it claimed to represent and serve. They had to be bought off in order to get things started.

The operation was too big for the mission alone, so the UN's World Food Programme and High Commission for Refugees came into the picture. The WFP supplied food; the UNHCR had the logistical system, storage, transportation, mechanics, drivers, lorry-workers, clerks and secretaries. That's where one problem began. Nothing happened. It might seem easy to bring those two

together – the food and the distribution system – indeed, they had offices beside the mission about a hundred metres apart from each other. But the food stayed where it was. Why? Because the heads of the two agencies were not on speaking terms. I don't remember why, but all efforts to get them to cooperate failed, and, in the meantime, while they indulged their tantrums, people went hungry. Benignus contacted their bosses in Lusaka; they came and knocked heads together and things began to happen. The UN agencies really won the prize for inefficiency and waste. At this time, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization was spending about two-thirds of its annual budget in its Rome headquarters.

Then another problem emerged. I became aware that the operations of the Relief Department of the Catholic Secretariat were being preyed upon from within by opportunists who saw a chance for personal enrichment. When goods came for relief work they were not accompanied by supporting documentation. We had only the lorry driver's word for it that they were intact. On the one occasion when a delivery note was provided, it did not correspond with the goods on the lorry, which were less than those indicated on the note. When this practice was raised at a meeting of the secretariat in Lusaka, an assurance was given that it would not happen again, but it continued as before. I heard some secretariat staff accuse others of tribalism in the allocation of relief supplies to their home areas. Supplies of materials for the repair of a school were marked down as having been sent and used, when they had not been sent. Blankets intended for the needy were sold in exchange for cattle

which went to the farm of one of the secretariat's staff. Oxen bought for ploughing were entered in the books as having cost K1000 each, when their actual price was about K160. Some secretariat staff engaged in ivory trafficking while supposedly doing relief work, and sold clothes intended for free distribution. I also knew of simple direct theft by secretariat staff. When caught, they received nothing more than a reprimand, even if it was their second or third time doing so. I knew of double invoicing, with the same goods listed as having cost very different amounts, and substantial sums of money not being accounted for at all. I could not see how some secretariat staff could sustain their life-style on their official salary. I knew of projects left unattended for months with resulting waste of money on wages and materials, as well as injustice to the workers concerned who were left in isolated areas with little food or clothing during the cold season.

Those were the matters that I knew of; there may have been more. Two or three years before, in the face of widespread criticism, the bishops had appointed an internationally known development worker to investigate the secretariat. He had done his job, written his report, and that's as far as it went. I wrote a letter about what I had seen, sending copies to the secretariat, to my own bishop and to the nuncio. I was told by the person who hand-delivered my letter to the secretary-general of the secretariat that he denied everything in it and threw it in the waste-paper basket. The bishop acknowledged receipt of the letter and promised to take the matter up with the secretariat. I heard nothing from the nuncio.

Perhaps a year later, at a meeting of the diocesan council of priests, I was surprised when the bishop suggested that the priests of the diocese should organize relief programmes in their parishes. One after the other, we said we saw no need for it as there had been a good harvest that season. He persisted, saying that the secretariat had food available. Once he mentioned the secretariat, there was an outburst of anger, and, one by one, the priests opened up on it, each man telling a story of corruption. The bishop looked surprised, and said, 'I never knew that.' At that moment his credibility went out the window. I had told him about it, and I knew that three of the other nine priests at the meeting, including his vicar general, had spoken to him about it, yet here he was saying he didn't know.

Did he have sticky fingers? I don't think so; I believe he was a weak man who just took the line of least resistance when a problem occurred. Some years later, when the issue of clerical sex abuse came to public notice in Ireland and elsewhere, I saw what struck me as the same pattern at work: fudging problems instead of facing them, covering up instead of cleaning up, lying and a simple lack of respect for people.

Clearly, the church's internal structures were not up to the task of dealing with its corruption. I had a choice: I could say that I had done what I could and leave it at that, or I could take the fight outside the church's structures. Since the former had failed, I chose the latter. In 1986, I wrote a report and sent copies of it to three

funding agencies which I knew were donors: *Misereor*, the German Catholic aid agency, *Irish Aid*, and the *World Food Programme*. They held the purse strings, and that might carry the clout that moral argument did not. *Misereor* said they knew nothing about it, but would investigate. *Irish Aid* said likewise. The WFP representative told me that he and representatives of other agencies had had doubts about the secretariat for some time and was not surprised at what I said. Not very long afterwards, several agencies - I am not sure which because Sioma was 800 km from the capital - suspended aid to the secretariat. The church's leaders had faced a moral challenge and failed. The root cause was lack of moral courage. The people who paid the price were the needy, but, in truth, they themselves were also corrupt when the opportunity arose, not infrequently claiming to have received no aid when in fact they had. People's anger against corruption was often about not being part of it and seeing someone else getting a bigger slice of the cake.

I cannot think of any relief or development project in Zambia, except one, that was not undermined by corruption, often by the very people it was designed to help. This experience was shared by, I think, every development worker and missionary I spoke with. It was a huge brake on development. Much more could and would have been done for the country if development workers had not been constantly demoralized by this problem, and aid agencies, both governmental and non-, would willingly have committed more resources to the country if they had seen them well spent. There wasn't

the trust or sense of community that would have made development advance as it might have done. It was a problem that was difficult to discuss with local people without running the risk of being accused of racism. They had learned how to play the 'You're a racist' card, and use it to silence criticism. But Africa is riddled from end to end with tribalism, and people freely admit it; what is tribalism, if not racism under another name?

The one approach to relief and development work that I saw operate effectively was the U.S.-based *Food for Work* programme. It was a scheme whereby people who wanted to undertake a local project, such as the construction of a bridge, for example, would be paid for their work with food. It was simple, and it worked, but the amount of food given was, in my view, not enough. It would have been sufficient for an adult for a day, but not for a family.

On a different level, we had a problem with the local branch of the New Apostolic church. This was a Protestant church of German, and previously Scottish, origins, formerly known as the Irvingites. While they had much to commend them in terms of developing local leadership and self-reliance, I was disappointed at their attitude towards relief supplies in times of food scarcity. They took it for granted, as a matter of course, that supplies distributed by the Catholic mission would be given to everyone on the basis of need, and that indeed was the case. But they equally took it for granted that relief supplies they received would be given exclusively to their members. There was no reciprocity.

Crocodiles are nasty

One morning, just as I was getting ready to go to the church for Mass, Sister Nora came to me in a state of excitement asking me to go first to the clinic to see a patient there. I got a shock when I saw her: she was a middle-aged woman, dressed in shredded rags, covered in blood, with bits of torn flesh hanging from her body here and there. Nora asked me if I could bring her to Senanga Hospital where there were doctors and an operating theatre. I agreed, though thinking to myself that I didn't think she would survive the journey. Oddly, all she seemed to be concerned about was that she couldn't find her snuff box! We started off, and what I remember most was that it was one of those rare days when everything went well: we caught the pontoon at Kalongola for the river crossing without a hitch.

When we arrived at the hospital, there at the entrance was a Zambian nurse, a bright and competent lady, who took charge immediately. My patient was wheeled down a corridor to a theatre which another patient was about to enter for an operation. The doctor took one look at mine and gave her priority, the other patient being sent back to the ward to wait another day. First, the wounds had to be cleaned; they were dirty, with bits of grass stuck to them. And then the real work began. Later in the day I was really surprised to hear that she was alive and showed signs of making a recovery.

The big question on my mind was what had happened to her in the first place. On returning to Sioma, I was told

by the catechist that she had been attacked on an island in the river by a crocodile. It had bitten a few chunks out of her, but she had entered into meaningful negotiations with it and managed to broker her escape by telling it that she had taken Lozi protective medicine (*muliani*) and that, if it killed her, it would die. The crocodile, therefore, had agreed to settle for just a few more bites.

That story was hilariously imaginative. Apart from anything else, a croc's *modus operandi* is to grab its prey in its mouth, pull it underwater and drown it, and then eat it later at leisure. But, on the basis of the type of dirt and infection he found in her wounds, the doctor had told me he believed she had been attacked by a croc.

There was another version. It was that she was a lady of the night and had spent the evening before at a lengthy beer party. It was said that she had been seen walking away with a stranger who had just turned up at the party. Then, according to this version – and there were others – they used a canoe to cross to a large island where they could enjoy themselves in private. While they were having sex, he produced a knife and started trying to extract her liver, presumably for use in ritual medicine. She started to scream and fight and the struggle went on for a few minutes. The grass had been flattened over a fairly wide area and had lots of blood on it. Afraid of being caught, the man took off, using the canoe to make his escape; it was found later, far downstream. Her screams were eventually heard; people came, rescued her and brought her to the clinic. Her husband, who was away from home was notified, but

took six weeks to return to see her. When I met her on her return home safe and sound, she denied all the above, and said that, as she staggered home drunk after the party, she wandered into the river, thinking it was only a pool of water on the road – it was the rainy season – and she insisted that the crocodile version of the story was the genuine one.

I kept a record of the number of fatalities I heard of as a result of crocodile attacks in the Sioma area while I was there from 1984 to 1989: it was in the twenties.

I was relaxing one Sunday afternoon when a man came to ask me to bring a woman to the clinic. He told me that she had been attacked by a crocodile but had managed to escape. I was skeptical, since escapes from crocs are extremely rare. But the story turned out to be true – I think. She had been washing in the river when a croc struck, catching her by a leg. But she had the presence of mind to hold onto a canoe that was moored there; she gripped it with all her strength and screamed for help. A man passing nearby came running, picked up an oar which was in the canoe, and beat the croc on its eyes with it. That made it let go, and he was then able to help her from the water. She made a full recovery.

We had a cook in the house, a very good man who served us faithfully for about twenty-five years. Two of his sons, boys of about ten and fourteen years old, went to the river one day to wash. As was so often the case in Sioma, the day was beautiful; the sun was shining, the grass was green, the birds were singing in the trees, and

the boys were enjoying themselves splashing around in the shallows. And then, out of the blue, a crocodile grabbed the older boy by the leg and began to drag him out into deep water where it would commence the roll that would disorientate him and make drowning easy. The young boy, acting entirely on impulse, ran after the crocodile, climbed onto it, straddling it like a horse, and inserted a thumb and forefinger into its nostrils and pulled its jaw upwards. With his other hand, he pulled his brother's leg free of the croc's teeth and shoved him aside. At that point the young boy panicked, didn't know what to do, and stayed where he was – on the croc's back. The older brother, seeing what was happening, made his move and pulled his young brother off the croc, and together they made their way ashore, while the croc, perhaps frightened by these unusual goings-on, went off. Each boy had saved the other. Both of them confirmed the story for me as true. The young one recovered quickly, but the older was frightened and nervous for a long time after, perhaps afraid that the croc had been “sent” by witchcraft.

More snapshots from Sioma

I noticed a big change in the area around Sioma, even in the short time since I had last lived there, between 1978 and 1984. It was becoming denuded of trees, the loss accelerated by goats' eating new growth and young trees. When I saw some places, they looked as if they had been blasted by a flight of bombers – just blackened stumps remaining. People had cleared the trees in slash-and-burn agriculture. I saw trees of mahogany and teak

burned so that their ashes would fertilize the soil. People need land for cultivation and they need trees for building and firewood, but nobody plants any to replace those lost. In colonial times, it was necessary to buy a permit for tree felling, and the receipts went into a re-forestation fund – I remember seeing the permits in mission archives – but that no longer applied. I planted trees in every mission where I lived, but was surprised to find that doing so evoked a reaction of dismay, even hostility, as if people were saying, ‘Why are you collaborating with the enemy?’ I think they saw the forest as an enemy. In some places, the trees I planted were uprooted and thrown away; in others, they were burned.

The nineteenth-century chief, Liwanika, showing the missionary, François Coillard, the Barotse Plain, remarked, ‘See how beautiful it is! Not a single tree!’ With Africa losing its forest cover at an area equal to that of Belgium each year, how long, I wondered, would it be before the Western Province reverted to what it had been in the past, part of the Kalahari Desert. With the destruction of the forest was an accompanying loss of animal life: I often spent weeks at a time living in a tent in remote areas without seeing a wild animal.

My time in Sioma was one when food was scarce and often monotonous. One item was a life-saver – Viet-Nam war biscuits. These, I was told, were US army rations. At ten years of age, or more, and even with the very occasional weevil as “supplementary protein”, they were nourishing and tasty. I often lived on them in the bush for weeks at a time. Thank you, Pentagon.

A local man set out one day to paddle a canoe across the Zambezi with three or four passengers. A few moments after pushing out from the bank, the canoe hit an underwater obstacle, perhaps a drifting log, and capsized. The passengers swam ashore with little difficulty, but the paddler was wearing overalls and rubber boots which quickly filled with water and dragged him down, drowning him. At the mission we conveyed the news of his death by the mission radio system to a brother of his, a VIP living in Lusaka. The brother came in a state of great distress and, it seemed, fear. The funeral took place, and then the brother returned home. There he became ill and was admitted to hospital, but no illness was diagnosed. It seemed that his basic problem was one of fear: he was afraid that his brother's death had been caused through witchcraft by colleagues jealous of his rapid promotion, and that this was a warning to him that he was next. His job? He was the prime minister.

The *Litunga* – his title means the Earth – also known as the Paramount Chief of the Barotse people of the Western Province came on an official visit to Sioma. Since he was also a member of the central committee of UNIP, he was escorted by a security detail from the Office of the President, the state security organization. An advance party came to the friary where the Litunga was to have lunch to check out security. The check consisted of examining a cushion on the armchair he would sit on, and squeezing it to see if a bomb was concealed inside. Once no bomb was discovered there, we got the all-clear!

Our cook came to me one day in a state of great fear, and told me that something terrible had happened: a white owl had come into the living room. It seems that it had been building a nest in the chimney, or maybe hatching eggs, when the nest collapsed and the owl fell down into the fireplace. In local tradition, if an owl lands on the roof of a house, it's a sign that someone there will die soon. For it to come into the house was worse still. The cook was terrified, and no re-assurances from me made any difference. This incident brought back memories of New Zealand where a similar tradition held good among the Maori people. All of us who were there at the time are still alive some thirty years later.

The cook's two sons offered an example of brother helped by brother. Another such example came in a different context. Two priests came to visit Sioma, Fr. Paul Chuwa, a Spiritan missionary from Tanzania based in Sesheke to the south of Sioma, and a German priest from *Missio*, the German bishops' missionary support body. When travelling to Sioma from the north, they were held up by a South African army patrol, whose soldiers, a surprisingly undisciplined group that appeared to take little notice of their officer, declared their intention of killing Fr. Paul, because of his country's support for SWAPO, and because, not long before, they had heard that some fifteen of their comrades had been killed in Caprivi during an exchange of artillery fire with Zambian forces. Through the German priest's effort and his speaking to them in German, which is like their own Afrikaans, they were dissuaded. A few days later,

leaving Sioma for Sesheke, the two men were again held up on the road, this time by SWAPO guerrillas who, like their South African opposite numbers, were in killing mode, said they would kill the German priest because they suspected he was really South African. This time it was Fr. Paul's turn to save his confrère. He told them of what had happened a few days before, of how the German priest had saved him. Impressed, the guerrillas let them both go.

It was at about this time that I was talking with another friar about Africa and we noted that Zambia, land-locked and bordered by eight countries, was at peace while there were wars in six out of the eight neighbours. Tanzania was at war against Uganda; Kolwezi in the then Zaire had erupted into revolt, though no one seemed to know about what; Angola had been at war since 1962; in Namibia, SWAPO was fighting against South African rule; Botswana was at peace; in Rhodesia, two guerrilla movements were fighting against Ian Smith's government; Mozambique, like Angola, was in a post-independence civil war; Malawi, an extremely poor country, was at peace, and was host to an influx of refugees equivalent to about one-tenth of its population. We counted thirteen wars under way in Africa at the time. It was remarkable that Zambia kept out of them, especially as KK had a penchant for backing the wrong horse in foreign affairs. He had supported Biafra in the Nigerian civil war, Joshua Nkomo in Zimbabwe, UNITA in Angola, and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Most of these wars were either a spin-off from the colonial

process, or were fought by proxy on the part of the superpowers, the USA and the USSR.

One of those very indirectly involved in refugee relief work was a man from the Eastern Province of Zambia. His name, an Eastern one, meant April in Lozi, and Fornication in Mashi. He spent a lot of time along the Angola-Zambia border, living in a tent below the high water mark on the Zambian side of the Mashi River. From there he ran a diamond-smuggling business. His choice of site put him, legally, in Angolan territory and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the Zambian authorities, while those in Angola were his partners. In the evenings he visited obliging local ladies, one of whom was the wife of a school headmaster who was away at the time, collecting salaries, an operation which could take months. On his return, however, he heard about the goings-on and decided on action. One night, when the unwise man from the east was asleep in his tent, the schoolmaster poured petrol over it and set fire to it. Mr. April/Fornication had to slash the tent open with a knife to escape being burned, but a substantial store of medicines was destroyed. I saw the two of them in Sioma not long after as they happened to pass by each other in the back yard of the mission. They greeted each other effusively, with abundant clapping of hands, smiles, and concerned enquiries about each other's health and general well-being, a perfect picture of communal harmony!

Another refugee worker came from the north of Zambia, and saw himself as a cut above the local yokels.

He was working with a local team in digging wells, and they moved from place to place. On one occasion, he took the cook, a local man, to task for using a metal spoon to scrape a pot, saying that he should know that only a wooden spoon should be used for that job. This was one of many similar incidents of talking down to the locals. On his return to Sioma for a break, his reputation preceded him. One evening, he began to talk down to a local man about something. This was the last straw. The man said to him, 'You may know everything there is to know about spoons and pots, but here's something you may not know. Your girlfriend, the one who's in the clinic having a baby - who's the father of her child? While you were in the bush we had a great time with her, so is it yours or not?' This was not well received by the Northerner, who went away, collected a pestle, more than 1.5 metres in length, about 4 cm in diameter, made of teak or other hardwood, and used for stamping maize in a mortar. He returned to where the local man was sitting at a fire, swung it and hit him across the back of the head, stretching him out unconscious. We used to say that the script-writers of the Hollywood soaps should have come to Sioma for some new ideas.

But there was a dark side also to life in Sioma. A young woman was walking up the hill to the road one day, hoping to catch a bus. (The service varied between rare and non-existent, but perhaps there was a good patch then.) She was carrying a heavy suitcase, and a young man, also going for the bus, but empty-handed, offered to help her with it. She was glad to accept his help. But her husband saw this and drew a conclusion.

He flew into a rage and attacked not the young man, but his wife, accusing her of infidelity and beating her so savagely that she died. When he calmed down he could not believe what he had done. Zambians, most of the time, seemed calm and unruffled in situations where Westerners would show irritation or anger. They used to laugh at us for our annoyance or impatience. But the other side of the situation was that, when Zambians did lose their cool, it was like a volcanic eruption with all restraint gone.

Visiting the church along the Angolan border always involved a lot of work, but was rewarding. Sometimes there were surprises. I was saying Mass in a small grass church, combining with it confessions, baptisms and confirmations, and even an occasional marriage. When it came to a wedding on one occasion, I asked the bride, 'Do you, X, take this man, Y, to be your husband....?'. For a moment, there was silence, and then she said quietly, 'No.' I was taken aback. For a moment I was unsure if I had heard correctly. I asked the question again. And, once again, she said quietly, 'No.' She was withholding consent and that was that. Marriage is based on the mutual consent of the couple, and, if that's absent, then there isn't a marriage. I turned to the choir and asked them to sing a hymn to draw attention away from the couple. When the Mass was over I - probably unwisely - asked her why she said no. She replied, 'My parents don't agree.' I didn't believe the answer, but it didn't matter. No consent, no marriage. End of story.

‘Ya ipulaya h’a liliwi’ says a Silozi proverb. It means ‘The one who takes his life is not mourned.’ I discovered the truth of that when someone came and told me there a corpse lying on the river bank. It seems that a man had thrown himself in the river about a week before, taking his life. His body had floated to the surface and been pulled ashore, but no one wanted anything more to do with it after that. A local policeman and I took it from there: we loaded his body onto my pick-up and drove to a quiet place some distance away. The ground was very hard because we were well into the dry season and it was necessary to use a pick-axe to break the crust of the soil open for digging. The smell was pretty nauseating, so I left the engine of the vehicle running with the exhaust pointing towards us as we dug, the diesel fumes counteracting the smell of decay. There were no mourners. I think the public attitude may have been that, by taking his own life, he had rejected the community, so now they rejected him.

Alongside the road between Livingstone and Sesheke, there was a line of power pylons running parallel. They were built of steel, tapering almost to a point, with a criss-cross network of reinforcement. The stork fraternity discovered that these made handy foundations for nests; indeed, the job of building one was already half done for them. So they built their nests in them, starting from the Livingstone end. The following year there were more, and, the year after that, more again. Clearly the word had got round and opportunistic storks from far and wide were availing of these handy property developments – a *des res* in the pylons!

A less intelligent use of the same power pylons was when power to Mongu, the capital of the Western province, was cut off, on more than one occasion, when farmers, looking for nuts and bolts to repair ox-drawn ploughs, found that those on the pylons fitted perfectly, so they did a “self-help scheme”, removing the bolts that held them together. Down came the pylons and off went the power. The provincial hospital was left without electricity – it had no back-up. To prevent a recurrence, the electricity company had to weld the bolts in every pylon for hundreds of kilometres. Higher electricity charges followed.

I had a dream one night about the trial of Jesus as recounted in the gospel. It seemed to me that the trial of the one whom Pilate called ‘The Man’ gradually became a trial of Man, humanity. Starting the next morning, I began writing it as a play, and it was published in 1990 by Saint Paul Publications in Nairobi under the title *Man on Trial*. It was about human reactions to Jesus, in effect asking the question, ‘Who do you say that I am?’

There was a local traditional healer who had a great reputation not only locally, or even in Zambia, but in neighbouring countries, too. He was a charming gentleman of great courtesy and humour. His services did not come cheap, anything up to ten head of cattle in some cases. A niece of mine, a medical doctor by profession, came to see me and we went to visit him together. He explained his method to her: he would first test a possible medicine on a hen; if it survived, he would try it on a dog or cat; and, if that survived, he

would try it on himself. He died not very long afterwards. But there probably is a cornucopia of medicinal potential in the plant-life of the forest, the plain and the river valleys.

Once, when visiting a church a long way from Sioma, near the Angolan border, I noticed that the people used as an altar in their church an unusual looking table. The top was made of thick, strong Perspex, oval in shape. Where did they get that from, I wondered? They told me it was a window from a plane of the Portuguese air force which had crashed across the border, whose contents they had “liberated”. Thank you, Portuguese air force and NATO, the ultimate source.

On another occasion, I entered a church which the people had cleaned and decorated for my visit, which might come as little as once in a year. My eye was drawn to strings of twine which they had strung across the church, from which were hanging what they called “balloons”. They were inflated condoms! Thank you, International Planned Parenthood Federation, for your devotion.

A crop widely grown in Zambia is sorghum – *mabeele* in Silozi; it’s used for brewing beer. At a government agricultural research station in a place called Mount Makuru, researchers had developed a new strain with a shorter stem but a bigger cluster of seeds. It was also less vulnerable to drought. This seemed like good news, but there was a catch. In contrast to traditional strains which could be planted from the harvest year after year, it was

a hybrid, and so new seeds would have to be sown each year. That sounded to me as if someone was creating a captive market for themselves. I have heard similar stories from other parts of the Third World, and the name *Monsanto* keeps coming up.

Churches were simple, built by the people of local materials, but they were rightly proud of them. Often they had no windows, just an opening in the wall, but that was adequate. Around Christmas, I visited one where the people had prepared a crib under the altar. A hen found this to be just the very place she had been looking for, and made her nest in the straw, laid her eggs, and was happily hatching them when I arrived. 'The sparrow herself finds a home and the swallow a nest for her brood; she lays her young by your altar, Lord of Hosts, my king and my God.' (Psalm 83 {84}.2) So, if the swallow may do it, why not the hen, too? She stayed there happily throughout the Mass and was left where she was.

One of the things I really enjoyed in Sioma was sitting on the porch at the front of the house in the evening, having a cold beer and enjoying a conversation with Benignus and Hugh, or the occasional visitor. The sky was beautifully clear, and you could watch satellites cutting their arc across the sky, sometimes as many as three or four at a time. In the wet season, there would be powerful thunder-storms, with brilliant shafts of lightning striking the ground or trees across the river from us. On one occasion, a blue gum tree (eucalyptus) tree near us was hit; it split and almost disintegrated. I

think the sap in it boiled instantly and exploded every part of the wood.

We would also see, from time to time, unmarked and unlit military planes flying west to land at Njamba in south-east Angola, near Sinjembela in the parish, said to be collecting ivory and rhino horn, and possibly diamonds, for transmission to Lusaka for the Secretary of State for Defence and Security, Grey Zulu. It was supplied by UNITA, the guerrilla organization of Jonas Savimbi, who fought a civil war against the MPLA government in Luanda from independence in 1975 till his defeat and death in 2002. We used to speculate on what the *quid pro quo* might have been. According to the *International Union for the Conservation of Nature*, staff at the Italian and US embassies were also involved in this trade, and the Benedictine monastery at Peramiho in Tanzania was a trans-shipment point.

There were some narrow escapes. At the mission I had asked two men working for us to change the tyres on my four-by-four. They did so and I drove off happily. After some distance I heard a heavy clunking sound coming from the left front wheel. I got out to look, and saw that it was held in place by just one nut instead of five. Clearly, the men had not given them the final tightening, and the movement of the vehicle gradually rattled them loose so that they fell off one by one along the way. If the wheel had come off, the outcome might have been seriously different. I took a nut from each of the other three wheels and used them to hold the wheel in place until I got back to the mission. One of the men berated the other for being stupid and careless, but, when we

followed up who was working on which wheel, it turned out that it was he who was to blame!

A new word in the vocabulary

A new word was beginning to enter our vocabulary – AIDS. And then it became so pervasive a term that it seemed hardly possible to have a conversation without it. I got some materials in Silozi from the district hospital in Senanga about it, and started to spread the word around. When I spoke about it in the churches, and said that the best to avoid getting it was for one man and one woman to be faithful to each other, a common reaction was for people to burst out laughing. They simply thought this was ridiculous – only a white man, or a missionary, could think up something so crazy! One local man, a lorry driver, said to me that he understood what was going on. According to him, missionaries had been preaching to people for decades about keeping the Ten Commandments, but no one had taken any notice of ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery.’ So now, missionaries had invented this bogeyman called AIDS to frighten people into compliance. And he said that he, for one, wasn’t going to be fooled by it!

In Zambia, sex was freely sought and freely given, and this created ideal conditions for the spread of STI’s, including AIDS. There was huge denial around the subject. No one was prepared to admit that they, or someone close to them, had it. They would say it was TB, malnutrition, giardia, malaria or anything else. This might have had some truth in it, as AIDS, destroying the

immune system, left the body prey to any of the resident bugs which were common, and these might be the immediate cause of death. But the root cause was AIDS. It was a problem that we were just beginning to become aware of.

Getting cross with God

On one occasion, when I spent a long time in the bush near the Angolan border, which is formed by the Mashi River – also known as the Cuando, the Linyanti, and later the Chobe – I was feeling hot, sweaty and dirty. I badly needed a good wash, and was tired of trying to give myself a “bath” in a bucket of water. I came to a place where there was a small inlet of the river, which, in that area, was wide and shallow. It seemed like a good place. As I was getting ready to go into the water, a local man appeared and advised me that the water was bad. I asked him what he meant but didn’t understand his answer, and decided to go ahead. I had my wash and everything seemed alright.

Not long after, on my return to Sioma, I found that I was feeling extremely tired. After a long night’s sleep, I was so tired that, after breakfast, I would go back to bed and sleep for a few hours. Or sometimes I couldn’t sleep and spent the night listening to the grunts of hippos foraging along the river-banks. I went to the hospital where the doctor told me I had *bilharzia*, also known as *schistosomiasis*, a water-borne tropical illness carried by

parasites which enter the body through the skin, and make their way to the liver which they then begin to eat. If unchecked, they may kill a person. Clearly, the man had been right; the water was indeed “bad.” The doctor gave me medication called *Ambilhar* which was awful, producing feelings of depression. Only later I learned that a patient on this treatment was supposed to be put on suicide watch, because some who had been on it had taken their life. Not knowing this, I had continued trying to work as normal, and went around to churches saying Mass and meeting the people. But I knew I wasn’t getting better as the tiredness continued.

I set out to drive to Bulawayo in Zimbabwe for further treatment. On the way, I heard a heavy noise coming from underneath the Landrover. I got out to see what it was. The fuel-tank had fallen off, the result of endless bumping on rough roads, and was held in place only by the feeder pipe. There was nothing for it but to get underneath the vehicle, jack up the tank, tie it in place with a rope, and hope it held until I reached Sesheke. As I was doing this, it began to rain heavily, and the water ran down along the hill collecting silt as it went, until it reached me lying on the ground. I became soaked through with muddy water.

This was one of my cross-with-God moments. I remember thinking, ‘Dear God, you’re not making things easy for me, are you?’ I’m trying to serve you; I feel weak as a kitten, I’m in this mess, and you send me rain. Thanks.’ But there was nothing for it except to keep

going and I made it to Sesheke where someone had bolts and the tank was properly fixed.

I went on to Bulawayo where I checked into Mater Dei hospital, run by the FMDM sisters. Their doctor exploded when I told him I had been given *Ambilhar*. I still remember his words, ‘Primitive and useless!’ He gave me other medication called *Biltricide*. It worked, and I experienced the nearest thing to resurrection I have ever felt. Overnight there was a change and I felt energy coming back to me. Thank God – and the pharmaceutical profession – for medicine that works.

Mines

Mines were a feature of life in Sioma parish: magnetic ones that detonated when anything metallic approached; heavy ones that could be detonated only by a vehicle such as a truck or bus; phosphorous ones designed to stick to flesh and burn into it; mines placed on top of each other, so that, if a mine clearance worker – there weren’t any - lifted the top one, doing so would trigger the one underneath; anti-personnel mines that sprang out of the ground to about chest height, and then spun hundreds of barbed balls of hard plastic around 360 degrees. These had the malicious advantage that plastic would not show up on an X-ray and so the process of removing them from even one person’s body would be slow and expensive. People used the only mine clearance method open to them; they would drive a herd of cattle along the road and hope for the best.

On my second last day in Sioma, there was a commotion outside the house one morning. Two children, a brother and sister, were being brought to the clinic. The boy, about five years old, was dead; the girl, about seven, was dying, her stomach burst open and her intestines hanging out. They had been playing near their village and had picked up a “toy”. Toys are very scarce in a Zambian village and it must have seemed to them that they had found a treasure. It was a mine, deliberately made to look like a toy so that children would pick it up and be injured or killed. The idea was to demoralize and frighten the adult population. The girl died a few hours later. What kind of people are they who use their God-given talents as psychologists and engineers to work out that kind of evil tactic? Do they go home at the end of the day to their wives and children, have supper, watch TV, go to bed and have a good night’s sleep?

Four government agricultural workers were killed by a mine on the road near the Kalongola ferry crossing. Why? Were they really the intended targets, or was it meant for someone else? Apart from a memorial slab, they were quickly forgotten, and yet they were human beings with homes and families.

In all probability, these mines had been placed by South African forces. They were engaged in a war against SWAPO, the Namibian guerrillas, and wanted to deprive them of their base of support between the Zambezi River and the Angolan border to the west. So they sank the ferry at Kalongola, blew up the bridge at the Matebele plain, sank canoes along the river, and took

the Sesheke ferry across to Caprivi and held it there. They distributed land mines to paid local supporters for planting on tracks which they thought SWAPO might use. The mines were sometimes used to settle personal scores, and the innocent, such as children, also suffered. ‘When elephants fight, it’s the grass that suffers’ is an African proverb.

A local shopkeeper owned a Landrover, a green one, an unfortunate choice of colour because of its military associations. One day, as it was parked beside his house, a South African air force plane bombed it, killing three of his children. Collateral damage.

A visitor from the sky

I went to the Caprivi Strip in Namibia at Christmas 1986, just across the border from Sesheke, for the funeral of Brother Andrew O’Shea who had been with me in Sioma in 1978. In the evening, I was walking from the friary to the dormitory of a boarding school where several of us visitors were staying. It was dark and moonless, I didn’t have a torch, and was picking my way slowly, unsure of where I was going. Suddenly, an intensely bright light lit up the countryside, making it easy for me to make my way. It lasted about twenty seconds and then went down towards the horizon. I remember thinking of those legends – the Venerable Bede has them in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* – of how a bright light was seen to ascend to heaven at the death of a holy person. But this

light was falling. I had no idea what it was, but everyone else had seen it also, and they were just as confused.

On returning to Sioma, the people there were full of it. They said it seemed to move in low over the villages, coming from the west, from Angola, with a loud, rushing sound, before dropping below the horizon in the general direction of Mulobezi. People further away in Kaoma had a similar experience. From Caprivi to Kaoma is about 280 km as the crow flies, so the light was clearly not a military flare which would be seen only locally. Later, people in Mulobezi reported a large forest fire east of their town.

I wrote to a BBC science programme, giving them a detailed account. They replied, stating that they believed it was a Soviet satellite which had spun out of orbit and re-entered the earth's atmosphere, burning up as it went.

I spent five years in Sioma and liked every minute of it. It was a beautiful place, the people were always friendly, the work had been rewarding, and I had seen new possibilities of what the church could be.

Mangango, 1989-1994

In 1989, I received a transfer to Mangango in Kaoma district, on the banks of a river called the Luena. It flowed west onto the Barotse Plain before disappearing underground, probably to join the Zambezi. The mission there had been founded in 1948 after Father Aquinas

Carroll had spent 1946-47 building a bridge over the river, opening up access. The arrival of Brother Gabriel McGillicuddy was the beginning of a programme of building which went on for years: a church, a school, a 115-bed hospital, a leper village, a convent, a friary and staff houses. The Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood, a congregation of British origin, staffed the hospital and leper village. One person among them who gave untiring service was Sr. Luke Connor, a medical doctor. Gabriel worked in Mangango until his retirement to Ireland at the age of about eighty-five.

In my time, there were outstanding lay missionaries there: Nell Dillon from Omagh in Northern Ireland who spent seventeen years there, working mostly with women, and who pioneered the growing of rice in the area; Liam Cronin, from West Cork, who was carpenter, plumber, mechanic, builder, and all-purpose maintenance man; Dr. Maeve Bradley from Maghera in Derry. She and Liam married – romance blossomed in the bush – and now live in West Cork with their three children. There was also Dr. Clare Groves from England. I often thought we were blessed to have them; apart from their professional skills, they were outstanding human beings and had great rapport with the local people.

The people in the Mangango area were mainly of the Nkoya tribe, but with the presence also of some Mambunda, Luchazi, Luvale and Chokwe people. Fortunately, Silozi was widely used, so it was not necessary to learn a new language. Shortly after going there, I went for a walk around the area to get an overview and a feel for the place. Looking at it from the

other side of the Luena, I could see that it was little more than a clearing in the bush, though the hospital served a wide catchment area.

AIDS

One thing which caught my attention was that this small place had four cemeteries, one of them a new one that had recently opened with just three or four graves in it. Before leaving Mangango after four and a half years, I went to that same cemetery and counted 234 graves in it, most of them probably victims of AIDS; and that's not counting the other three cemeteries. On the basis of blood tests, the hospital staff in Mangango estimated that one-third of the adult population was HIV positive, well above the national average of twenty per cent. To jump ahead to a later date for which I have statistics, in 1999, the number of people dying of AIDS in Zambia each year was estimated to be 90,000, almost all of them in the 15-49 age group. This meant that the middle generation was wiped out, and it left grandparents with the job of caring for their grand-children on a full-time basis. I knew of a retired school caretaker, a far from wealthy man, who was trying to look after his thirteen grand-children on his own.

There was great ignorance, and it increased problems. For instance, there was a widespread idea that, if you had AIDS, you get rid of by giving it to someone who didn't have it. That sounds insane; perhaps it was something that desperate people clung to for hope. But it resulted in

young girls, because they were virgins, being raped so that the rapist could free himself of the disease.

The best way of preventing this problem is by following the commandments, with abstinence before marriage and fidelity in it. Condoms don't provide what is called "safe sex". At best they make it safer, or, in the context of a pandemic like that in Southern Africa, less dangerous. Condoms could also make sex more dangerous, if they help create the impression that, as long as a condom is used, then there is no danger and people may happily and safely be promiscuous. And children were endangered by discarded condoms which they picked up, and, thinking they were balloons, put them to their mouths and inflated them. But, weighing up the balance of argument in a situation like that in Zambia, the use of condoms seems to me to be at least the lesser of two evils. It may, in some cases, be the more responsible thing to do. But if one partner in a marriage is HIV positive and the other is not, then it would seem morally wrong of the couple not to use a condom. Are we not losing the good for the sake of the best in excluding the use of condoms altogether?

My view is that the use of a condom to protect life rather than prevent it is compatible with n.15 of the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* which upheld the use of contraception for therapeutic purposes. I raised this question at a deanery meeting, a meeting of the priests in a group of neighbouring parishes. One priest said, 'The Holy Father had said that the use of condoms is everywhere and always mortally sinful.' I turned to the bishop, who looked as if he wished he were somewhere

else. After some squirming, he finally said that everyone had to carry their cross. To me that is the kind of opiate theology that gives church leadership a name for intellectual dishonesty and lack of courage. Leaders who just dodge and duck for cover whenever a difficulty arises quickly lose respect; they don't lead.

The official church position is that the use of condoms is always immoral. I wonder what later generations will think of that when they read of 5,500 people dying every day in Africa of AIDS. That's about the equivalent of eighteen fully-laden jumbo jets crashing daily with no survivors. It is not far from two 911's daily. I think those generations will wonder, not only about our sense of responsibility, or our humanity, but even our sanity. They will wonder, too, about the silence of those who disagreed with official teaching but said nothing.

Mail from the *boma*, the district capital, used to come to the mission for distribution, and it was a common sight to see letters franked by the University Teaching Hospital (UTH) in Lusaka addressed to local people, giving them the result of their blood test for HIV. I remember thinking that, for some, it was like receiving a death sentence through the post. There were no anti-retroviral drugs. Fortunately, this way of doing things was changed, and letters would be sent to the doctor, and the news, good or bad, given to the patient by the doctor. President Kaunda, in a courageous move, helped to break the taboo of silence around the topic of AIDS, by stating publicly that a son of his had died of the disease.

There was great resistance on the part of local people to a change in sexual mores. They would simply say, 'It is our culture.' That was the cover-all, the explanation for everything, but, in reality, it was an abdication of personal responsibility. If you do something for long enough, whether it's good or bad, you can always excuse it by saying, 'It is our culture.' Slavery would be an example. I remember attending a course on Christian marriage organized by the diocese, and attended by people from Mangango and elsewhere. If you only listened to what was said, you would have been very impressed by the group discussions and reporting back. People spoke of love, fidelity, trust, mutual respect, sharing, caring, etc. – all the right things. But, if you watched the faces, and saw the suppressed giggles, the nods, winks and nudges, you would have received the message that people didn't believe what they were saying. They said what was expected of them in the context of a course of Christian marriage.

One world

There was news from Europe that affected us directly. We had heard about Mikhail Gorbachev and his efforts at *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the USSR – so like the *renewal* and *adaptation* of Vatican II. I had never dared to hope that things would go as well as they did. The Soviet Union, seemingly so immovable, melted away before our eyes with few lives lost. The Berlin Wall was demolished and Germany re-united. This marked the end

of the Cold War, which, in the Third World, had often been a hot war, with the superpowers fighting each other through their proxies.

Angola, our western neighbour, was an example: the US and South Africa had supported the UNITA anti-government guerrilla movement, while the Soviet Union and Cuba had supported the MPLA, the Marxist government which held power in Luanda, the capital. In the end, the MPLA won, but the loss of life was huge, and Angola is said to have been left with seventeen million landmines in its soil. It is a potentially rich country, with oil, diamonds, good land and an excellent climate. Its enclave, Cabinda, across a narrow strip of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) was rich in oil, extracted by the US company, Chevron, and was a major source of revenue for the MPLA. Chevron's installations were guarded against possible UNITA attacks by a brigade of Cuban (!) soldiers. The Angolan government used the oil revenue to buy arms from the Soviet Union, which may in turn have used the dollars to buy wheat from the US. Wheels within wheels - we live in one world.

A consequence of the collapse of communism in Europe was that communist governments elsewhere began to fall in the face of a loss of support from the Soviet Union and popular pressures for free multi-party elections. This happened in Zambia. A movement for multi-party democracy gradually formed itself into a political party, the MMD, in 1990. Under mounting external and internal pressure, President Kaunda had agreed to an amendment to the Constitution dropping the

one-party clause. In 1973, Zambia had voted itself a one-party state, and also, unbelievably, had voted in a referendum to drop from the Constitution a clause requiring referenda for constitutional amendments. The people had voted away their own freedom – twice! (Foolishly, a Catholic archbishop had campaigned with UNIP for a one-party state.)

In the election campaign of 1991, Kenneth Kaunda predicted a landslide victory, and there was one - but neither for him nor for UNIP. Frederick Chiluba of the MMD won 81% of the vote, and Kaunda only 19% in the presidential contest. In the elections to the National Assembly the MMD won 135 seats and UNIP 15. A few months later, having learned nothing from its defeat in those elections, UNIP went into local elections insisting that people were obliged to vote for it since it was, they said, the country's only legitimate political party. It received a renewed drubbing.

The change was a breath of fresh air for the country. People spoke openly, voicing their opinions for the first time in almost twenty years. Business and industry began to come back to life as the dead hand of bureaucracy and overweening political control was lifted. Zambians, who had often seemed so passive and even lethargic, turned out to have as much creativity and ingenuity as anyone else, and used them once they had the opportunity. This was the first sign of development and progress that I had seen in the country since arriving there fourteen years before. Understandably, though, there was perhaps too ready an assumption that if

communism didn't work, then capitalism must be the answer.

Dan's dam

Brother Daniel O'Brien, whom I had lived with in Sichili, had spent some years in Mangango before me. A man with little formal education, he had extraordinary talent. One of his qualities was an ability to feel compassion, not just for the victim of crime, but for its perpetrator also. He had conceived the idea of building a dam on the river principally to generate electricity for the hospital. He undertook a survey, chose the site, bearing in mind the head, or fall, that would be created by the dam and where a foundation could be built. He patiently won the agreement of local people who would lose some of their land through the formation of the lake, and then began the work of construction. A turbine was ordered from Germany, was stolen in the port of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, but replaced free of charge by the German company. Only someone who has lived and worked in an area like Mangango can have an appreciation of the work involved and the amount of energy and determination required to bring the project to completion. Dan did it. It was up and running by the time I went there. It supplied the whole mission and saved a great deal of money that would otherwise have been spent on diesel generation. In the dry season, the output was reduced and had to be limited to the evening to some buildings, but it still kept us going.

When Dan and Liam Cronin were away, the job of servicing the turbine fell to me. I had never in my wildest imagination seen myself in such a role. Changing a wheel or a light bulb were the outer limits of my technical abilities, and I found it pretty intimidating, knowing how much depended on it – an operating theatre, an X-ray machine, and fridges to keep vaccines cool and usable. I managed with the help of a handbook in German, which I don't know, and a dictionary, explaining the *zu* and the *auf*. 'Do your best and you'll get better' – the mantra came back to me; there's truth in it. It was a great disappointment to hear, some years later, that the dam had been put out of use by someone who opened the sluices at night and emptied the lake, so that they could catch the fish easily. I was told that it was hospital staff who did it! I hope it's not true.

Malaria – or was it?

A good number of people in the area – expatriate and local – began to complain of feeling extremely tired without any obvious explanation. I felt it, too. I wondered if my bilharzia was returning. I went for a check-up and was clear as far as that was concerned, but registered positive for malaria. I was puzzled: I didn't have the classic symptoms of the disease – high temperature, headache, muscular pain and vomiting. I had been careful since coming to Zambia and had not contracted it before. I used a mosquito net over the bed at night, I had kept fly-screens closed, sprayed the bedroom, used a high-tech sound-operated mosquito repellent, and taken a weekly preventative. So was it

really malaria? The doctor recommended a course of *chloroquin*, the standard treatment. I took it and still registered positive at the end. A repeat dose was recommended, with the same result. I was prescribed other treatments such as *Fansidar*, *Camoquin*, quinine, *Tetracycline*, *Meflaquin*, *Halofantrin* and *Halfan* – in all, seventeen courses of treatment over a period of eight months, with a positive result at the end of it all. While taking *Meflaquin*, I became deaf, and have suffered some hearing loss since then as well as *tinnitus*. Finally, I said, ‘No more!’- I think I should have said it earlier, perhaps much earlier - and nothing happened. But I was still very tired. What broke the illness – whatever it was – in my case was a transfer from Mangango to Malengwa near Mongu, the provincial capital of the Western province in 1994.

Dr. Luke Connor, the English doctor, told me that, when treating some patients who showed the classic symptoms of malaria, she noticed that there was no response to the usual course of *chloroquin*, and some died. She couldn’t understand this, and was worried that resistance to the drug might be developing as a result of over-use. But the explanation was different: when she went home to England on leave, she brought some of the tablets with her and had them analysed in a tropical diseases hospital. The result showed that the tablets, made in Thailand, contained no active ingredient; they were simply compressed powder with no medicinal properties. Zambians had become victims of a scam that affected many people in Third World countries. How many had died as a result? Had that been the case with

me also? I don't know. And in a local, government-owned shop, they sold 25 kg bags of DDT, - an agricultural chemical banned in most countries - with minimal information about health and safety in its use, and nothing about its environmental impact. The manufacturers must have known that they would never get away with doing that in the West, but anything was good enough for Africa, it seemed.

An elderly friar from the neighbouring parish of Kaoma, Father Connor Brady, a Cavan man, came to us at the same time showing the symptoms of malaria. He was treated, but did not respond. One course followed another, even double courses, without effect. I remember him saying, 'I never thought dying would be so easy,' and it did, indeed, look as if he were dying. Some workmen were repairing a broken pipe at the back of the house at the time, and, hearing the banging, he asked if they were making his coffin, and he wasn't joking! Then the doctor made a last effort with one more course of a different drug, the only one not yet tried. It worked, and Connor lived for another year.

Snapshots from Mangango

One day, before my time, the first bishop of the diocese, Timothy Phelim O'Shea, a Cork man, came for a while, probably for confirmation. Early one morning, he went out into the garden and was shocked to see a man lying on the ground, apparently dead. But a quick examination made it clear that the man was not dead, but only dead drunk! The bishop spoke to him and he woke

up, gradually got his bearings, and stood up. Unknown to the bishop, all this had been watched by a passer-by, who put two and two together, made twenty-two of them, and then ran around telling everyone that the bishop had raised a dead man to life! The story remained alive for years to come, no matter how often it was denied.

Driving to Lusaka, the capital, on one occasion, I stopped for a break in the Kafue Game Park. As I was having something to eat, to my great surprise, a cheetah (at least I think it was cheetah, but it might have been a small leopard) walked across the road a little distance away and, following a narrow track, disappeared from sight into the bush. Without thinking of what I was doing, I followed it. Rounding a bend, I saw the animal close in front, looking back over its shoulder straight at me, as if to say, 'What are you doing?' I remember how yellow its eyes were, and how the pupils were like narrow vertical slits. I had an impression of concentrated hatred directed at me. It was time to get out, so I slowly walked backwards until out of sight, and then returned to the car. It was a foolish thing to have done. On another occasion, in Zimbabwe, I had gone to have a close look at a herd of elephants until a large male warned me off by moving towards me, flapping its ears.

The local chief, Mwene Mutondo, came on a visit and it was something of an eye-opener. The people received him with great enthusiasm. Since UNIP had come to office, the chiefs had lost their power but clearly not their popularity. There was a House of Chiefs in Lusaka

under the terms of the Constitution, but it was as toothless as the stone lions outside the High Court. They had been cleverly neutered: they and their staff were paid state salaries; their sons and daughters were given jobs in the Party hierarchy or state companies. With such obvious advantages to be derived from cooperating with the system, they were not going to rock the boat. While this was clever politics, it was a pity that their influence was not used constructively as a motivator for development; they could have done something useful.

Some distance from the mission, SWAPO had a camp. We had received instructions from the *boma* not to go there; it was off-limits to ex-pats. This made me wonder sometimes what went on there. After South-West Africa became independent as Namibia in 1990, I heard stories about how some of its external camps had been places of detention, torture and even execution. I used to ask whether I had not been living near a mini-Dachau. And if asked, would I answer, like many Germans did, saying 'I knew nothing.' I was invited to visit the camp after Namibian independence and saw there an exhibition of photos showing the cruelty of the German occupation forces in the late nineteenth century when they slaughtered the Herero people in their tens of thousands. The camp itself was a squalid place, with evidence everywhere of waste of goods supplied by Western, especially Nordic, donors. I would not have been surprised at anything I might have heard about it. I had earlier met a group of visiting young Danish socialists, supporters of SWAPO, who had the most naïve, starry-eyed ideas of what Zambia was like, UNIP especially,

and I couldn't help thinking how easily they had been fooled.

While I was in Mangango, the friars in Zambia gathered in Lusaka, the capital, for a mission chapter. One of our tasks was to elect a new regional leader. We chose Brother Declan O'Callaghan, who was elected by 32 votes out of 35. All went well until we were told that, since he was not ordained, Rome would have to be asked for approval. It was asked, and it didn't. We were told that the new Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1983, did not allow a non-cleric to exercise jurisdiction over clerics; and religious orders were required to declare themselves to be clerical or non-clerical, fish or flesh. We pointed out that the Second Vatican Council had told religious orders to return to the spirit of their founder, and Saint Francis, our founder, (like Saint Benedict) was not a priest, had not intended founding an order, but had simply lived the gospel in such a way that a community of brothers had gathered round him. We were doing what the Council told us. We were told that the church would not allow it. "The church" in this instance was a cranky monsignor in the Vatican congregation of religious. We repeated our request. We were told that Declan could continue in office but with a different title, that of provincial delegate. We were satisfied with that, and life went on happily. Subsequently, after repeated requests from other parts of the order, Rome thawed and non-ordained brothers were elected provincials and general definitors (councillors).

Some of the news from Ireland was not good. I began to hear about a priest called Brendan Smith who had been accused of sexually abusing children, and it seemed that the evidence against him was strong. Then I heard that he had not denied the charges, in fact, had admitted them fully, but had taken an attitude of ‘So what?’ He was quoted as saying, ‘It was just a bit of uncle stuff.’ It seems he acknowledged the facts but entirely denied their significance. How could a priest, of all people, take such a view? How could any human being take such a view? But I felt that, however bad it was, it was just the action of one man, and that was the end of it. How mistaken I was! When I was in New Zealand I had heard a parish priest say that he would not allow his curate to have anything to do with altar servers. At the time I was so naïve that I thought this was because the curate might be hot-tempered and impatient, though I now think the truth was probably that he was, at least potentially, an abuser. But that was all I had heard on this subject, even as a whisper on the grapevine.

During my time in Mangango, I started writing about Zambia with the hope that one day it might be published. I completed a study of about 150 pages which I called *Zambia: the Kaunda Years*. I sent it to a publisher, who replied, saying that he thought it was professionally acceptable, but not a practical business proposition as he could not elicit a response from any potential Zambian co-publisher. That was disappointing, but still just one of the ups and downs of life. Doing the study and writing had been good for clarifying ideas in my head.

I had an experience which recalled my earlier “atheist” interval in Kilkenny as a novice. Once again, God simply dropped out, suddenly and completely. An image came to my mind of water pouring down a plughole, and there was nothing I could do about it. In a few moments, it was gone, and there was nothing left. I felt an extraordinary sense of emptiness, of absence. Nothing, simply nothing. I couldn’t pray. It was disconcerting, to say the least. I had the presence of mind not to panic but simply wait. And then what came to me was the thought that if there were no God, who would there be to thank for anything? All the beauty of creation, and no one to thank for it? That couldn’t be. God came back.

While conducting a funeral one day, I noticed that one woman in particular, a primary school teacher, was crying her eyes out and wailing loudly and dramatically. As we returned from the cemetery afterwards, I asked her if she was related to the deceased; I hadn’t thought there was any connection. She said to me, ‘Do you think that because I was crying so much?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ She chuckled quietly and said, ‘It’s expected of us.’ It reminded me of the keening women in Ireland up to the early twentieth century, the mourners who could turn on the taps at a funeral for an appropriate fee.

On one occasion, I was asked to conduct the funeral of a chief. I called first to his house and spoke for a while with the family. Before going outside to where the coffin was, someone handed me a can of fly spray, saying, ‘You’ll need this.’ I did. In Zambia, funerals often take place on the day of death, or, if not, then the next day, as there are no refrigerated mortuaries in rural areas. But,

with a chief, it was different; on account of his status, they had to wait for VIP's to come. He was dressed in a three-piece suit, and was seated on a throne, wearing a homburg hat. He did actually look stately. A huge grave had been dug for him. I wondered why it was so big, but recalled the rumours I had heard that young people had gone into hiding when his death was announced, because of fears that they might be captured and buried - alive or dead, I don't know - with him to be his servants in the next life. Seemingly, this had been done in the past, maybe even the recent past in the case of some chiefs. But I don't believe it happened in this case. At least, I hope so.

A man asked me one day in an outstation – we had twelve, a relatively small number - if I could fix up his family affairs so that he could marry in church. I asked him to start at the beginning and explain. His story went something like this: -

‘Well, first, there was Maria – she was pure useless!’

‘Then there was Ann – even worse.’

‘After that came Susan –a really bad mistake; she was moveous.’

(For those who haven't guessed, ‘moveous’ in Zambian English means loose, as in ‘a loose woman.’)

‘The next was Sepo – she couldn't cook.’

‘Then came Inonge – a very cross woman, impossible to live with.’

He had been counting them off on his fingers and had moved onto his second hand.

‘After Inonge came Lilato – Ah, but that woman! She was just too stupid.’

At this point he was moving on to the next finger and I was thinking, ‘Bye-bye, Henry VIII and Liz Taylor; he’s passed you out!’

‘I tried again, this time with Joan, but she wasted food and money all the time.’

I was wondering if he was going to run out of fingers and have to start on his toes, but he said, ‘This time it’s going to work; I know it. So can I marry her in the church?’

‘What’s her name?’ I asked.

He answered, ‘I don’t know; I haven’t met her yet.’

I suggested to him to stay with whoever it might be for a few years and then, if he wished, come back to me and we’d talk about it again. I never heard from him.

While visiting the parish, the bishop gave me a document, asking me to let him know what I thought about it. It was the *lineamenta* (outlines) for an upcoming Synod of Bishops to be held in Rome. They were intended to be the first step in drafting a working document called the *instrumentum laboris*. I knew the topic had already been chosen by Rome, along with the time, the venue, the moderators and a significant percentage of the participants. I knew also that the synod was not a decision-making body – it was purely consultative – and that the outcome would be nothing more than a document which would follow a year or more after it closed. As I read the *lineamenta*, I couldn’t help thinking that the synod secretariat which drafted it had a pretty good idea of what course it wanted the discussions to take. There was a lot of detail under the headings, the sub-headings and the sub-sub-headings. It was clear that, a year or more before the synod was to be

held, the secretariat already had a clear and specific idea about what it wanted – and I'm sure it got it. This kind of pretend consultation, with pre-ordained conclusions, is an example of what Rome means by *communio*. I felt they could have saved time and money by skipping the synod and sending out the minutes along with the agenda.

I was asked one day after lunch to go as quickly as I could to a nearby village to bring a seriously ill young woman to the hospital. This kind of call was frequent as the mission often had the only functioning transport in an area. I went immediately - the village was in fact only about three minutes' drive away. When I arrived, I found that she was already dead, a woman of perhaps thirty years of age. I asked why she hadn't gone to hospital earlier, and was told that her father wouldn't allow it. I asked why, and the answer was that he wanted her to stay with him to look after him. A moment or two later, the father appeared, crying loudly and calling out, 'Ki mangi ya ka ni sokela buhobe?' 'Who will cook my food now?' I felt furiously angry with what seemed to me like blatant and even stupid selfishness on his part. But I said nothing. I had already learned that, in Zambia – and perhaps elsewhere also – you rarely know the full picture and that the obvious conclusion may not be the right one. In any culture, crying may be a sign of guilt as well as grief, or it may be a performance.

There were discouraging things. I often asked myself why it was that, in Mangango, the mission had to employ seven night-watchmen to protect the facilities the

mission was offering to the local people, free of charge. The really discouraging aspect of this was that they were being protected *from* the local people; it was they who were doing the stealing. The leper village, for example, was trying to become self-sufficient in food as far as possible. The lepers used to work on their knees in the fields, and try to use a hoe with hands that had few or no fingers, and dig a hole in the ground for a seed. Doing that work in the heat of the day during the hot season is very tough going. But, when the harvest came, their maize and vegetables would be stolen at night, leaving them with nothing. I found that shamefully mean. Equipment was stolen from the hospital, such as a microscope from the lab. No one knew anything about it. But they had reckoned without a new matron, a bright young thing from England who looked as if a puff of wind would blow her away, but who was as tough as nails. She shut down the outpatients department and announced that it would re-open when the microscope was returned. The news went around fast, and then someone remembered that, yes, they had seen a person carrying something that might have been a microscope.... It was returned, and the clinic re-opened. It had been stolen to order on behalf of a doctor in Lusaka who was setting himself up in private practice and needed equipment. If those were isolated incidents, it would not have mattered, but they weren't. They were pretty constant. Was part of the problem that the services were offered free? Did it create the idea that "they" have plenty of money so it's easy for them to buy replacements?

I was letting off steam one day about someone who had let me down by failing to keep a promise. The man I was speaking to, a local, said to me, 'You're long enough in Africa to know better than to trust an African.' I felt that was devastating coming from a local man about his own people. They were better than that, I felt. But it was not uncommon to hear local people say such things. It was common to see people roll up their eyes and say 'African promises,' meaning broken promises. A catechist once said to me, 'Luna batu banansu, lu ziba feela ku sinyanya' or 'We black people, we know only how to destroy.' Were these the self-destructive attitudes of people robbed of control of their lives, reduced to a point where they can show power only in negativity? Like many other things, I don't know the answer.

One day a man walked into the hospital with an axe in his head. He had been in a fight and someone had struck him. The axe was firmly jammed in place, no one could do anything for him, so he simply walked about twenty kilometres to the hospital by himself with the axe still there. On arrival, a nurse in reception scolded him firstly for not bringing his ID, the National Registration Card, and then for not washing himself before coming to see the doctor; she ordered him off for a hot bath. As luck would have it, the doctor arrived at that point, and told the nurse there were other priorities, foremost among which was to start treatment! The hot bath, if anything, might have re-started the bleeding which had stopped. He was treated and recovered. I was often amazed at Zambians' capacity for enduring pain, at their sheer toughness in the face of physical suffering, and also their

capacity to resist infection. They could endure, and recover from, pain and injury which would have killed a Westerner. A doctor once told me she would prescribe for Zambians only a half-dose of antibiotics because they responded much better than Europeans, and she didn't want to contribute to the resistance to antibiotics that was becoming evident among Westerners who had received them fairly often.

I had often asked myself why it was, that, after more than fifty years in the Western Province, there were so few vocations from it to the priesthood or religious life, whether in the diocese or in the order; the few that offered themselves didn't last. By the mid-eighties, there were just three Capuchins, and no diocesan priest. (There had been one, but he had left.) I thought about it a lot, reflecting on my experience in formation and in parish work. I gradually came to believe that we ex-pats were the obstacle: vocations would not come as long as we were there running the show. We didn't mean it to be that way, but I think it was. No matter what was said, people simply didn't see the need. There was Mass on Sunday, and a priest visited the outstations as before. If he was grey-haired and tired, and couldn't do as much as before, maybe no one noticed. I spent several years thinking about this – I am a slow thinker – and let the thought remain in the back of my mind.

In the friary in Mangango we had a cook and house servant who had worked with us for many years. During that time, he had paid his monthly contributions, and we as employers had paid ours, into a state pension scheme

called the Zambian National Provident Fund (ZNPF). Finally, he came to retire and he applied to the Fund for his pension. After some time, a cheque came for him in the post accompanied by a letter explaining that there would not be a monthly pension but a single, once-off payment. I don't remember what it was, and, in any event, because of massive devaluation, the sum would be meaningless today, but what I do remember was that it was not enough to buy three 25 kg bags of the staple food, mealie meal. This was a huge injustice, a real rip-off. His monthly contributions were something real when he made them. Inflation had eroded them, but there was another factor. The ZNPF was a major contributor to UNIP party funds. I remember reading an annual report by its Chairman in which he spoke of how proud the Fund was to be able to support The Party in view of the great service it rendered the nation, and his only regret was that it was unable to do more. That's where the money had gone – on a crowd of wastrels.

To help the man out, I bought him pots, pans, and flour, as he was a good baker, and helped set him up. But, unfortunately, since he was an alcoholic, he sold the lot and spent the money on drink.

I called to the hospital one day to visit the patients. Near the entrance to one ward was a young woman, about thirty years old, and I began a conversation with her. After a minute or two, I noticed a change in the appearance of her eyes. It was like watching a light being lowered by a dimmer switch. In the space of about one minute, the light went from her eyes and she was dead. There was no struggle, no sign of pain. I never

heard a cause of her death and I don't remember what illness she had. It was the easiest death I have ever seen. I have sometimes thought that I would love if my own were so easy when the time comes.

One of the out-stations in Mangango parish was in a place called Mayukwayukwa. It was a settlement of Angolan refugees. Like their fellow-tribes-people in Shangombo they had strong faith, and visiting them was a delight – I couldn't say the same for many other parts of the parish. There was an atmosphere of faith and devotion among them, a sense of being on the same wavelength about God. They had some very good local leaders, and that, in my view, is the determining factor in the growth or death of a local community. I spent some days there at a time, sleeping in the church at night, or rather, trying to sleep against the background noise of thousands of frogs trumpeting mating calls. One alone makes is noisy, but thousands....! I used at times, too, think of the saying that, if you ever feel that one individual can make no difference, just trying sleeping in a room with one mosquito!

Looking back on it now, I wonder how the people there have fared since. They were supporters of Jonas Savimbi and UNITA in the Angolan civil war – the losing side. Were they able to return home after the war ended? And if they did, what reception did they receive? I don't know.

Musings on the Luena

I was standing on the banks of the Luena River, beside the mission of Mangango, in Zambia. It was one of those quiet days when your soul is at peace and you are able to relax, let go of all routine thoughts, pressures and commitments and just live in the present, savouring every beautiful moment of it. I was looking at the river, just watching the water flow past, my attention absorbed by the whirls and eddies of the current with its restless energy, constantly in a state of flux - and yet so calm.

A small branch floated past, twirled every way by the current. It had no control over itself; it just went whatever way the current caught and carried it.

Looking upstream I saw a large tree which had fallen across the river and lay in the water - heavy, water-logged and dying. It was a picture of inertia and passivity, just lying there without a move. And yet there was a sort of defiance about it, as if it were challenging the river to a test of strength. It seemed to say, 'I'll lie here and block you just by doing nothing.' But, of course, it couldn't do that. As the weeks went by, debris would accumulate against it, creating a dam of sorts, and when the rainy season would come and the level of the river rise, the pressure of the water would be too strong. It would simply lift the tree and carry it along, sweeping it out of the way, probably depositing it downstream on a sand-bank. And there it would lie, gradually bleaching in the sun, dead.

And then I saw a man paddling a canoe upstream. It was made of a hollowed-out tree trunk. You could see at

a glance that he was a skilled and experienced paddler. He stood upright in the canoe, working the oar and guiding the canoe in swift, steady movements upstream. He knew how to use the back-currents, those flows at the edge of the stream, almost beside the bank, which go against the main current. He was relaxed and confident. He knew where he wanted to go and how to get there.

It occurred to me that this was a parable about life. You could just go with the flow in a directionless drift like the branch. Or you could dig in your heels and stubbornly fight against life, trying to defeat it, like the fallen tree. Or you could treat life as a partner, learn about its currents, and work with them.

Malengwa, 1994-97

Malengwa is a mission about six km from Mongu, the capital of the Western Province. It was founded in 1947, with a local man, Henry Sinjwala, as one of its pioneers. A large primary school for boys and girls was built in 1956. A big, bright church named after Saint Francis was built in 1962. The teachers' training college was transferred there from Lukulu in 1965. A credit union for teachers was founded in the early sixties. Holy Cross girls' secondary school, run by sisters from Germany and Austria, was only the second such school in the country when it opened. A Cheshire Home for physically handicapped children, run by Presentation Sisters from Ireland, was set up in 1979 as a result of decision made by the friars at a chapter in 1978 in response to the UN Year of the Child. There were three convents of sisters

servicing the various institutions, a garage workshop, a bookshop, and a parish hall. The latter, a fine building with a kitchen, stage, small library, meeting rooms and a projection room, was built in 1973 at a cost of K1,300. A measure of how the Zambian currency, the Kwacha, deteriorated was that, by 1996, K1,500 was the cost of posting a letter to Europe. There were about twenty-five churches in outlying areas, and, with Brother Charles Chishimba, I spent a lot of time there training local leaders in the running of their churches. By preference I am a bush man rather than a townie and felt more at home there. And, as I had done in New Zealand, I put the archives of the Zambian mission in order.

There was a light interlude one day when I heard a knock at the door. I found a man there, and after the customary greetings, he secretively whispered that he wanted to offer me some haemorrhoids for sale. He spoke in English, and that's what he seemed to be saying. I asked him to repeat what he'd said. He said the same again. I told him I didn't understand what he was saying. Looking around furtively, he withdrew a brown envelope from his pocket, opened it just a little and showed it to me. In the bottom I saw small green stones. The penny dropped. 'You mean emeralds?' 'Yes, haemorrhoids.'

Problems with women

While in Malengwa, I served on the Board of Management of the teachers' training college. One problem I became aware of was that, if a woman student

became pregnant, she would be dismissed. I felt this was unjust, and served only to encourage her to look for an abortion, as well as letting the father off scot-free, and he might well be a fellow-student. I decided to propose a change to the rules, and sought to win support for it. Thinking that the men on the board might oppose the move, I set out to explain my idea to them and try to win their support. To my surprise, I found that they didn't need persuading; they all accepted it readily. Very foolishly, I assumed that the women board members would favour the change. How wrong I was! When the board meeting came, the women members, one after the other, came out with guns blazing, in opposition. They said that such women were just prostitutes, sleeping with their husbands and breaking up their marriages, and they fully deserved what they got. My proposal was voted down by the women and the rule remained in place.

I was going to Senanga from Sioma one day and had arrived at the pontoon at Kalongola for the river crossing. A commotion caught my attention, so I went to see what was happening. A circle of women, cheering, singing and clapping were watching something. I made my way through the circle to see what it was. There I saw a soldier beating a woman who was lying face down on the ground with a stick. I went to intervene, but was pushed back by other soldiers and told to keep out of it, with a few punches to reinforce the point. I discovered what it was about: the woman was a prostitute, and had agreed to give the soldier sex in return for a blanket. He took the sex but didn't pay up, so she took the blanket anyway. When he went back to claim it, she had hidden

it, so he was beating her to get it from her. The other women, all local, were happy to see her being beaten for the same reason as the women on the board of management. They saw her as someone who was threatening their marriages and deserved to be beaten.

“Property-grabbing” became a public issue. This was the name given to the widespread practice whereby, if a man died, his relatives would come and take his property as theirs, leaving his widow with as much or as little as they chose; it was seen as their property. If they wanted to, they could take the children, too. I remember a woman coming to the door of the friary in Sichili dressed shabbily, and crying, saying that her late husband’s relatives had come and taken everything, leaving her with nothing. (I don’t remember what I did, but I hope I helped her.) Another friar told me of seeing a woman being chased through a wood, totally naked, by a posse of laughing and jeering members – female as well as male - of her late husband’s family. Many people saw how unjust this was. After a determined campaign, legislation was passed by the National Assembly outlawing the practice. But making it work was another matter. A local woman said to me, ‘We are all against property-grabbing until the opportunity comes, and then we grab, too.’

During an attempted coup in Lusaka, one that lasted only a few hours, rioters broke into Indian-owned shops, pulled the Indian women out onto the streets and raped them, while local women sang, clapped and cheered. Some of those Indian women later took their own lives.

A teacher from Germany came to the Holy Cross Girls' School in Malengwa while I was there. She told me of her astonishment when she raised with the girls the question of why they were not studying hard enough. They told her it was because she did not beat them. If she beat them, they would study, so their failure to learn was her fault, they said. At times, the lack of solidarity among women was depressing.

I was in the parish office one Saturday morning when I saw three women coming towards me together, chatting happily, and each carrying a baby on her back. They were beautiful looking. They said they wanted to have their babies baptized. I talked with the first, and, among other things, asked the name of the baby's father. She gave it. It was familiar, a local man whom I knew as a gardener. Then the second woman came in, and I repeated the process. I asked for the father's name, and she gave it - the same. That stopped me in my tracks: the women were beautiful, but he was no Mr. Pin Up - very far from it indeed! Then came the third woman - a repeat: the same father again. I asked myself what it was about this guy, that he was able to win the favours of these women, and that it seemed not to bother them that he had been with all three of them, and probably at about the same time. And what did his wife think of all this? One of the mysteries of life!

I was in conversation with a village headman one day, when his wife appeared on the scene and said something which, in a minor way, disrupted the conversation. Her

husband turned his head slightly towards her and said, 'Kuza, wena musali! Wa eza feela lilata!' (Quiet, woman! You're only making noise!) using the singular form of the second person, the form used for addressing children or people at a lower level on the hierarchical ladder. She immediately curtsied and clapped her hands in apology, saying, 'Eni, mungaaka!' (Yes, my lord!) It wasn't as serious as it sounds. I said to the husband that Lozi men had a great life, able to lord it over women. He burst out laughing and said, 'That's what you white men think. You think the women are all deferential and submissive, but, let me tell you, that, when it's just the two of us in bed together, then it's not 'Eni, mungaaka!' any more. It's you, f*** off!'

But on the other hand...

It was nearly always women who were chosen as treasurers of clubs and societies. Men were not trusted, as it was believed that they would drink the money, whereas women were seen as reliable.

A study of the Lima Bank, a government-owned agricultural bank, showed that, in one year, only 4% of farmers repaid their debts, while, in another governmental lending institution, the Zambia Co-operative Federation, it was even lower, at 2%. In the same year, a group of women in Mongu who had borrowed from a small co-operative credit union comprising no more than a hundred members had a 100% repayment rate. Very few women could borrow from commercial or government banks, even though

they were the backbone of the farming industry. But when they set up their alternative system they made a success of it.

Without a doubt, women were the workers. Women in Africa were like those caryatids in the Parthenon who carry the weight of the world on their heads. I remember a UN report on agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa with the apt title of *The African Farmer – and her Husband*. In agriculture, the woman did most of the work: she dug the ground, cleared scrub and weeds, planted seeds, weeded again, chased away birds and animals, harvested, prepared, cooked and served the food to her husband, and then ate hers with the children. It was said that women and girls did two-thirds of the work of food production in Africa and men and boys did two-thirds of the consumption. The average Zambian farmer was a woman, young to middle-aged, perhaps pregnant, with a hoe in her hand and a baby on her back. A woman's greatest attribute was her fertility, as a mother and as a food-producer. Women were proud of their physical strength, in terms of child-bearing and work in the fields. Normally a woman who gave birth would return to work in the fields on the same day, her new-born baby on her back.

I met a wonderful woman called Graziella Jalla. She was born at Lialui in 1898, the daughter of Waldensian (Protestant) missionaries from the north of Italy. They had been in Northern Rhodesia, as Zambia was then known, for many years. She told me of how, in her early years as a missionary, she had attended the funeral of a

young mother who had died in childbirth. She saw something there that shocked her to the core: the baby, a girl, fully alive, was being placed in the grave alongside her dead mother, and was going to be buried. On impulse, she jumped into the grave, took the baby and climbed back out. The people thought she was crazy, but probably said to themselves, ‘She’s white, and we all know they’re half-crazy anyway, so let her at it.’ She kept the baby; no one wanted it; it had “killed” its mother and deserved to die. Nearly sixty years later, not married, but having reared the baby till she became a mother and grandmother, Graziella decided to retire to Italy. But it was not a happy decision. She felt like a fish out of water; she knew no one, and no one knew her. She wanted to return to Zambia, but had no means of going there. Her tiny pension did not make a flight possible. Her adopted daughter came to hear about this – by now she was working in Zambia Airways – and talked the airline into giving her a complementary ticket. So Graziella returned to Zambia, her real home, and was living in happy retirement when I met her at Sefula, near Mongu, where her parents and uncle were buried in the place where they had worked all their adult lives. She was a wonderful old lady with a life-time of memories.

Where are we going?

From an early stage in Malengwa I had begun to feel ill at ease. It was more like a settled parish in Europe than one in Africa. Its focus was maintenance rather than mission. I often reflected that my job as parish priest was a multitude of bits and pieces, an unending series of

interruptions, often about things that didn't matter very much, and lacked a missionary focus. Sometimes I used to say to myself, 'The interruptions *are* the job,' but I'm not sure that such was really the case. There was a routine about the work, but not much challenge. I think that, if the church in Zambia were still a missionary church, I'd still be there.

I wasn't helped by a document from Rome called by the block-buster title of 'Interdicasterial Instruction on certain Questions regarding the Collaboration of the non-ordained Faithful in the sacred Ministry of Priests, *Ecclesiae de Mystero.*' It was an unusual document, coming as it did from eight different Vatican bodies. A flavour of what it said may be gained from these quotations: -

'Only in some of these [priestly] functions, and to a limited degree, may the non-ordained faithful cooperate with their pastors should they be called to do so by lawful authority and in accordance with the prescribed manner.' And,

'With regard to these last-mentioned areas or functions, the non-ordained faithful do not enjoy a right to such tasks and functions.'

This threw a bucket of cold water over much of what the church in East Africa had been doing since the adoption of the policy of small Christian communities in 1973. We had been encouraging people to a greater level of participation in the running of the church on the basis of their baptism, as leaders and not simply as delegates of the priest, and they had responded generously. They

had put some flesh on the bones of the church's teaching about the priesthood of all the faithful. Now we were being told that this was not a right but a matter of exception and of permission by lawful authority. It sounded like, 'Laity, lie down!' What I saw in Zambia was that laypeople were the strength of the church, not its bishops, priests or religious. As I had experienced at Shangombo and elsewhere, lay men and women could be powerful evangelizers, true missionaries, following the example of the early disciples of Jesus, spreading the Gospel two by two in the villages and towns around them. I knew many people whose faith had been tested in suffering, who had strong commitment, who had learned to lead, and who, if trusted and trained, could be priests in the fullest sense. But, in this document, Rome, as so often, seemed to prioritize control and seemed prepared to stifle initiative in order to maintain it.

The mentality represented by the above document was an example of the clerical/hierarchical structure of the church protecting its institutional position, instead of letting laypeople flourish. The institutional element of the church was swallowing up the charismatic and the prophetic. That is a long-standing and systemic failing in the life of the church.

(To digress for a moment, an especially clear example of the institutional element of the church swallowing up the charismatic and the prophetic is found in the Franciscan order. Saint Francis initiated and led a community movement based on fidelity to the Gospel. But, as the chronicles attest, even during his lifetime, the

order was monasticized, clericalized and co-opted to the agenda of the church of the day. Francis, like Jesus, wanted a life of brother/sisterhood, while the church took a different path, becoming the ideological underpinning for a stratified, hierarchical view of society. This caused Francis such suffering, that, towards the end of his life, he was close to despair over the direction in which the order was being led. In Ireland, the early Franciscan friaries – Quin in Clare is an example – built within twenty years of his death had moved so far from his ideals that they resembled small Cistercian abbeys. I see it in my own life, too, in that, for several years from 2010 onwards, I have, at the request of the order, lived alone, in a life which is closer to that of a diocesan priest than to that of a friar.)

For many years I had read Vatican documents, several shelves of them, and took extensive notes. I did so because I saw them as orthodox, covering a wide range of church topics, and generally pretty concise, so that it was possible to learn a lot without having to read too much. But gradually I came to see that, whatever their supposed theme might be, they were political in character, with an agenda of domination underscored by mistrust. The control screws were being tightened and this was called service. Communion with Rome was coded language for control by Rome. I don't see Rome as the centre of the church; the centre is wherever the faithful gather for the celebration of the Eucharist. And the latter is being stifled by a frightened and self-protective – or should it be power-crazy and untrusting? – pre-occupation with control, by an arrogant and over-

bearing bureaucracy in the Vatican which has become a mill-stone around the church's neck. *Pereat ut floreat*: may it perish so that the church may flourish.

With my interest in history, I have sometimes wondered whether some historians are not right in suggesting that, following the changed status of the church in the Roman empire under Emperors Constantine and Theodosius, as it moved from persecution to establishment, it was not seduced by the empire which shrewdly decided that, if it couldn't beat the church by persecution, then the next best position was to co-opt it, and the church, instead of seeing this as a temptation, which it was (see Luke 4.1-13), welcomed it as an opportunity. The result that, when the Western Roman empire faded out in all but the name, the church stepped into its role and became, in effect, a new Roman empire, adopting its structures and its mentality, which persist to this day. But the values of the (Roman) empire are not those of the kingdom (of God).

I think there may also be a parallel in another instance. When the Jewish priesthood ended in 70 AD, with the capture of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the dispersal of the Jewish people, did the Christian priesthood step into its shoes and become primarily a cultic function, whereas Jesus was closer to the prophets than to the priests? Indeed, his relationship with the priesthood was frosty at best. He himself was not a Jewish priest; in the New Testament, only the letter to the Hebrews describes him as a priest, and then in a highly allegorical sense. In the church we have created a

clerical-hierarchical structure which often disables rather than enables, and commonly seems alien in thought and action to what Jesus taught, in Matthew 23, for example. The Jewish people, in 70 AD, lost their homeland, their temple, the sacrifices and priesthood, and sometimes, because of persecution, could not have even a synagogue, but kept their faith alive for two thousand years with only the home and the Torah (teaching) for support, even in the face of the evil activities of Hitler and company. I think we could learn from that, and not be so fearful about the evident decline of the church's hierarchical structures. Dying and rising are a central part of the Christian story.

I had some of this on my mind when I wrote an article for the Irish church journal, *The Furrow*, in January 1994 under the title, "The Silent Schism". I did not imagine it at the time, but this was the beginning of a twenty-year period of writing about the church. The title describes the article, though I should have said *schisms*. I set out to describe various expressions of alienation in the church that I saw, and proposed dialogue as a way forward. I was astonished by the reaction. My experience since then in writing is that usually there is no reaction to an article, but, in this case, I received letters from every continent, from men and women, lay and clerical, warmly commending it. The most welcome response was from an eighty-something year old priest in Rome who said it was the best article he had ever read. I was also delighted – I am vain enough to like my ego stroked – when the Religious Press Association awarded it their prize for the best article of 1994. Better still was when I

received a letter from Michael Gill of the publishing house of Gill & Macmillan suggesting that I expand the article into a book.

I took up this challenge and put a lot of work into it. I offered a critique of the church as I saw it, and proposed alternatives which I believed would be more in keeping with its tradition and, at the same time, more responsive to the needs of the times. Running to about 88,000 words, it was published by Gill & Macmillan in 1997 under the title *The Silent Schism: Renewal of Catholic Spirit and Structures*. I believe it created something of a stir in the church in Ireland at the time, but little has come of it since then. But I still feel that we might not be in the mess we are in, if some of it had been adopted. (There was a sequel many years later when Amazon, having sold me a book on some theological topic, also asked me to review *The Silent Schism*, clearly not realizing that I was its author! I was tempted to write a glowing account, urging the whole world to rush out immediately and buy copies for all and sundry, but I resisted it.)

Another project I worked on at this time was collecting materials for a prayer book. I drew on the Psalms, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant and Celtic sources, and the Fathers of the church, compiling prayers for use in the morning and the evening, for each day of the week, in a four-week cycle. Along with the prayers, there were reflections, most of them just a single sentence, three to a day, and one of the three from scripture. I was trying to create a link between liturgy

and life, and between public and private prayer. I did a lot of reading, and quite a bit of praying, too. It was the kind of work I was able to do in empty spaces here and there between other activities. I was a compiler, not a composer, and that was easier. When I was finished, I went looking for a publisher and found one in the British Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK). The book was published in 2001, under the title *Daily Prayers for the People of God*, but the work was mostly done a few years before that in Malengwa. A second volume, called *Everyday Prayers for god's People*, published by the Columba Press, followed in 2003.

At about this time that I was asked to go to Mozambique for a meeting of Capuchins from south-east Africa to discuss ways of cooperating with one another, especially to promote the growth of the order. On the way there I passed through Lusaka and found, to my amusement, that a road just a little distance from the friary had had a name change – again. In the days of British rule, and for many years afterwards, it had been known as Brentwood Avenue. Then, when Zambia needed low-cost oil and Saddam Hussein offered it in return for political support at the UN, it was re-named Saddam Hussein Boulevard. Now it just happened that the US embassy was based on this road, and I think the change may have ruffled feathers there. After Iraq's defeat in 1993, in the first Gulf war, it was re-named – Los Angeles Boulevard. I wonder what it is now.

On arrival at the friary in the Mozambican capital, Maputo, I met a Tyrolean friar I knew and asked him about his brother, also a Capuchin, whom I had met the previous year. With tears in his eyes, he told me he had died of malaria. While in the country, I went to visit a friary on the island of Inhassunge, off the coast from the town of Quelimane, reached by a motorized barge so rotten with rust it was a wonder it floated at all. The friary had been attacked during the Mozambican civil war by guerrillas from ReNaMo, a movement fighting against the Marxist government in the capital, and sponsored by Rhodesia in earlier years, and by South Africa more recently. When the attack came, four friars had their throats cut, one escaped and the other was captured. An elderly man, he was made to walk the length of the country; his picture was taken in various places along the way and circulated to international media. It was ReNaMo's way of showing how much of the country they could operate in freely. And killing the friars was, it seems, a gesture, a way of catching international attention, and saying, in effect, 'We have clout, so you must listen to us!' The friar who escaped later became archbishop of Maputo. The civil war finally ended in 1992 with a peace agreement brokered by the Catholic lay movement, the *Community of Sant'Egidio*.

Madagascar - an island interlude

I was invited to Madagascar in 1995 to teach English for three months to Capuchin students in a friary at Ambohimalaza, not far from the capital, Antananarivo, a name which means "the city of a thousand villages," and

has a population of about two million. The island itself is about 1700 km long and 600 wide. I found it a fascinating place. The people of the country originated in Borneo and crossed the Indian Ocean about the fourteenth century. An Indonesian friar of Dutch origin, a visitor like me, was able to understand the Malagasy language from his knowledge of Indonesian. About a quarter of the population, mostly living on the north-west coast, were of African origin, having crossed the Mozambican channel in migrations some centuries ago. The country was not African, or Asian, but simply itself. I saw them as a people with a culture of their own, which they were proud of, and they felt no need to ape the ways of the Western world.

Madagascar had been a French colony since the early nineteenth century. After the Second World War, an independence movement began, which the French suppressed violently. They had World War II weaponry; the Malagasy had spears, bows and arrows. After 80,000 local lives had been lost, the French granted independence!

The country was poorer than Zambia. Its main export is vanilla, used in the making of ice-cream, but now often replaced by a synthetic substitute. It also has precious stones, but the income from those never seems to fall from the tables of the rich. On the way from the airport to the city, I had seen women trying to wash clothes in storm-water drains at the side of the road. In the capital, most of the adults did not have footwear. It was the only place where I ever saw people buy bread by

the slice or cabbage by the leaf. Malnutrition was widespread, and child mortality high. In the friary, the food was probably better than many people had, but it was still poor. There was rice for three meals a day, every day, and not many vegetables other than carrots. One day I noticed tiny dark specks in the rice. Thinking they might be bits of husk, I asked about them, and was surprised to be told, 'No, that's the meat.' Four kilos of meat supplied forty-two friars for a week.

Few people had electricity, and paraffin or candles were too expensive for most to use for lighting. When I asked a student what people did in the evening, he answered simply, 'We sing.' It was true; the sound of song was constant. Every class began and ended with it; all I had to do was ask for someone to sing, and straightaway, without hesitation, someone would start up, and then everyone else would join in, harmonizing base, baritone, alto and tenor naturally as they went along. Walking in the countryside, song could be heard almost constantly from the fields and villages.

I never met people who could celebrate like the Malagasy. On occasions like a village feast at the end of the harvest, the re-dedication of a repaired church, or an ordination, there was exuberance greater than anything I had seen. Singing, dancing and jubilation overflowed with enthusiasm. Everyone was joyful and there was an air of festivity that left me with a sense of wonder. We Westerners are simply not in the picture; we don't know how to celebrate. A lasting memory I have is of a celebration in the friary, where the young friars danced,

clapped and sang as they carried into the dining room a tray with the cake that climaxed a simple meal for the twenty-fifth anniversary of one of the community. The cake was a single layer of sponge with a film of red jam on top - that was what all the singing and dancing was about. I felt humbled by the experience.

Chopping down the future

Another constant sound was less happy – the sound of axes felling trees. Deforestation is widespread, and reforestation is nowhere near replacement levels. I was reminded of how, as my plane approached the island, I could see how the sea was coloured the reddish-sandy brown tone of the soil for a long way out from the estuaries by the topsoil being washed away with no tree cover to hold it. For most people, charcoal is their fuel, and columns of green Mercedes trucks used to drive past the friary daily on their way to the markets in the capital carrying capacity loads of it for sale. An ecological crash seems to be in the making. Is there a blind spot in humanity that allows us to turn a blind eye to evidence, no matter how pressing, until the very last minute? I sometimes wonder if the environmental sins of our past and present are not catching up with us, so that, in the not too distant future, humanity may have only one item on the agenda – survival – and the other issues, which seem so important now, may fade into insignificance.

How do you get rid of a dictator?

In one respect, Madagascar was like Zambia. For a good part of its post-independence history, it was governed by a one-party Marxist dictatorship. The leader was one Didier Ratsiraka; he had been a Lieutenant Commander in Madagascar's minuscule navy but had declared himself Admiral, and President, too, for good measure. The country was poor when his rule began and it became progressively poorer. A problem posed itself for the people: how do those without power, position, or possessions remove from office a system which has control over the armed forces, the police, the judiciary, the media – in fact, virtually all the organs of state and society?

They began by using their heads. What they had was numbers, time, and – as events were to demonstrate – self-discipline. They gathered in the open space beside the lake that lies at the foot of the hill on which the presidential palace is built. They did so each day, from dawn to dusk. They did nothing except sit in silence and look up at the palace. They had no banners or placards – they probably couldn't afford them. Since they were not shouting, or marching, or attacking anyone, the police had no excuse for intervening. They could not possibly arrest them all. The smallest crowd was estimated at 200,000, and the largest somewhere between one and two million. Since so many were unemployed, they had nothing else to do.

But their real strength was not only numbers and time; it was their self-discipline. They kept up their silent demonstration every day, sitting in silence from dawn to

dusk, looking up at the windows of the palace – and they kept it up for seven months. In 1993, Ratsíraka finally took the hint, held fair elections, lost, and was replaced by a medical doctor and member of the Secular Franciscan Order, Albert Zafy. Unfortunately, he did not live up to expectations, and lost power to Ratsíraka in an election in 1996.

La Sanguinaire and Victoire Rasoamanarivo

There was a bitter-sweet part to the church's history in the country. In the nineteenth century the Christian community on Madagascar came under attack by the queen, Ranaválona I. Just what sparked off her hatred I don't know, but in her long rule she became known in French as *La Sanguinaire* (the Bloody) – and not without reason. Her palace was built on top of the highest of the many hills that make up the capital. Nearby was a cliff from which, on her orders, Christians were thrown to their death, an estimated 30,000 of them during her rule. She had previously expelled the missionaries, Protestant and Catholic alike, who had brought the Christian faith to the island.

How was the new, young Christian community to manage without the missionaries who had first spread the Gospel message? The answer was to be found in the quality of local leadership.

One such person was Victoire Rasoamanarivo, daughter-in-law of the prime minister. On one occasion, while at a meal in the palace with the queen, during the

persecution, the clock in the room struck twelve. Victoire rose and stood aside, quietly saying the Angelus. When the queen asked her what she was doing, Victoire replied that she was saying the Angelus, as was the custom among Catholics. For whatever reason, the queen did nothing. On Sundays, Victoire used to go to a local church. But she found the doors locked and guarded by soldiers with orders to let no one in. She must have had a powerful personality because she managed to persuade, cajole or bribe the soldiers into unlocking the doors and letting her in. And, once in, she led people in prayer.

This continued until La Sanguinaire died. Her successor lifted the persecution and allowed missionaries to return. They found, not a ruined church, but a flourishing one. But the end of the story was not happy. Victoire was shunted into obscurity. The missionaries were back in charge, and there was no place for a woman in a position of leadership in the church. She died a few years later.

Today, the cathedral stands on the edge of the cliff from which the Christians were flung. From its back door you can walk two or three metres to a railing overlooking the valley. I'm scared of heights, and just a look below gave me a small share in the terror they must have felt.

In 1989, Victoire Rasoamanarivo was declared blessed by Pope John Paul II when he visited Madagascar. Her tomb is close to the cathedral – but outside it. What a

pity! Her life, and the placing of her tomb, speak with sad eloquence about the role of laypeople in general and of women in particular in the church.

I visited the royal palace and spent a few hours looking at the regalia the French colonial power had given to consolidate the *ersatz* rule of the Mérina dynasty, the better to facilitate their real rule. It was *kitsch*, baubles to impress the simple. The palace, though, was a fine building, and it was unfortunate that, a few years later, it was burned down in a politically-motivated arson attack.

Déterrement

While at Ambohimalaza, I had the privilege of witnessing a *déterrement* ceremony, called *famadihana* in Malagasy. The name is a misnomer: the Malagasy of the highlands do not inter their dead. They mummify them and place them in above-ground tombs, buildings which far surpass the family home in style. While the home may be built of clay-and-wattle, with a straw roof, no expense is spared on the tomb, which is built of cut stone, with a wrought iron railing on the surrounding wall, and a strong steel door. In the autumn, after the harvest, members of an extended family take it in turns – it's an expensive business – to call the whole family together to their village for a few days of festivities, eating, and drinking. The climax of the celebration is when the tomb is opened and the mummified bodies of many generations of the family's past are brought out. People sit on benches, or on the ground, with a mummy on their lap. What follows is a kind of up-date of family

news since the last *famadihana*. And the dead, seen as intermediaries with God, may be scolded for not doing their job properly, if, for example, there has been a crop failure, or exceptional and unexplained deaths in the family. This may go on for several days. Towards the end there is much dancing, and the mummies are part of it. They may be lifted, or even thrown into the air, before being wrapped in new burial cloths, cotton or linen according to one's purse, before being re-buried. Women compete for possession of the old burial cloths, and lively tugs-of-war followed. I saw one granny run off, triumphantly waving in the air the cloth she had won in a tussle with others; she believed it would bring her blessings.

To my surprise, I was invited to be part of all this - it's the one time in my life that I've danced with a corpse – and people's only regret was that my camera was still rather than movie. All of it took place in an atmosphere of great celebration. One man, who had had more than his share to drink, shouted out a slogan of the ruling party – *Vive la Révolution socialiste!* – to the great hilarity of the crowd. I have a picture of him grinning with embarrassment as he realized his *faux pas*.

Snapshots from Madagascar

I had a slightly surreal experience one evening, when, sitting at supper in the refectory, I watched two friars next to me have a conversation lasting about twenty minutes, one speaking in Malagasy and the other in French; I don't think they noticed it.

I caused a scandal in the friary one day by doing something very simple: I bought a bar of chocolate. I had shared it with others, but that didn't diminish the scandal. When someone expressed disapproval, I asked why. The answer was, 'Do you realize that the price of that bar of chocolate is a man's wages for a day?' No, I hadn't realized it.

Living in the hilly central region of the country, a noticeable feature was that every human habitation on a hilltop had two churches, a Catholic and a Protestant. On Sunday morning, they compete in out-singing each other. It seems a pity, indeed more than that just a pity, that the church of Jesus who prayed 'that they all may be one' (John 17.21) is actually a source of division where previously there had been unity. People today who argue that religion is divisive are not short of examples to point to.

My three months in Madagascar flew. I enjoyed every minute of it. I had not been impressed by the formation system I saw in operation in the order, but I kept my mouth shut. I was tired of being an ignored whistleblower, and decided to say nothing unless asked, which I wasn't. But there was a lot of trouble there in the years that followed, and people in positions of leadership in the order were removed from office.

Back to Malengwa

I was not long back in Malengwa when I had an experience which brought to the fore something I had been mulling over for several years, namely, how long I should stay in Zambia. I was conducting a funeral service for a prominent local person, and the church was full to capacity. Many of those present were members of the New Apostolic church, which had first come to Zambia about 1956, that is, twenty-five years after Catholic missionaries. What struck me as so bizarre about the situation was that I, who was leading the prayers, was the only European present. I thought to myself, ‘This is crazy. We Catholics have had a twenty-five year head-start on the New Apostolic church, and yet they have clearly surpassed us in developing local leadership. They have cut the umbilical cord to Europe in that respect, and also financially to a greater degree than we.’ Our pastoral structures were too rigid, we had a one-dimensional model of priesthood, and a one-size-fits-all system of training for it - and there was no prospect of a change in those matters.

I also felt that we had not brought people to adulthood in faith but kept them at a childish level. An example is that Catholics were quite helpless in defending themselves against attacks made on the church by some Protestant groups. Some Protestants called Catholics “Romans” and argued like this, ‘Pontius Pilate was a Roman, and the soldiers who killed Jesus were Romans, so the Romans [i.e. Catholics] are responsible for the death of Jesus.’ Another line was that Catholics were idolaters because they worshipped statues, crucifixes, pictures, Mary, etc. I often discussed this with other

priests and found that their experience was the same as mine: that Catholics were beaten down by these arguments, and it didn't matter how often you refuted them and explained the matter, they were still left speechless with little or no self-confidence in standing up for the faith, while Protestants could be assertive and even aggressive. Why? Was it because we had taught people *what* to think, but not *how* to think, or even, simply, *to think*? Did our use of the title Father help keep people in a childish relationship with us? Did we perhaps not listen enough and speak as if we had all the answers, thereby belittling people?

Not for the first or last time, I believed that the clerical-hierarchical structure we had created over the centuries was self-serving, self-protective and self-justifying. We had turned means into ends, making them an end in themselves. The church had become narcissistic; we were offering people churchianity more than Christianity. The system had become power-serving, not people-serving, self-serving, not Gospel-serving. As I saw it, and still see it, those who run the church have neither the leadership, the vision, nor, regrettably, the will, to reform. Rome's response to the challenge of change is to dig in its heels and try to turn back the hands of the clock. In Zambia's case, the model of priesthood and religious life it has is a replica of the European one. It is financially unsustainable and that is unhealthy, as it leads to a mentality of dependence and helplessness. Rome controls the purse-strings and has shown itself willing to use them to impose uniformity in the name of unity; diversity is out and conformity is in:

for example, one church, one liturgy, one rite. The strength of the church in Zambia lies in its laypeople, not in its bishops, priests or religious. But the church's political correctness refuses to see that.

I had to ask myself whether I wished to spend my time in Zambia sustaining that. It was clear that, the longer I stayed, the more I was propping up a self-serving system which was marginalizing the church from society. The question to ask about the church is not how it's doing or whether it will survive but whether it is fulfilling the mission Christ gave it, of proclaiming the kingdom of God. The person of Christ and the Gospel will always attract people.

I spent a lot of time weighing up alternatives. Should I go back to New Zealand? Should I ask for a transfer to South Africa, California, or Korea where Irish Capuchins also worked? What would it be like in Ireland, better or worse? There was a time to come and a time to go, and to recognize one was just as important as to recognize the other. Perhaps I should have left earlier, but, by 1997, I felt it was time to go.

Looking back on it, many things could have been better or happier in Zambia, but I don't regret a moment of my time there. I had come to have great admiration for what I saw so often, namely, the ability of the people to keep hope alive in situations which I would have found hopeless. They were often knocked down by life, but they always got up again. They were people who

simply kept trying – and maybe that’s a good working definition of a saint.

Part 5: BACK TO IRELAND

Kilkenny once again, 1997-1998

I arrived back in Ireland on 6 March 1997, my mother’s birthday. She and my father were then in their late eighties, and it was good to be near them again. My father had made a good recovery from cancer, despite two heart attacks that followed, while my mother’s health had always been good. (When in her early nineties, she was still not on any medication.) My sister,

Veve, who had spent thirteen years as a missionary in Nigeria, had been back home since 1976, and was teaching in a secondary school, but made time to give to our parents. She was a lifeline of care and support for them. Una, Vincent, and Clare had been living abroad for several decades and were likely to remain there; their families had been born abroad, and it was their home.

A process of unlearning and letting go of illusions – all to the good.

On return, my first posting was to Kilkenny. When I had left it in 1962, it was a sleepy, somewhat dilapidated provincial town with the title of a city. Its castle, dominating the River Nore by Saint John's Bridge, had been impressive without, derelict within. Now, thirty five years later, I found the city alive and alert, full of vitality, a place where interesting things were happening. The uniformly dull grey concrete of unpainted houses had given way to a bright variety of cheerful colour. There was a theatre, a fortnight-long Arts Festival; the place was alive with tourists from all continents; the Design Centre had established an international reputation for good quality products; and the castle, like several other historic buildings in the city, had been splendidly restored, places to be proud of.

Other changes that I became aware of were that women had come alive; there was a sparkle in their eyes, and a spring in their step. They had taken the world in their hands with confidence and were shaping it as they thought right. Men, by contrast, seemed bewildered,

almost helpless. There was a wonderful growth in community associations of all sorts, from Alzheimer's to Bulimia to Cystic Fibrosis to Down's Syndrome - an alphabet of associations of people caring for people. In 1962, it would have worried me if those had had no formal links with the church; now it didn't: the Kingdom of God is larger than the church. One of my favourite sayings is from Saint Augustine, 'There are many whom God has and the church does not have them; and there are many whom the church has and God does not have them'. (*On Baptism*, 5.27.38; CSEL 53.174-175)

Beyond Kilkenny, in the country in general, things had also changed. The State had got its act together in a way which it did not have in the fifties and sixties. It was more flexible and responsive, more democratic in its procedures, more open to public opinion, more willing to learn from mistakes and correct them. Emigration had become immigration. The Celtic Tiger had put an end to the cruel poverty of the past and opened up new horizons and opportunities for people - and they were using them. There were more and better jobs and new avenues for re-training. I looked out my bedroom window one day to see a team of men begin demolishing a derelict building and clearing the site for construction. Still thinking in Zambian terms, I imagined it might take them a few weeks - in fact, they had finished it by the same evening! Visiting Dublin one day, I looked out from a friary window and counted thirteen cranes at work on building sites. Houses were going up in every city, town, and village in the country. All this was bringing a change of culture: we were beginning to find remedies rather

than seek excuses. We were beginning to believe that it was possible to change society, and with it our lives, for the better. The *Sean Bhean Bhocht* was gone - and good riddance to her!

But Ireland, in common with Western Europe, was a wasteful society, especially relative to Africa. Nothing seemed to be repaired: once an item aged a little, or gave trouble, or was no longer in fashion, or had been superseded by a more recent model, it was replaced. People spent a great deal of money on smoking and drink. I read that people threw out one-third of the food they bought. If that were true, I thought, an African family could live on what an Irish family discarded.

I noticed a change in children's attitudes towards school. Whereas for me, primary school had been characterized by fear, and secondary school by boredom, children now seemed actually to like going to school. Perhaps, with smaller families, that was where they found companionship. The relationship between teacher and pupil had also changed, and for the better. A downside was that parents seemed to be afraid of their children, afraid to challenge them when they did wrong, even giving approval to conduct they must have known was wrong, out of fear, or lack of moral courage, and then tried to assuage their guilt by giving them gifts and money.

Regarding the church, I experienced a culture shock greater than in going to New Zealand as a newly-ordained priest, or to Zambia seven years later. It was

not simply that congregations were smaller and older; it was the pervasive atmosphere in the church and the order of negativity, fatalism and despair. I kept asking myself: 'Did Vatican II ever come to Ireland?' Apart from the liturgy being translated into the vernacular and the re-ordering of sanctuaries, what was done? To be fully fair, Vatican II had helped free religious life of some attitudes and practices which were unchristian and even inhuman. It had helped, too, to diminish the power-and-control fixation of the church.

But why was the liturgy, and indeed the life of the church in general, so dead? Where, for example, was the active lay participation that so characterized the church in Africa? Why was it that, for those who came to church regularly, morals seemed a burden, an obstacle course from which they did *not* wish to be liberated, while others had found growth only by walking away? We seemed in the intervening years to have lost the young, the left, the poor, the liberals, most men, and educated middle-class women. That didn't leave many, except for the over fifties, and many of those, clerical as much as lay, were locked into denial. Some were "pillars of the church," who, regrettably, were not so much upholding the church as holding the church up.

Much had quickly happened and changed that could be grouped under the broad umbrella of secularism. While secularism and atheism are philosophically distinct, I think there is little space between them at the practical level. Secularism didn't bother me so much as the seeming lack of response to it. The church had moved

from the centre to the margins of society, a practical denial of the Incarnation. When I left, Ireland was a Christian society; when I returned it was substantially secular. This appeared to be paralleled by a movement from a focus on the other (or Other) to the self. Sometimes I wondered if the only absolute anyone recognized was self-will, and if individualism was anything more than a politically correct term for selfishness. It seemed to me that selfishness, and especially self-centredness, had become more widespread, and the latter is a sign of a failure to mature. And I believed this had not made people happier; indeed, I think people were less happy. Look at film documentaries from the forties and fifties and I think you can see the difference on people's faces. And levels of crime had increased sharply.

Irish people have a tradition of compassion for the suffering and for the under-dog, but how long will that last, cut off from its Christian roots? An Irishman of much pastoral experience and insight has written, 'An inert laity is only two generations removed from non-practice. And non-practice is only two generations away from non-belief.' (Frank Duff) I think his scenario is optimistic.

There was a noticeable lack of leadership at all levels of the church, the grass-roots no less than the diocese or nation. I couldn't pick up a sense of mission, or a vision of where the church was going. If there was a pastoral strategy, I didn't see or hear anything of it. The church seemed to be sleep-walking into oblivion, and unable to

summon up the energy to challenge itself. Clergy seemed demoralized, so punch-drunk under the impact of the sexual and other scandals they did not notice that a greater scandal was the number of Catholics for whom Jesus Christ was not much more than a swear word. Ireland had become mission territory, awaiting evangelization. Some clergy appeared to be passively waiting for death to release them from despair – ‘It’ll do for my time’; others spent their remaining energy propping up models of church (or religious life) which were no longer viable; while still others circled the wagons defensively. I remember asking, at a community meeting, whether we shouldn’t consider what we were doing in the friary and look at new ways of reaching and serving people. One friar replied, ‘The young people are gone; the old people are dying, and when they’re gone, we’ll be gone, too, and, if you keep on asking questions like this, I’ll just have to leave the community because I can’t take it any longer.’ He was a deeply depressed man, with much suppressed anger, and unable to cope.

Standing back from particular issues, I was reminded of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's ideas (in her book *On Death and Dying*) about the mental attitudes of a person faced with terminal illness. She saw a process in which a person goes through stages of denial, anger, bargaining, despair, acceptance and death. That described the stages I saw in the church in Ireland.

Denial was there: we could no longer deny the facts of decline because they were so undeniably pervasive, so instead we denied their significance. A failure to acknowledge unpleasant or even ugly realities and call

them by name was dressed up as ‘looking on the bright side of things.’

Anger was there, too: it expressed itself in looking for someone to blame, typically the media, trendy liberals, Dublin 4, but also conservatives, progressives, liberals or restorationists, according to one's orientation in ecclesiastical politics.

There was *bargaining*: ‘If only people would start saying the rosary again’; ‘If only priests would follow the lead of the Holy Father’; ‘If only we would just go back to the way things were....’ Such bargaining is delusional.

Despair was there also. It sometimes appeared as cynicism, the belittling of attempts at a new venture or a new approach. On one occasion, I was asked to speak at a meeting of parishes about small Christian communities as I had experienced them in Zambia, the oft-spoken-of input from returned missionaries to rejuvenate the Irish church. At the end, a priest bore down on me, his face red with rage, looking like an over-ripe tomato about to burst. Speaking with the rock-like certainty of the closed mind, he hissed at me, ‘That has absolutely *nothing* to say to us.’

Acceptance: for the most part, we have not yet reached the point of accepting the reality of impending death for the model of church we've grown up with, which, unfortunately, we identify with the reality of the church itself. Our attitude reminds me of a line from an Irish poem I learned at school, ‘Táimse im’ chodladh, is ná dúistear mé.’ (I'm asleep; don't wake me up.)

The model of church that existed in Ireland in the one hundred and fifty years between Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979 was one of a Catholic society alternative to the alienating British colonial one. At its best, its mission was to lift up the Catholic people of Ireland from the gutter and enable them to take their rightful place as fully-fledged citizens of their own country. The prime means of achieving that was education. Through generous effort, hard work and sacrifice it largely achieved its goal.

But now, a new model of Catholic religious education needed to take its place, not because the old one had failed, but because it succeeded so well that parents opted out of the process. At times, too, the church co-opted the state to its mission, especially after 1922. The papacy became a substitute royal family: the pageantry of the Eucharistic congress of 1932 was a Catholic counterpoint to the royalist pageantry of 1913 when King Edward VII visited Ireland (shadowed by Rashers Tierney!) The Unionists had been right to say that Home Rule meant Rome rule; when the British Empire moved out, the Roman (Catholic) Empire moved in. We preached churchianity rather than Christianity. We made the church a substitute for the Holy Spirit; we made it an end in itself instead of a means to the one end, God. People are not going to let us do that again, so there's no point in talking about restoration. Even if it were possible, I, for one, would not want it.

I think the church in Ireland in the twentieth century turned the faith it into a control system, and betrayed it

in doing so. (Spiritually, it was to see the temptations of Jesus in the desert – Matthew 4.1-11 - not *as temptations* but as roles to be adopted.) Compliance was the goal, and guilt and fear the means of attaining it. Make people feel guilty about all sorts of things, especially sex. Since everyone is sexual, no one escapes that net. Then bring in the fear of hell as a punishment for sin. The next step was to offer confession as the way out. Pile guilt on with one hand; take it off with the other. It achieves compliance, and we became a conformist society, which deluded itself by singing rebel songs! The clergy identified with that role, and, unwittingly, were its victims no less than laypeople.

Examples of the power and control technique would be the fire-and-brimstone preaching that used religion as a way of frightening people into obedience. Another was that of using heaven and hell as carrot-and-stick on a cosmic scale. I remember reading the preface to *The Key of Heaven*, a manual which was the devotional staple for generations of Irish people from the mid-nineteenth century. In it, Archbishop McHale of Tuam expressed the hope that ‘the meditations contained therein might strike terror in the heart of the sinner.’ Those, and other practices, were abuses of people, and of religion, too. Once you start coercing, you stop persuading. Those practices alienated people and left behind sour memories. Elderly Catholics of the pre-Vatican II generation who have now “copped on” to the above have awoken but, sadly, their response is often that of adolescent rebellion.

There are others for whom the Christian life is a moral obstacle course which we have to clear if we want to get to heaven; and, if we fail, we go to hell. This latter view is reinforced by many of the alleged private revelations and visions of the last hundred years. Reading the Gospel stories about the Pharisees, I think that, although the latter are dead, pharisaism is still alive and well. I take the Pharisees to have been, not a bunch of two-faced hypocrites preaching one thing and practising another, but, for the most part, sincere people who had reduced religion to a system, who felt that, if you kept the rules and fulfilled the observances, then you would be seen as righteous in God's eyes. I recall a bishop who used to give his summary of the Christian life to people, saying, 'Go to Mass, say your prayers and you'll get to heaven.' I don't think that's true. It's good pharisaism but not what Jesus taught. Religion is about relationships.

It troubled me that there were many people of faith, intelligence and good-will who did not find what the popes were teaching about sexuality and human relationships to be believable, and who had reluctantly parted company with the church. Examples would be the teaching about IVF, about homosexuality, the admission of divorced and re-married couples to Communion and *Humanae Vitae* about contraception. (I have known many priests who left active ministry and married. I don't know any among them who had more than the standard two children. Did they believe in *Humanae Vitae* before or after leaving?)

I didn't hear people in the church asking the questions that might have led to answers. For instance, what was God saying to us about priesthood, not just its roles or functions, but its nature and significance as we look towards a future of fewer and ageing priests? Why was our understanding of priesthood reduced to a one-dimensional view – the cultic figure? How was the traditional understanding of the relationship between the ministerial priesthood of the ordained and the general priesthood of all the baptized likely to be affected by the changing situation? Did we want collaborative ministry with lay-people? Were we making room for the thousands of young Irish men and women who had completed degrees in theology and pastoral studies? Were we ready to work with them in pastoral ministry on a basis of equality? Were we going to wait for the last woman to leave the church before deciding to work with women on a basis of equality? Why was there such resistance on the part of most adult Catholics to further education in the faith? Why was it that Ireland, a nation of writers, had produced no theologians of international repute? Why was it that, with music in Ireland having taken on such a flourishing and vibrant life for several decades, incorporating the old and the new, that church music, with a few honourable exceptions such as that of Liam Lawton, was seemingly unable to move beyond *Bring flowers of the fairest* and its like? We have singing pubs and chanting football stands but silent churches. With a lively amateur dramatics culture, where was the input from it into the liturgy? Were we content with the *status quo* in schools and their role in passing on the faith to the next generation? I felt that if we did not begin

to see those and other questions as an opportunity we would end by fearing them as a threat. Why did so few parishes have parish councils? Why did so few priests' deaneries work? Without structures of dialogue and participation, without openness, transparency and accountability could we expect anything but stagnation? People, it seemed, did not want to ask questions because they knew, and were afraid of, what the answers might be.

Religious life should exercise a prophetic role in the church, but instead had allowed itself to be co-opted into the maintenance of structures which were no longer fit for purpose, which drained people of energy for little return. It has become part of the problem. People like Sister Stan Kennedy, Brother Kevin Crowley and Father Peter McVerry, are exceptions to the rule, and evoke a warm response. The supposedly anti-church media give them much positive publicity.

My response to the above, while in Kilkenny, was to write about the church and to get into adult education in the faith. Although I believed that both the order and the church were moribund, I felt I had an obligation to try. I wrote for journals such as *The Furrow*, and *Doctrine and Life*, and started a weekly column in two regional newspapers, *The Nationalist* in Carlow and *The Weekender* in Meath. I gave a series of courses in the *Creidim* centre in Saint Kieran's College in Kilkenny. In the latter case, I was reminded of the film *Casablanca*, with Captain Renault saying, 'Round up the usual suspects,' because it was the same handful of people

who came to most of them, including the lovely woman who sat in the front row, muttering at frequent intervals, 'Heresy, heresy, pure heresy!' I never found an answer to my question as to why there was and is such massive resistance by most Catholics to expanding their knowledge of the faith. An illustration of the need for adult faith education is the gulf that exists between what scripture scholars say about the bible and how to read it, and the way in which the average Catholic understands it. One example would be the Gospel stories of the birth of Jesus and the popular image of it at Christmas. It's one gap among many into which the church's credibility is falling. People are willing to come to educational events relating to their children's first Communion or confirmation, and a smaller number attend courses in popular psychology, but that is about it. Is it the consequence of generations of laypeople being disempowered by clergy, generations of pray-pay-obey as their role in the church? Concern for power and control is evidence of insecurity and institutional atheism. We need to be control freaks only when we don't believe or don't trust God to be in charge.

Where was leadership? In a society like the church which (like the military) is so conscious of, and uptight about, hierarchy, where initiative is generally unwelcome, where there is great, if not always explicit, fear of loss of control, leadership is widely seen as something that should come from "the top." The top-down image is unhelpful if one sees the church as a communion of communities rather than a pyramid of power and status, but it is the one that is dominant. The church and the order were drifting rudderless, without

direction, and everyone seemed to be waiting for someone else to make the first move. Without communication, that wasn't going to happen, and communication wasn't there. Clergy seemed to be afraid of each other, and meetings such as deaneries and vicariates (normally thinly attended) or chapters skirted around issues rather than face them. This led to a loss of morale which has grown with the years.

Church leadership is generally reactive rather than proactive, and that is probably to be expected since it seems that Rome's priority in choosing bishops is to have "a safe pair of hands," someone it can easily control and who won't rock the boat. That ignores the reality that it is largely the "safe pairs of hands" that have got us into the mess we're in. A "safe pair of hands" may be alright in normal, predictable times, but, when courage, vision and imagination are called for, when it's necessary to think outside the box just for survival, the "safe pairs of hands" are an impediment. It's as if, after the collision with the iceberg, the captain of the Titanic said to the crew, 'Don't panic, lads; everything will be alright. Stay with the ship. Be loyal, and stay with the ship.' Would it not be better to launch a few lifeboats – they are Titanic lifeboats after all – leave the ship and launch out into the deep?

My return to Ireland from Africa was a process of disillusionment and letting go of mental baggage I had accumulated in my past. I felt progressively less and less hope that the church might come to grips with reality and enter into a process of dialogue both within and without.

There seemed to be little desire for it, and many clergy and religious were resolutely set in denial. Disillusionment is a difficult process, but it can be liberating – after all, what use are illusions to anyone? Discomfiting truths are preferable to comforting half-truths. I was letting go of ideas I had accepted since my early days in the order, such as that, with rare exceptions, what the “superior” told the “subject” was God’s will for him/her. I was beginning also to look beyond the boundaries of the church to the wider picture of the Kingdom (or rule) of God, as the church seemed to have turned in on itself defensively and in fear. It was disillusioning, and yet liberating, to be able to accept, quietly and without anxiety, that the current way of being church was beyond reform and had to die before a new way of being church rose from the grass-roots to take its place, even if that meant that all I would see in my lifetime would be the dying and not the rising.

Looking back on it, I think that what I should have done was to set a deadline, commit myself to the church in Ireland for a few years – three, or perhaps five - and then, if there was no sign of change, move to another place, in or out of the order or priesthood, where there was the prospect of life and growth. I didn’t do that, and I ask myself why. Was I trapped in the habits of a lifetime, habits of seeing obedience as doing nothing until you are told, of waiting in hope for the next provincial chapter? (Chapters are the triennial gatherings for election of office-holders and making of policy decisions in the order.) A phrase jumped into my mind one day – betrayed by hope. I kept hoping from one chapter to

another, was disappointed by each in turn, and yet went on to hope in the next one. That was delusional; it was time to wake up, but I didn't do it.

But in that respect I'm jumping ahead of where I was on returning to Ireland in 1997.

Helping in hospital

Each week I relieved the regular chaplain in Saint Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny. It was a busy place and rapidly expanding. You could be called at any hour of the day or night over a forty-eight hour period. If there were several night calls it could be tiring. But it was an opportunity to meet with people at a time when they needed help and support, and they welcomed it.

I visited the female medical ward one day and met an elderly woman who was dying of cancer. She told me that she didn't expect to live long. I couldn't help feeling she was right. She said something very sad, 'I'm so lonely, I have no one.' She was single and had no living siblings. There were relatives but, for whatever reason, they had not come to see her. I spent some time with her, listening to her and trying to help her. Then I had to go; there were other patients to visit. I often thought back to that meeting, and I still think of it with a sense of regret. I did not give her the help she needed. Neither did anyone else. Her fellow human beings, to whom she looked for solidarity and support in her moment of greatest need, as she faced the supreme test for any

person, had let her down. She faced death alone without a human hand or face to ease her passing.

The sacramental side of the job troubled me, especially the daily “Communion round.” For example, as I walked along a corridor, a visitor, seeing me dressed in vestments and carrying the ciborium containing the Hosts, asked for Communion on the spot and expected to get it there and then; it seemed to me as casual as a smoker asking for a light. A patient, surrounded by a large number of visitors chatting with him, asked for Communion; the visitors seemed to resent my presence as if I were an intruder on their conversation, which they resumed the moment the patient had taken the Host in his mouth. A patient emerging from the toilet, comes forward for Communion, extending a damp hand for the Host. Another, lying on top of a bed in pyjamas, genitalia exposed through the flap of the trousers, extended a hand for a Host. Patients, listening to the radio, watching TV, reading a magazine, talking on a mobile phone, or shaving, would ask for Communion, swallow it, and immediately resume their activity with no evident sign of prayer or devotion. Such examples were routine. I don’t think people were being deliberately irreverent; they were simply clueless. It was as if they saw Communion as a *thing* you take rather than a relationship you entered into. Communion is a verb more than a noun. Sacraments are human acts, not holy magic. To receive Communion while reading a magazine is as inappropriate and incongruous as a person reading a magazine while making love to their partner. I felt like a nurse giving out tablets which work

regardless of the patient's dispositions. It was as if Communion were a "holy tablet," as if the only thing that mattered was to swallow the Host and then it would "work" automatically. (Has the theology of transubstantiation fed into a materialistic understanding of the Eucharist?) I have no problem in giving Communion to people with difficulties in faith or morals – I have those myself. I have great difficulty in giving it to people who seem so unthinking, so unaware, of what they are doing. I regret accommodating people's wishes in the matter. If I were serving in a hospital again, I would try to do things differently. I think of Saint Thomas Aquinas saying that the effectiveness of a sacrament is in proportion to the dispositions of the recipient, and of Vatican II's statement that 'Before individuals can come to the liturgy, they must be called to faith and conversion.' (*Constitution on the Liturgy*, n.9) Sorry, Lord, for dumbing down your gift of yourself to us.

I was disappointed to find that the beautiful chapel I remembered from years before had been converted to general hospital use, and replaced by a small room. Was this part of the new secular Ireland? I suspect it was, though I have to say that not many patients or staff came to the daily Mass; most of those who came were living near the hospital for whom it was more convenient than going into a church in the city centre.

What had happened to Catholic Ireland?

A noticeable change in the twenty-seven years of my absence from Ireland is the loss in a sense of the sacred,

and this is nowhere more evident than in the liturgy. It has been dumbed down, reduced to a lowest common denominator of minimalism, sometimes in the name of simplicity. It has become functional, the Mass often McDonaldized into a spiritual fast-food takeaway where the clock is master and speed is all-important. The atmosphere in liturgy sometimes seemed to be, 'Ah, sure it'll do; what are you making a fuss about? Just get on with it.' Relentless chatter, often at loud volume, makes prayer before or after Mass almost impossible. (The reverent silence of the Bingo hall would have been so welcome!) A minority have no inhibitions in taking calls on mobile phones during the liturgy. I have heard of people making calls on their phones during Mass, sometimes to a friend on the other side of the church. Appropriate decorum, such as genuflecting in front of the tabernacle, is widely ignored even by regular churchgoers; they seem oblivious to the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. My impression is that priests and religious led the way in these matters, and laypeople followed. I often find with daily Mass-goers that they seem to want to "get Mass in" and then get out quickly. 'Father X is on the ten; he'll have you out in twenty minutes. If it's Father Y, he'll keep you there all day' - maybe as much as thirty minutes. Many people prefer a quick Mass on Sunday, too, without singing, silence, sermon, prayers of the faithful or lay readers. I know of a priest who does this, and he has the largest congregation among several parishes. We accommodate this for fear of losing numbers. The result is that we now have the worst of both worlds: we have lost the numbers, and respect for the Mass along with it. The Mass has become a private

devotion carried on at the same time and place rather than the great prayer of the Christian community. People scatter around the church avoiding each other.

Mass has been over-used, sometimes, seemingly, as a filler of gaps. All our pastoral/liturgical eggs are in one basket - the Mass - and little else. It is the summit of the liturgy, but we have made it into the middle and the base as well. As it stands, and as it is said, at least by me, it has become formalized, rigid, and ritualistic; it strangles the Spirit. I could do it on automatic pilot. Are we being real in calling it a “celebration”? I believe that daily Mass is not good liturgy: no one has a Christmas dinner every day. We should have Mass only on Sundays, replacing daily Mass with other forms of prayer led by the people themselves. The experience I had in Africa has shown me the value of this. And we should also let go of those questionable practices, based on dodgy theology, around stipends, “shared” Masses and those for novenas. They bring in money but they sell the Mass short.

The other noticeable contrast with liturgy in Africa was the absence of vitality in Irish liturgy. In Africa, liturgy is a celebration. The congregation sings, claps, and dances. There could be twenty hymns at Mass and no one looks at the clock. The familiarity that Zambians have with the bible is impressive. They can follow and find biblical references with ease. They read the bible at home, and sometimes even at work! It is familiar territory, so the Liturgy of the Word is listened to. There is a real sense of congregational participation, a sense

that the Mass is the celebration of priest and people together as one.

If we have our pastoral/liturgical eggs in one basket - the Mass – we likewise have all our ecclesial eggs in one basket – the papacy. Speaking in the thirties to a group of seminarians soon to be ordained, Pope Pius XI said that the church had become a monster, a big head and tiny members. That is even more true today: we have an imperial papacy. Apart from any other consideration, and there are many, that is a high risk position. One “bad pope” could virtually wreck the church. The other levels of the church’s life have been trivialized or debased, so there is no fall-back position.

Speaking with educated people in Ireland, occasionally touching on matters of faith, I was often taken aback by the ignorance among them of basic elements of the faith, such as knowledge of the Ten Commandments or the common prayers. I asked myself how people who had received twelve years of Catholic education could be so uninformed about the faith. They didn’t know the fundamentals. I thought back to my time in Sioma parish when the baptismal team examined each candidate in the basic prayers and teachings of the faith, and those who did not know them were asked to learn them and apply again for baptism the next year. In Ireland, most people, including those baptized many years before, would have failed! A minor example was when I asked a man in his thirties what his Christian name was, and he didn’t know what I meant; he had not heard the expression before. I was aware that people used the term *first name*, but I had

imagined that the other term would also have been known. Another example was when I anointed a dying man in his bed at home, and a relative thanked me for ‘the lovely Mass.’ I came to realize that I could not take anything for granted, but that it was best to start from the assumption that people knew little. When Irish people reject the faith, as many do, I wondered what they are rejecting: was it really the faith or was it their own diminished and confused misunderstanding of it?

More snapshots from Kilkenny

One of my jobs in Kilkenny was to take my turn in doing “duty.” This meant being available for people who called to the friary for confession or to see a priest about any matter. For confession, people came to the church, rang a bell and a priest went out to them. While few in number relative to former times, confessions were often reflective and thoughtful. It could be very busy: there were times when I was literally running from the church to one or other of the three parlours made available for visitors and then back again, and still not keeping pace with the demand. But I remember the first time I was called to the parlour. There was an elderly woman there who had in her hand a bundle of medals bearing an image of Saint Benedict. I hadn’t seen them before, and asked what they were about. She said she wanted me to bless them so that she could hang them around the necks of her cattle to protect them from disease. I didn’t know whether to laugh, or what to do. I said to myself, ‘I thought I had left *muliani* behind in Africa!’ But I did as she requested and she left happy.

I was astonished to find that the busiest day in the year was February 3rd, the feast of Saint Blaise. There was a tradition of people going to the church to have their throats blessed: ‘Through the intercession of Saint Blaise, bishop and martyr, may God protect you from all illnesses of the throat, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’ Young people from the nearby Technical College, afraid of contracting cancer of the throat or lungs from a recently acquired smoking habit, were taking out insurance, as were large numbers of elderly people, many of whom had no intention of giving up smoking. The flow of people was large and constant; several of the community were kept going all day giving the blessing. By evening, *we* had sore throats from constant blessing! As with the blessing of medals for cattle, I had reservations about doing this, as I felt it smacked of superstition, but I kept quiet and went along.

When I was settling in to the friary on returning from Zambia, I was one day dragging a table from a corridor into my room, when Brother Seraphin, a very elderly friar who was clearly dying, came along and offered to help. He could barely walk, much less lift one end of a table, so I declined his offer with thanks. But I was hugely impressed by his generosity and goodness of heart in that, despite his own situation, he was thinking of me, not of himself. He died about a week later.

I was chatting with a journalist from the local paper, *The Kilkenny People*, one day, and he asked me, ‘What’s happening at the friary?’ He explained that, if we had

anything in mind, any plans or ideas, he would willingly give them publicity. I felt embarrassed, as there was nothing happening beyond the basic routines, and it didn't seem likely that there would be. But his request gave me an idea. The following year, 1998, was the 350th anniversary of the coming of the friars to Kilkenny, and I thought, 'Why not celebrate it, with the focus on the people rather than on us?' I discussed the idea with the guardian and he was positive about it. I was asked to write a short history of the friars in the city and this was published for the occasion under the title, *Capuchins in Kilkenny, 1648-1998*. The celebration itself, when it came, was a happy occasion and an opportunity for us to say thanks to the people who had supported us down through the years. Our way of doing this was to set up a radio transmitter and broadcast the morning Mass each day on FM. This was to enable housebound people to participate in Mass as far as they could. It met a need and was received well. One less happy memory of the day was that local TD's had been invited and had a seat reserved for them: all accepted; none attended!

Friary life had changed, becoming more individualistic. Visiting Ireland on leave from time to time when I was abroad, I noticed how difficult it was to find anyone to have a conversation with. Members of the communities were engaged in their own world of work or personal interest, and, beyond a generalized enquiry or two, did not seem interested in others' affairs. Television had been something that drew us together, at least for the evening news, but more and more friars had a TV in their rooms, and watched their favourite

programmes, so that we saw less of each other. Conversation at meals was often at a childish level, with a hidden message of avoiding communication, as if to say, ‘Keep it trivial and don’t talk about anything real.’ There seemed to be a fear of engagement with one another. I found that disappointing; it was a loss, and has impeded us from facing the challenges that confront us.

I met a Fianna Fáil councillor one day and we chatted for a while about his life in local politics. He said to me, with some pride, ‘I never took a bribe.’ I was so naïve as to be surprised by this, thinking that no one would do it. Only a few years passed before many examples of such activities came to light. The Ireland of my memory - or was it of my imagination? - was being shattered.

I attended the installation of Bishop (later Archbishop) John Neill as Church of Ireland Bishop of Cashel and Ossory in Saint Canice’s Cathedral. Norman Lynas, the Dean, read a document describing the process which had led to the choice. As he read it, I couldn’t help thinking that I wish we had something even just a little like it. It was a participatory process; it involved laypeople as well as clergy and it was open. In the Catholic church, some clergy of a diocese – not all, despite official statements – are invited to put forward a list of three priests whom they consider to be *episcopabilis*, that is, suitable for being bishops. It is called the *terna*. It is often said among the clergy that the appearance of a priest’s name on the *terna* is the surest indication that he will *not* be chosen. So why bother going through the motions? Why not have a transparent system? Power and control from

Rome seems to be the answer, so the nuncios guard their carefully their role as Roman consuls.

I spent a day with a group of transition year students in a small town in County Kilkenny. I spoke for a while about Africa and one of the students asked me what I missed most about it. I said, 'The children,' a risky thing to say, wide open to misunderstanding. A girl asked me what I thought of Irish children, meaning those of her age group. I said, 'I think they're spoiled brats.' She said, 'Yes, that's it! That's us!' She had maturity.

Something I became aware of in Kilkenny, but which was not peculiar to that city, was the way in which elderly people were becoming like teenagers. We are accustomed to the idea of teenage rebellion, of young people wanting to do their own thing regardless, of the words *me*, *mine* and *I* featuring largely in their vocabulary. But this bug seemed to be contagious, and the elderly picked it up and went with it. I found the immaturity of some elderly people so childish as to be embarrassing, with people insisting on getting their own way regardless of its impact on others. Sometimes it wasn't so much selfishness as self-centredness, where it didn't seem to occur to the person to consider the needs of others. It wasn't a pretty sight. A mild example would be that of people in their seventies or eighties saying they no longer went to Mass because they couldn't be bothered or because they were lazy, and seemingly content to leave it at that.

Christmas Eve 1997 brought a powerful storm which brought down trees and knocked out power lines to the city, throwing it into darkness at the height of the Christmas shopping. Some shopkeepers shut their doors, as they were without lighting or power for cash registers. Others tried to keep going, lighting candles and using battery-operated calculators. These found that, almost instantly, some customers were transformed into shoplifters; people took goods from shelves and walked out the door with them, paying for nothing. If they had been asked the question, 'Would you ever steal from a shop?' they would likely have reacted with outrage, perhaps demanding an apology even for being asked. But, when the opportunity came, they stole. This made me ask how deeply the Christian faith went in Ireland. Was it just a veneer, skin-deep?

Carlow, 1998-2001

I was transferred to Carlow after a provincial chapter, arriving on 12 August 1998. It was a quiet country town, made quieter by the loss of its main industry, the sugar beet factory, which provided jobs in the town and an assured market for farmers in the surrounding countryside. Its closure was brought about by an EU decision, subsequently recognized as having been made in error. The friary was opened in the eighties, to provide a place for prayer, for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and for people to have confession at almost any hour of the day. The response had been very positive, and people came in large numbers over many years.

Confession

My experience in Carlow made me reflect on confession, also known as the sacrament of reconciliation. It had always been my favourite sacrament, both as penitent and as confessor. (Perhaps the first quality of a confessor is that he be a penitent.) In my time in Carlow, plenty of people came and a priest could be kept busy with a constant stream of penitents, morning and afternoon. At Christmas and Easter, several priests would be kept going for hours. But the numbers declined even in the three-year period of my stay there, as they have everywhere else. It seems to be a universal experience: in Zambia, I remember holding a penitential service in Malengwa parish in preparation for Holy Week, and no one came. Priests I have met from many different situations recall similar experiences of a very large drop in numbers from the Sixties onwards, almost to the point of disappearance.

It does not surprise me that Catholics today have all but abandoned confession. It requires a fundamental re-think, and I don't see the prospect of reviving it in its present form. Sometimes it enables scrupulosity or childishness. I recall being asked, along with a confrère, to help with confessions in a parish near Carlow where there was a special celebration. We went there, heard the confessions, and as we walked out of the church through separate doors we looked at each other and began to laugh. We said nothing, there was no violation of the seal of confession, but I think each knew what the other was thinking. We had heard the same sins of the same

penitents as had been to confession in the friary earlier in the week. With some people, if they forgot what to confess, you could prompt them because of having heard the same story so many times before and often about matters which were probably not sins at all! Some people, even the elderly, make the same confession that they made at their first confession when they were seven years' old. It reminds me a little of what was said by Frank Cluskey, one-time leader of the Labour Party, talking about TD's "clinics": he said one third of people ask the impossible, one third the illegal, and the other third were just looking for someone to talk to.

For some, confession seems like a particularly intrusive control system, and indeed there are confessors – I've met them myself as a penitent – who are nosy, bossy or arrogant, sometimes reducing people to tears. And yet, even where this is widely known, nothing is done about it and the situation is allowed to continue. Apart from that, much of what goes on in confession is lacking in depth and makes little difference to anyone; it is simply superficial. A person could go to the sacrament, confess to murder, and walk out after a few minutes hearing just 'Three Hail Marys, O my God....' By contrast, I read some years ago of an English politician, an Anglican, who, on being received into the Catholic church, made a general confession of his life. He said he spent a day and a half at it. He spoke of it as being challenging and difficult, but also that it was an experience of purification and healing that made a real difference to him and that he was glad of. That is so

much more real than what usually goes on, and perhaps points a way to something better.

In the Western world, people often lead such pressured lives that it does not surprise me if they do not have the disposition or energy for a spiritual life in any of its manifestations such as personal prayer, the Mass or the sacraments. Living at a fast pace does not lend itself to living in depth. In an individualized world, do people want to 'cut out the middle man' and deal with God direct? But do they actually do that, or is it simply an evasion? I noticed in the Seventies that, when confession was introduced in a room, face-to-face with a priest, rather than in the traditional confessional, the character of penitents' confessions seemed to change from confession of sin to self-justification.

The need for forgiveness and reconciliation in human affairs has not grown less, yet people do not seem to recognize a link between it and the sacrament. There is a human need to acknowledge our wrongdoing to another, to get it out, so to speak, to share instead of bottling up. 'We are as sick as our secrets' is a wise word from AA. People are going to psychotherapists in greater numbers than ever, often limited only by financial constraints. When a person acknowledges having done wrong that is a large step forward in human growth. A community dimension is important: people are willing to acknowledge their wrongdoing collectively. But Rome insists on individual confession and absolution. That seems unnecessarily limiting; why not both-and? It seems that Rome wants confession to be part of a system

of power and control, even if it means losing the sacrament altogether. The experience of forgiveness and reconciliation should be frequent, but the sacrament infrequent. Perhaps the challenge is to connect with people's experience of life and respond to that. Dialogue would help.

Editing and writing

I was asked to undertake the job of producing what we called *The Provincial Bulletin*, an in-house quarterly of the Irish Province of the order. The job involved printing and distribution as well as editing. I found it easy, and often the only real challenge was in finding sufficient room for the material. There was another quarterly also, called *The Capuchin*, which I was also asked to produce. It was a link between the order and the people whom we served in our churches and further afield. This was easy in one respect, in that it was professionally printed and distribution was in bulk through the friaries. But there was a large problem. It was very difficult to get the friars to write for it, or to send contributions in any form. Indeed, there were times when I wrote the entire issue myself, using several pseudonyms to conceal the fact! Why was it so easy to get friars to write for the in-house journal and so difficult in the case of the public one? I sensed an almost primitive fear of the printed word that brought to mind what the poet Séamus Heaney's mother said to him, 'Séamus, whatever you say, say nothing!' The friars did not want to commit themselves, did not want to say anything for the public. It was a strange

opting out that suggested to me an undercurrent of fear – of what? – that I do not understand.

I also wrote a weekly column for the features section of the local newspaper *The Nationalist*, and later for another also, *The Weekender*. I discussed the idea with the editor, Eddie Coffey, and asked him if terms and conditions applied. I was impressed when he asked, not specified, that I avoid using theological jargon which people might not understand, and avoid writing anything divisive. I was happy to meet both conditions. I wrote it for eight years and found it rewarding – not financially, as there was no payment - but in learning how to focus in writing something without too many words. (Did I succeed?)

Listening to priests

While in Carlow, I was asked, along with Fathers John Byrne OSA and Senan Timoney SJ, to conduct a survey of the priests of the diocese of Ossory, which covers Kilkenny and parts of Waterford and Tipperary. The survey was to look at the personal, apostolic and professional needs of the priests with a view to planning how these might be addressed. In 1999 and 2000, we visited priests throughout the diocese. Everywhere we were received with friendship and hospitality. We listened to what the priests had to say, and my impression was that this was something new for most of them. They welcomed it gladly and responded to it with openness. I felt that many of them were lonely men, struggling courageously and generously in fighting a

constant uphill battle for the faith. I felt great respect for them, but I wonder about the viability of their lifestyle. Marriage should be an option alongside celibacy, I think.

Senan, John and I had many meetings digesting the feedback, and finding a lot of common ground. When we completed our report – it ran to 47 pages – one thing which particularly impressed me was that priests’ pay was covered in just one sentence. I doubt if there are many professional or other groups who would commission a survey of their needs that would give it so little attention.

A big question in my mind was whether the survey and the report which followed would make any difference. If it was just left to gather dust on a shelf, it would be a betrayal of many men’s hopes. After I left Carlow in 2001, I was glad to hear that it had led to a diocesan forum of priests, religious and laypeople which, I was told, had helped the process forward.

Parish missions

While based in Carlow I was asked to give some parish missions. In practical terms, this was a new venture for me, as the last time I had done it was more than twenty years before, in New Zealand. But I worked at it and prepared for it. My first venture was in County Cork where the friar previously assigned had pulled out for health reasons. When I arrived, the parish priest wasn’t too happy: he told me he had printed and circulated flyers about the mission six times, each with a different

priest named as the missionary. I had known nothing of this and felt I had been thrust unknowing into an awkward situation. I asked about it in the order; it seems that he had exaggerated, but only a little; there had been others who had withdrawn before the sick man. I was to be joined on the mission by another friar, but he had other commitments at the same time, so he just came, gave a sermon and went. The usual pre-mission parish visitation had been done in part, but much of it was undone. The organization of the whole thing was pretty haphazard. I did my best, which wasn't very good. Attendance was poor, not surprisingly in view of the chopping and changing of arrangements beforehand. I'm not sure the people got much out of it. I thoroughly enjoyed the parish priest's company: he was knowledgeable about the parish and the diocese, and had a limitless fund of historical stories about goings on of past and present.

I became involved in missions elsewhere in the country, and found that they were as haphazard in their organization. Men were plucked out of jobs here and there, often at short notice, and thrown together into what was called a team. We didn't meet beforehand, or plan anything until arriving at the parish. It wasn't a good way to do things, and I felt we let the people down. They are not fools and can see what's in front of them.

I found the experience dispiriting: we had let down the people, and ourselves, too. I wrote to the provincial and his councillors about it. They replied, proposing a one-day gathering of missionaries in Carlow to share

experiences and plan for the future. This was a promising response, and I was glad to hear of it. The gathering was held in January 2001 and attended by eighteen friars. The level of interest and participation was high. Participants shared ideas and experiences willingly, limited only by the relatively short time. All agreed that follow-up to the meeting was necessary, so a group was chosen for that task.

But, in the days that followed, those chosen dropped out one by one until none was left. I don't know what was going on. A new group of three came together – I was one – and decided to try and put together what, for the moment, we would call a *Mission Manual*, a workshop manual as a resource for missionaries. I was asked to put it together, using materials which the friars – hopefully – would contribute. So I wrote an individual letter to each of those who had taken part in the one-day gathering, as well as a general request in the *Provincial Bulletin*, which would reach all the friars, asking for their help. I had not anticipated a great response, knowing that we don't have a good record at answering letters, but I was not prepared for what happened. There was no response. No one sent anything, not even the two friars who had been with me in the group that proposed the idea. And that was the end of it. To this day, I do not understand why there was such a comprehensive failure to follow up. It seemed like a victory for individualism, lack of trust in each other, and an unwillingness to submerge egos in the service of the people. More significantly, it seemed symptomatic of the wider

church's inability to get its act together. I don't know why; it's not rocket science.

Snapshots from Carlow

In conversation with a local man one day, he said to me, 'We should go back to the way things were in the past, when the priest was in charge and he told people what to do and they did it.' I almost laughed; it was never like that. The idea that priests told people what to do, and they did it, is a fantasy. I think priests of any generation have found it difficult to persuade people to do *anything*! But some of the most clericalist people I have met were lay people.

While in Kilkenny I met a teenage boy who told me of a quarrel he had had with his father. It was a genuinely serious matter, and had divided the family. What troubled me about it was the bitterness and anger he had towards his father; I felt it could destroy him. Trying to move him forward a little, I asked him a question, 'If your father needed a blood transfusion to save his life, and you were the only person in the world who could give it to him, would you do it?' Without hesitation, he snapped, 'No!' I was disappointed and could only hope and pray - I did pray for him many times since then - that he would experience healing. In Carlow, I visited an old people's home and met an elderly man who felt great anger, and bitterness, too, towards a nephew of his whom he felt had treated his (the elderly man's) brother badly. I asked him the same question as I had asked the boy in Kilkenny. Unlike the boy, he reflected for a time.

But then he answered, 'No, I wouldn't give it to him; he wouldn't deserve it.' And that was as far as I got. I hope he didn't die with that bitterness. I think people sometimes persuade themselves that a refusal to forgive is an expression of high-minded principle.

My three years in Carlow were at the height of the Celtic Tiger period. I remember a shop assistant saying that, at Christmas, people didn't even ask the price of the items they wanted. They just said, 'Charge it up to my card,' and it was a status symbol to do it like that. People went to financial institutions to borrow money for holidays, a first or a second, and the institutions loaned it to them. Borrow, spend, and don't worry about repayment seemed to be the way things were done a lot of the time. 'The country is awash with money,' a banker said to me, and told of people coming into his office with suitcases of notes, insisting that no paper-work accompany the lodgement. (Where had the money come from?) As the new millennium dawned, there was talk of people being prepared to pay £1,000 for a babysitter to look after their children on New Year's Eve 2000. I don't think the talk was true, and the New Year festivities were generally low key, but it was an indication of how people were thinking.

We don't do self-discipline well, but strangely, for a people who like to think of themselves as rebels, we accept imposed discipline. For years there had been campaigns against litter; they didn't have much effect, and the country was often an unsightly mess. Then a levy was imposed on plastic bags; we had to pay for

them instead of getting them free. Within a few months they had disappeared, no longer blocking drains, or hanging from bushes on the roadside, or blown around by the wind. Towns and villages, along with the countryside, were cleaner and more attractive as a result, and the improvement seems to have continued since then. Similarly, campaigns against smoking had little effect, but, when a ban on smoking in enclosed work places was introduced, it was an immediate and lasting success, with beneficial health effects, and was copied in other countries. When the Celtic Tiger collapsed in 2008, a severe austerity programme was imposed, and people accepted it.

I spoke one day with a member of the management team of the Braun electronics factory which, at one time, employed eight hundred people in the town. Talking about it, he sighed wearily and said, ‘I can’t understand the workers. We just cannot get them to do the job properly.’ He went on to say that the company sold products all over the world but there was a constant stream of defective products being returned by dissatisfied customers, and the company’s reputation was suffering. This was being translated into job losses which took place every few years. And he went on to voice fears for the future of the plant. He told me of the company’s efforts to motivate its workers, to educate them to good work methods, but said these had had little effect. I was to hear the same in later years from people who had worked in the Ford car company and the Verholme Shipyard in Cork, both of which eventually closed. Do we have a work ethic, I wondered?

Down the road from the friary was an old house, a listed building that had historical associations with Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator. One Sunday morning it went on fire. Despite the efforts of a large number of firemen from Kilkenny as well as Carlow, it was destroyed, though the walls remained. By about four o'clock that afternoon, the shell had been demolished and the site cleared and flattened. It was said locally that the property had belonged jointly to a developer, an auctioneer, and a solicitor who had been refused planning permission for an apartment block on the site because the house was listed.

Where to from here?

I spent some time collecting more prayers from different sources for the prayer book which I had begun in Zambia. The completed work was published in 2001 under the title *Daily Prayers for the People of God* by the British Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK). That was satisfying, but, overall, the work I was doing in Carlow was undemanding. Friary life was like a comfortable bachelors' club without much community character. I did not find my work challenging, so I asked for a change to something else, without specifying what, because I could not see anything in the life of the province which seemed to offer more hope. But I was asked to stay till the next chapter in 2001.

Belfast, Lagmore, 2001-2007

First impressions

In August 2001, I was transferred to Lagmore parish, a new suburb in West Belfast, to replace Father Eustace McSweeney as curate with responsibility for visitation of homes. The provincial told me he had been unable to find anyone for it; no one wanted to go there. West Belfast, to many people south of the border, had the connotation of West Beirut, a place to avoid.

I was warmly welcomed by the parish priest, Father John Forsythe. Throughout my time in Lagmore, he was kind and generous, and we were able to discuss anything. I was especially grateful that, right at the start, he said to me that, if I had new ideas, to go ahead and try them. That was good to hear. Looking back on it, I think that, if priests from religious orders are to be involved in parishes – not something to be accepted lightly - the best way to do it is to have them as curates in parishes run by diocesan clergy, and not given full responsibility for the parish. Diocesan clergy are trained for parish work, orientated to it from their first days in the seminary. Not so religious.

I wrote down these first impressions a few months after arriving there.

Lagmore is a young parish, with children mostly below ten years old. There are lots of baptisms, few funerals. But it seems to be a new ghetto replacing old ones. Nearly everyone is from West Belfast, with their extended family living within three to five km. When I

visit them, people are welcoming, including those who don't "practise." There's a noticeable level of chronic illness, especially "nerves" and tension – hardly surprising after thirty years of conflict, often close to hand. Local people have their own sense of humour, lively banter, which could seem offensive if you took it at face value. They are hospitable and warm. They are down-to-earth; what you see is what you get. There is something natural and ordinary about them.

People are glad to be here, often to get away from violence, death-riding and vandalism in neighbouring suburbs. It's common to hear people say spontaneously that they want peace and quiet for themselves and their children. But they often bring their problems with them; and there are no geographical solutions to personal problems. People want community, but I wonder if they realize that it has to be built; you don't find it ready-made just by living alongside each other. If you come home from work, have supper, watch TV and go to bed, with little or no outreach beyond the walls of the house, how is community going to develop? And how will local problems be dealt with in the absence of a sense of community? Will it be by violence? I ask myself if I should say that to people? If I do, is there a readiness to receive such a message, however tactfully put? I'm not sure there is. Although Residents' Associations clearly have clout that individuals don't have in dealing with local authorities, on issues such as the bus service, rubbish collection, vandalism or anti-social behaviour, or in getting Belfast Improved Housing (BIH) to finish houses fully, people are reluctant to form them. Where

they exist, they are effective, even if the work is often left to one or two individuals.

There has been no effective, or accepted, police force in West Belfast for thirty years or more. Police are not often called; if they are, they are unwilling to come, and, if they do come, they get out quickly, sometimes having their vehicles stoned. In their absence, there is an inability to resolve grievances without anger, abuse, shouting, or inviting the Balaclava brigade to carry out punishment beatings. If the latter brought peace, Northern Ireland would have been a peaceful place a long time ago.

In Lagmore, there are no shops, health centre or library. In peoples' houses, there are no books, magazines or papers, except for a TV guide, and Poleglass library, not far away, closed for lack of use. There are excellent sports and recreational facilities in Lisburn, just about three km away, but, although Lagmore is within the boundaries of the city of Lisburn, not Belfast, there is an invisible Berlin Wall just about three hundred metres away once you reach Mill Road, and Lagmore people are reluctant to go beyond it.

There is high long-term unemployment, and in some families it is inter-generational. Some do casual work on the side, and many claim the DLA, the Disability Living Allowance – known informally as the Daily Liquor Allowance! One advantage of unemployment from my viewpoint is that when I call on people on parish visitation, I nearly always find someone at home.

Lagmore is a mixture of unemployed, working class and middle class. The problems are mostly in the areas of high unemployment.

A local housing organization called Belfast Improved Housing (BIH) decided to give its tenants the option of buying out their houses. It began in the toughest estate in the area. This was one where a residents' association had tried persuading people to collect litter, including waste goods from houses such as old furniture, and to put it in a skip supplied by Lisburn Council rather than dump it on the street. The plan seemed to be working, and the appearance of the estate improved greatly. But then a few residents, staunch republicans, seemingly angry that they did not control the process, sabotaged it. They went to the skip, took out the rubbish and strewed it around the estate. They denounced the residents' association, saying they were arrogant snobs, trying to push their ideas down other people's throats and judging everyone. So that venture failed. Under the BIH buy-out scheme, people paid a little more each month towards a mortgage than they had been paying in rent. The scheme worked, and people began the process. You could notice the difference almost immediately. People began to clean up their houses, remove litter, plant the garden, give a coat of paint, or put in structural improvements such as a porch. A rising tide lifts all boats, and, for a while, it seemed that this idea was really going to float. But then, the IRA saw it as a money-making opportunity and started to cash in on it – though I don't know just how they did it. BIH, not wishing to fund the IRA, felt obliged to stop the process, and there it ended. Similarly,

an attempt by one of the friars to start a youth club and which was promising at first, was stymied when a group of women, strong IRA supporters, invaded the meetings and disrupted them. Their message was that, if they didn't control the club, there would be no club. But I met many more people in Lagmore who loathed the IRA, and said so, than supported it.

The level of religious “practice”, measured in terms of attending Sunday Mass, is about 18%. In the two nearest parishes, it is 10% and 5% respectively. “Lapsing” is an ambiguous term. Many who have “lapsed” from the church have not lapsed from God, and many who have lapsed from the liturgy have not lapsed from prayer. The blessing of their house, and having a picture of the Sacred Heart on the wall, is important for people. In this context, a message came from on high that, if a couple were not married in church, the priest, when blessing their house, should make it clear that he was blessing the building, but not them; this, it was said, would give them an incentive to regularize their union in church, and then they would receive the priest's blessing. That didn't sound very Christian to me, so I ignored it. People are open to prayer when I visit them. They seem familiar with the ordinary prayers – *Our Father*, *Hail Mary* and *Glory be to the Father*; but spontaneous prayer is a non-starter.

A sense of Catholic identity seems strong. But what is its content? Some of it is a by-product of the Troubles of the last thirty years, and some from the longer history of the previous three hundred or more. It has a strongly political character. Many who never go near a church

still firmly identify themselves as Catholic. But is that a way of saying, ‘I’m not a Unionist’? The late Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich has been quoted as saying that, in his view, most Catholic prejudice against Protestants was because they were unionist; and most Protestant prejudice against nationalists was because they were Catholic. From my limited experience, that sounds right. In the six years that I was there I never heard a Catholic say anything that might be described as sectarian, or anti-Protestant. If the Good Friday peace agreement really takes hold, and its spirit works its way through society at all levels, will Catholic identity, and its Protestant counterpart, collapse, since it appears they need each other as props, like poles of a tent? Remove one, and the other has to collapse. Something like that appears to be happening in Poland since the collapse of communism.

The school is an important focus of Catholic identity. Parents who never come to church, even at Christmas or Easter, still send their children there, seemingly without question, and expect them to receive the sacraments and know their prayers. Does this presuppose a mass cultural Catholicism which does not involve personal choice or commitment? Can such a thing ever exist? Is it more than window-dressing?

Baptisms are important for all, though it is hard to believe that parents can mean what they say when they promise to bring the child up in the faith. They don’t go near the church, and the older children are not being brought up as Catholics either, so how can such a

promise be taken seriously? If it means sending the child to a Catholic school, parents do that, but it may not mean anything more. As children grow up and become aware of the disparity between what their parents tell them about the importance of the faith and what they actually do about it, the children often dismiss the faith as hypocrisy, which seems to miss the mark.

A large proportion of couples are in unions which the church would not recognize as valid. Many are in second unions or partnerships. The “valid” are a minority. Sometimes this is for financial reasons: for example, a single mother will lose social welfare allowances if she marries, and since, for good reasons, she does not want to be financially dependent on the man, she’s better off “single,” and so the man comes in through the back door instead of the front.

TV’s are switched on permanently, and, a general rule is that, the poorer the house, the larger the TV, and the fuller the ash-tray. Conversation is difficult against the background of “the box” and I sometimes have to ask people to turn it down when we come to saying prayers together. Where the box rules, there’s not much opportunity, or perhaps disposition, for reflection or prayer.

In areas of high unemployment, there is a widespread mentality of grievance, of helplessness and of entitlement. It’s as if people are saying, ‘I’ve got a problem; what are you doing about it?’ People wait for someone to do things for them, but it seems they want

help on their own terms, or not at all. (I was to find similar attitudes in Gurránabráher in Cork a few years later.) The situation is analogous to the problem of vandalism which is widespread in the same areas. Vandalism is stupid, destructive, and self-defeating. Examples would be wrecking a bus shelter and stoning buses so that they are withdrawn. This may then mean that a woman has to push a pram with a baby, plus a week's groceries, up the hill from Stewartstown Road to White's Rise. That is very tiring, but it has to be done if a family has no car, can't afford a taxi, and the bus service is suspended because of attacks. Do people use power self-destructively when they feel that they have no power over their circumstances? Yet the success or failure of community effort depends on the involvement of the community. You can do things *with* people; you can't do things *for* them in any lasting way. The determining factor is the quality of local leadership. If you wish people to assume their responsibilities, you achieve it by putting responsibility on their shoulders, and letting them see that the success or failure of a project rests with them. This may mean that, if it looks as if it's going to fail, you let it fail and don't run in with a safety net. Is that an avenue to despair, or is it tough love that helps people take responsibility for themselves?

There is a cluster of factors – serial partnerships, unemployment, poor levels of education, abuse of alcohol, use of illegal drugs, lack of contact with the church, or absence of a faith dimension – and these feed into each other as cause and effect. You can see them at work, and also see them spill over from one generation

to the next. How can the vicious circle be broken? To me, work is the key. It gives a person self-respect and personal dignity; it gives an incentive to learn and to improve oneself; it helps a person break out of the mentality of grievance, helplessness and entitlement. But work has got to be financially and humanly rewarding. A mixture of examples come to mind: a house-painter told me, at the height of the building boom, that he was £100 a week better off out of work than in it, so he was not looking for a job although an abundance of work was available; a postman, going on holidays in Spain with his wife and three children, who started work at eighteen, and was now, at the age of thirty-one, half way through paying off his mortgage; the two best houses in the parish, each of five bedrooms, on private grounds, with a conservatory, porch and excellent fittings, belonged to truck drivers; a doctor lived in an ordinary three-bedroomed semi-detached, and his son, a medical student, part-way through his course, already had incurred a debt of several thousand pounds because of the expenses of his education.

Looking back on the above from the perspective of 2013, it strikes me that the people with the greatest sense of entitlement in Ireland today are those in senior positions across the breadth of Irish society. Their “remuneration package” include salaries man times that of the average wage, a company car, paid golf club membership, a six figure sum deposited annually into their personal pension fund, and a large bonus which they receive even if the business collapses. In that event, they still take their chunk of the cake, because they have

seen to it beforehand that it's guaranteed to them by contract. Then, in the case of bankers, they turn to the public, and say, 'We're too big to be allowed to fail, so you have no choice but to bail us out. Bank profits are privatized, bank losses are nationalized; that's the way the system works. It's up to you, the public, to cover our gambling debts.' That is a culture of entitlement on a huge scale.

Visitation

My job in Lagmore was to go round visiting people in their homes. My predecessor, Eustace McSweeney, had been a dynamo of energy at the work. For some reason, people found it difficult to pronounce Eustace and unwittingly called him *Useless* - he was far from it. Even if he had only fifteen minutes to spare between one activity and another, he would still fit in a few visits, flying ones, but well-chosen and timed. He visited each household in the parish each year, and some with special needs of one kind or another more often. He enjoyed great respect and was well liked.

When I took over from him, the parish had 1,100 houses and was growing rapidly. The local authority, some years before, had given an undertaking that there would be only five estates in Lagmore. By the time I finished in 2007, there were twenty-four, and still growing. There was no sign of thought or planning; it was just a case of throwing in one estate after another wherever there was room. For a time, the only public services in the area were a letter-box and a litter bin with

the bottom out of it! I asked a local politician about this, pointing out that if amenities such as playing fields, parks, shopping centres and so on were not provided, if Lagmore was to be just a dormitory suburb, then the likely result would be crime and vandalism, with money saved by the non-provision of public services spent on the criminal justice system instead. His answer was a masterpiece of cynicism. He said to me, 'What you've said is true, but the criminal justice system is a charge on central government; local services are a charge on local government.' He went on to add that where there are playing fields, for example, there will be rowdyism, drunkenness, vandalism, and claims for compensation for personal injury, adding that people who wanted playing fields always wanted them somewhere else, not in their back-yard.

Of the 1,100 households, two were a Catholic-Protestant mix, four were Muslim, and the rest were Catholic. I asked someone from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive about this, since its official policy was to bring people together in mixed housing. He acknowledged that the Executive had quietly given up on it. Where Catholics and Protestants lived together in "inter-face" communities, there was trouble, he said, so the Executive had reluctantly decided that, since they couldn't live together peacefully, it was better that they live apart. Housing in Northern Ireland is more divided now than in the Sixties before the Troubles started. That doesn't augur well for the future.

In my first sermon in the parish church, I said to people that I wasn't another Eustace, and wasn't going to try to be one. I took up where he left off, however, as I believe continuity in pastoral care matters; parishioners shouldn't have to go back to the drawing-boards every time a new priest arrives. My idea in doing the job was, in effect, to say to people that, even if they were not interested in the church, the church was interested in them. I know the bishop thought that I was encouraging, cajoling or persuading people to go to Mass. I didn't see it that way.

I found it easier to relate to working-class rather than middle-class people. The latter seemed anxious to impress, whereas working class people were simply themselves, and what you saw was what you got; I preferred that. Very occasionally, when the conversation led naturally towards it, I would ask people what the faith meant to them. In reply, they rarely said anything about God, never anything about Jesus; they answered in terms of going to Mass or not. That was the touchstone: it meant that if a person stopped going to Mass, they saw themselves as having given up the faith.

One thing that became clear quickly enough was that the "normal" family of my childhood was not the norm any more. I had grown up in an environment where parents were married – once only, nearly always in a church, and they stayed together for life. Statistically, that kind of family had become a minority, sometimes a small one. Children would occasionally come to school announcing that they had a new Daddy, and there was a

large number of permutations and combinations of domestic arrangements, many of them transitory. Sometimes several children of the one mother all had different fathers. I don't think it was a change for the better.

Visitation evoked different responses. From some, it was fear: a visit from a priest could only be bad news; he was coming to tell them of a death. Or they thought I was collecting for something. Or they asked, 'Are you visiting all the homes in the area?' This meant one of two things, 'Are you visiting only your special friends?' Or, 'Why are we being singled out for particular attention? Do you consider us to be a problem family? What will the neighbours think if the priest comes to us and not to them?' But these were only rarely the case in Lagmore as Eustace's frequent visits had dispelled such anxieties. People were welcoming. I can recall only one case where a reception was unfriendly, and that was from a teenager who was a brat.

I often felt that people's assimilation of the faith was very limited, sometimes at a level not far removed from superstition. How could twelve years of Catholic education have produced such results? I remember speaking to a priest who ran a bible-study group with an attendance of Catholics and Protestants. He said despairingly, 'When they open their bibles, they close their minds.' He was talking of Protestants in particular, but I think it applied to Catholics, too. There is a strongly anti-intellectual streak in Irish Catholicism. What children seemed to internalize from the faith was

what they received at home; school imparted information, or material for an exam, but it didn't take root. Parents, unwittingly close to the Pharisees in their thinking, seemed to regard the faith as a matter of observances and ritual actions. They felt that the children *must* receive the sacraments, even if they themselves did not. I've met parents who admitted with a shrug of the shoulders that the faith meant little or nothing to them, but they still wanted their children baptized. When I explained about the parents' profession of faith in the rite of baptism, and of the promise to bring the children up as Catholics, they were puzzled that I thought it important. It wasn't an issue for them to stand up and profess and promise things they didn't believe in. (The same was true about my signing forms, e.g. passport and driving license applications, bus pass etc. They were baffled as to why I said I could not sign a statement I knew to be untrue, for example, to state that I knew them for two years although I had only just met them.) I remember a child saying that he didn't want to make first Communion, he just wanted the money. His parents still insisted that he go through with it. There was a high level of non-reception of the sacraments by children once they received them. For most, their first confession was also their last. After first Communion, they usually didn't go to Mass until confirmation. And, after that, they gave up altogether. The sacraments seemed to be mainly excuses for a family get-together, a rite of passage. I know that other priests, and bishops also, saw things in the same way, but no one seemed prepared to address the issue seriously. The pastoral policy, insofar as there was one, seemed to be to keep going blindly, not

ask questions, and hope for the best. But giving people the sacraments without evangelization and conversion is building a house on sand and it is now tumbling down.

Keeping up with visitation was a struggle. For each of my first two years I visited every house in the parish. But with houses being built at a rate of a hundred a year, in ten new estates, reaching 1,790 by 2007, it grew more difficult. During my time, the parish population grew from about 4,000 to 6,400, that is, by about 60%. Attendance at the five week-end Masses grew from 844 to 868. But on a percentage basis, it fell from 21.1% in 2001 to 13.6% in 2007. The biggest and most noticeable drop came when there was an intense burst of publicity about clerical sex abuse cases both in Ireland and in Boston, USA. For some of those who dropped out at that time, the scandals may have provided a handy excuse, but, for others, I think there was a deep sense of shame which was the last straw in a long series of disappointments.

There were some light moments during visitation. I knocked at a door one day, and a child answered. After studying me for a few moments, he shouted to his mother, 'Mammy, God is at the door!' 'Who?' 'God.' On another day, I knocked and again it was a child who answered. I said my *spiel* about who I was and what I was doing. The child went into the kitchen, and returned a few moments later, saying, 'Mammy said to tell you that there's no one at home.'

A woman asked me one day, on visitation, whether Saint Thérèse of Lisieux was angry with her, because she had not granted the request she had made in prayer. She explained that, in moving house shortly before, the head had been knocked off Thérèse's statue, and she felt that might have been what annoyed her. When I suggested that she stick with Jesus and the gospel, she was shocked, doubting, I think, if I was really a priest. She phoned her partner, to check it out with him, and the conversation went on to the issue of putting the statue of the Child of Prague in the garden for fine weather. How did we come to this odd mixture of folk religion and superstition?

The writing bug

Like many Irish people I was delighted that the two-hundred year long tradition of emigration from Ireland had turned to immigration in the late Nineties. We were becoming a multi-racial society, with people from every quarter of the globe coming to Ireland to find work and make a home for themselves and their families. I saw it as a welcome development. It would help to widen our horizons, broaden our outlook and give us a livelier society, less likely to sink into introspection. If all the Poles who immigrated had lived in one city, it would have been the biggest in the Republic after Dublin, and they had their own newspaper, radio stations and shops. But not everything was rosy in the garden. A Chinese woman, subsequently elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly, told me of being kicked to the ground on a Belfast street because of her race. She said that what hurt

her most was that nobody did anything. People pretended they hadn't noticed, didn't ask her how she was, offer help, or call the police. Some people said, too, that Filipina nurses should leave Northern Ireland; yet, if they had gone, one or other of Belfast's three hospitals would have had to close. Did the ideological purists want that?

Muslims, from being a very small minority, perhaps only a few hundred, increased to the point where they numbered about 25,000. I knew that, at times, they, too, were victims of bigotry and insult. I knew a Palestinian man and his family who had been driven from their home three times. A Muslim organization that wished to present a plaque to a Northern Ireland town council, to thank it for the hospitality of the town, had its offer rejected, on the grounds that the plaque was "pagan"! Yet I never heard anyone complain about being treated in hospital by a Pakistani doctor – we were glad to have them.

Seeing some of the results of sectarianism among Christians in Northern Ireland, I felt it might help to write something which could have the potential to offer Christians in Ireland some understanding of Islam, on the simple principle that knowledge is better than ignorance, and recognizing, too, that ignorance is a primary source of prejudice. (There could occasionally, by way of relief, be a funny side to ignorance, as when a parishioner, explaining to me about the ischaemic condition of her legs, kept calling it – in total innocence – her Islamic condition!) If we could see how much we

have in common, we might look for ways of accepting each other more fully as we are. So I read the Qur'ân – I have read the Bible several times, in case you're wondering - and studied a number of other Islamic texts. Then I compiled a series of extracts from the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It was no more than a beginning, something to whet the appetite rather than satisfy it. The focus was on what the texts had to say about relationships. The result was a 56 page booklet called *One God, Three Faiths*, published by The Columba Press early in 2002. Its arrival on the scene was timely, reaching the shelves shortly after 911.

I finished a second prayer book, *Everyday Prayers for God's People*, and it was published in 2003, also by The Columba Press. I sent a copy to the bishop, Patrick Walsh. He replied, thanking me for it. It was pleasant to receive a reply from a bishop. Thank you, Bishop Patrick.

One thing about Jesus that had struck me down through the years was that he asked a lot of questions. Accustomed to thinking of him as a teacher, telling people this and that, it often passed unnoticed, I believe, that he also asked questions. He did indeed give answers to questions, but it is no less true that he gave questions to answer. I believe he wanted to go beyond teaching people *what to think*, and wanted to teach them simply *to think*. His questions were a wake-up call, and they could be taken at different levels. I went through the gospels, and wrote a one-page piece on each of the 120 questions that Jesus asked. A favourite question was, 'Why do you

not judge for yourselves what is right?'(Luke 12.57) It was as much a journey of self-discovery as it was about teaching anybody anything. The result of this was *The Questions of Jesus*, published in 2003 by The Columba Press, and subsequently translated into Bulgarian. I sent a copy of this also to the bishop, and received another gracious letter of appreciation.

There was an interesting sequel to this in 2008, when I was on sabbatical in the United States. In 2004, a year after my book, another book under the same name, written by an American Jesuit called John Dear was published by a US publishing house, *Image*. For obvious reasons, authors generally try to avoid using a name already used by another, especially a recent one. I was in the Catholic Workers' house in Albuquerque, New Mexico, when I was introduced to a Jesuit. His name sounded familiar, but I couldn't make a link. Then the penny dropped in the slot; he was John Dear. I told him who I was, and about my book. He became embarrassed and explained that he had tried to dissuade the publishers from using that title because he knew about mine. But they had brushed off his concerns, saying that Ireland was a long way off and no one would ever know about the double usage. It's a small world, *Image*; naughty boys, you should have known better!

I continued producing the *Provincial Bulletin* and *The Capuchin*, and was then asked in 2004 to produce the *Ordo* for the Irish Province. This is a liturgical calendar in book form, not so easy to produce as it might seem. I know the bishop was wondering if I was doing my work

in the parish, with all these extraneous activities, but I was able to re-assure him. I pulled my weight there.

An evening walk

Not long after arriving in Lagmore, I wrote this account of a walk I took one evening: -

I left the house one evening to go for a walk to the top of the hill. It's thirty minutes up and down - good for the heart, the doctors say. The firecrackers have begun, even though Hallowe'en is still two months away. There are many different kinds, the ones which make a splitting, cracking sound when thrown at the footpath. There are the rockets, which start with a pop, followed by a whistle, and finally a loud bang, sometimes uncomfortably close. There are lots of them, and their sound is almost constant. I'd have thought they'd want to get away from all that after the Troubles.

Further up the hill uprooted shrubs are scattered on the path. At the top of the hill I turn round and come back. A bus from the newly-begun service passes nearby. Stones hop off its sides, flung by children of about nine to fifteen years of age. The driver waits until he gets out of range, stops, shouts a few four-lettered words at them and drives off.

I go over to the children. They are sitting on a discarded sofa and armchairs beside a bus shelter with shattered glass. 'Are you a priest?' says one. Pretty quick, I think, as I'm wearing civvies. 'I am.' 'Do you know Brother Useless?' 'Yes.' 'What do you think of

my chick?’ says one, with a giggle, talking about the girl sitting on his lap. ‘Don’t be talking like that; he’s a priest’, says another, shutting him up. I find it almost impossible to follow their conversation since they talk, sometimes all together, in short staccato bursts of words.

Nearby, one of their pals has a laser light which he flashes, lighting them up with a small red spot which can damage the eye if it beams into it. We talk for a while, and I bid them goodnight.

A little down the hill children are playing on the wreck of a car burned out by death-riders several days before. ‘I know you, you came to our school’, says the youngest, a girl in P2 (high infants). They run from the footpath onto the road, jump on the bonnet of the car, then onto the roof, then climb inside. I ask them to be careful not to cut themselves on the broken glass or ragged edges of metal. They take no notice, pulling bits and pieces from the car and playing with them. An older child lifts the smallest in his arms and jumps off the car roof with her. Another runs over to me to complain about him, ‘He said the bad word – eff.’

I ask them about playing fields or a park. There aren’t any. ‘Youth clubs?’ None. I ask the oldest, who is thirteen, and in second year of secondary school, what subjects he’s studying. ‘Tests,’ he replies. ‘Yes, but in what subjects?’ ‘We have to pass them,’ he says.

Most of the children I met were small, still at primary school. Wait until they’re teenagers, and then what?

The railway line

Not long after going to Lagmore, I was in conversation with a member of a religious order who lived near the city centre. We were talking about Lagmore, but, since it was new, he wasn't sure where it was, and I was explaining to him. I said it was on the right-hand side of the Stewartstown Road as you go towards Lisburn. He said, 'And what about the other side?' I thought he meant the other side of the road, and I said it was in Twinbrook parish. He explained that what he had meant was 'What about Protestants?' They were 'The other side.'

Northern Ireland struck me as being a society which was chronically mentally ill, at times suicidal. It seemed unable or unwilling – I don't know which – to break from sectarianism, racism and narrow-minded prejudice. It seemed unable to see itself except through its own sectarian lenses. I thought of it, too, as being like a railway line, the two tracks close to each other but never meeting, no matter how far they go. The Protestant-Catholic divide seemed to permeate every aspect of life, to be on people's minds all the time. When people met for the first time, formally or informally, the question, 'Is this person one of us or one of them?' seemed constantly present, and there were coded ways of finding the answer without asking directly. The name, address or accent would often provide it. In my case, my Southern accent was a complete give-away and would often evoke a look that seemed to say, 'What are you doing here?'

I don't recall hearing anything from a Catholic that I would consider sectarian. I used to visit the parish primary school, classroom by classroom, weekly, and visit Fourth Year students at Saint Colm's secondary school in Twinbrook, also on a weekly basis. There was never anything that, by any stretch of the imagination, could be described as sectarian. I think it is unjust and simply untrue to describe Catholic schools as such. But, in a divided society, like Northern Ireland, it is right to ask whether separate school systems, no matter how non-sectarian they may be, do not contribute to separation. I think it does, and that it would be better for Northern Ireland if it had a single school system for all children, a secular system, with religious education provided at home by parents. I said this on a number of occasions and was made to understand very quickly that I was in a minority of one in saying it. I also visited Oakwood Integrated Primary School which was attended by children of all faiths, and of none. It was excellent, largely due to the determination of its principal, Ms. Olwyn Frost, who had stayed with the project from its earliest days in shabby pre-fabs. Some parents sent their children there as a matter of simple convenience, or if they'd had a row with a teacher in another school. But I felt that if I were married and living with a family in Northern Ireland, I would send my children to an integrated school and teach them the Catholic faith at home. On several grounds, including that of religious education, I think that is a better way of doing things.

Separate school systems, along with separate housing, mean that Catholic and Protestant children may grow up

without ever meeting each other. One study undertaken while I was there showed that, by the age of three, children already knew the meaning of symbols such as flags, and painted kerb-stones. They knew whether these represented “our side” or “the other side.” An effort was made to bring young people together through the Ulster Project, an ecumenical venture in which American families hosted mixed groups of children from Northern Ireland in their homes. While recognizing the generosity of the American families, I felt it was shameful that Irish teenagers, in order to be able to talk across the sectarian divide, had to go to the other side of the Atlantic! What a mark against a society!

Northern Ireland remains an inward-looking society, living in a time-warp. There are a lot of closed minds, with deep resistance to change. People appear not to see that, if you keep doing what you’ve been doing, you’ll keep getting what you’ve been getting. Many are prisoners of their own propaganda, locked in narrow tribal loyalties, and unable or unwilling to look beyond them.

People in the Irish Republic lost interest in the North, turned off not only by the violence and hatred, but disappointed too by the constant raising and dashing of hopes - one step forwards followed by another step back - that marked the peace process for decades. In the referendum on acceptance of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, 44% of voters in the Republic did not vote.

The lack of moral courage in Irish Christian churches is a major impediment to reconciliation. It is a national fault, the cute hoor syndrome elevated to the status of wisdom. Ireland is often a testosterone-free zone. I don't think the churches pulled their weight in the peace process. What is the use of speaking the language of reconciliation while refusing to take steps that could bring it about? Individual clergy have done good work, but the refusal to tackle structural sources of division, the maintenance of a cult of grievance, the playing of the minority card, the failure to decommission minds (to borrow John Hume's phrase) as ways of reinforcing our separateness all serve to keep people apart. The churches have too many interests vested in the *status quo* to allow for real change, too much investment in institutional baggage, too little readiness to forgive. They fail to put the common good before sectional interest. How many clergy and how much church property would become redundant in a united Christian church? (This applies to the wider world also.) Ecumenical gestures are just that – gestures, tokenism which served only to underline the refusal to go further. That is to betray Jesus Christ, who was crucified by a coalition of forces who rejected him because of the universalist character of his message, because he would not play sectional power games. I think history will judge the churches in Northern Ireland harshly for their failure to be a unifying force; and that judgment may come quickly with a collapse of the churches' position if peace endures. The socio-political props to their position will have been removed.

Terence O'Neill, the former Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, was right when he said that Northern Ireland had not used its religion to elevate its politics but used its politics to degrade its religion. That failure of leadership has had a negative effect world-wide on people's perception of religion: many people of goodwill see it as the occasion, the excuse or the cause of violence. But, of course, leaders can lead only as far or as fast as their followers will allow; if they go too far ahead they will lose them. And sometimes the followers do not want to move.

Life isn't static. If Northern Ireland doesn't move forward towards a more integrated society, it will likely move back into the past. It is not inconceivable that the same dreary cycle of violence and counter-violence could resume unless people are willing to break from entrenched positions and go out and meet each other as human beings. That should have a prior claim to any other loyalty. 'The demands of peace transcend those of religion,' said Pope John Paul II.

The skeleton out of the cupboard

I had first heard about the issue of the sexual abuse of adolescents by clergy when Brendan Smith's case became public knowledge in the early nineties. From there on, there was a steady drip-drip-drip of new cases. At times it seemed unending. I wished it would all come out at one go and we could get it over with, but that could not happen. And it wasn't just in Ireland. At the same time, there was a flood of similar news from

Boston, and, in later years, from many other parts of the church.

The media - thank God for them - gave the issue substantial coverage, making it impossible for what we now know as the recognized practice of denying, delaying and dissembling to work any more. Without the media, the issue would not have been faced. As long as cover-up was effective there would be no clean up. But the pressure made life hard. For months, I felt ashamed to go outside the door, and wondered what I would face if I did. I went out anyway, and was occasionally shouted at about it. One man shouted from the other end of the street, 'I don't know as much about going to Mass as you do, but I bet you know more about little boys than I do.'

Over a period of about ten years, religious leaders such as bishops and provincials of religious orders were dragged by public pressure into admitting, accepting and acting. They had known about it for a long time. By 1983 – yes, 83 - it had reached a point where it became an annual item on the agenda of the bishops' conference, and some of them had taken out insurance policies to protect their dioceses against potential claims.

The bishops seemed chronically unable to deal with the matter. Priests, as much as laypeople, could not understand why they dragged their feet so much, were pathetically incoherent in trying to explain to the public what they were doing, and even, unfortunately, at times, lying in their attempts to cover up. There were unworthy

tactics of playing games with words, distinguishing between promises of disclosure to the Guards, and promises of full disclosure. It was clear that some bishops were not following their own commonly-agreed policies, and a few defended their right not to do so.

In fairness to church leaders it has to be acknowledged that psychologists had not been much help. For decades they were as blind to child sex abuse as anyone. And when priests were sent to them for assessment and treatment, they commonly sent them back after some time, saying that it was now safe to re-admit them to ministry as they had made a clean break with the past. Not surprisingly, bishops and provincials acted on such advice. It took time for psychologists to learn that, while a paedophile who is ready to ask for help, and willing and able to act on it when given, may learn to control his instincts, they cannot be cured. The instinct will always remain.

The state began to appoint commissions of inquiry into the church's handling of the issue, a procedure that would have been unthinkable even a decade before. The state investigating the church? The whole country, led by the clergy, would have been up in arms at such an idea. Now, the move was welcomed by almost everyone, not least the ordinary clergy, who felt that, at last, the issue might be faced instead of fudged.

What was happening was something truly remarkable: the media and the general public were teaching church leaders basic morals. Some of the latter, in their public statements, had minimized the evil of child abuse in a

way that scandalized people. For quite a number of Catholics this became a parting of the ways with the church. People were looking for the truth and what they got was (bad) PR. They were looking for repentance and reform, and what they got was crisis management. The church, which had so often used the phrase, 'Confession is good for the soul' seemed unable to admit having done wrong.

Another, no less nasty, aspect of the question began to emerge. It was noticeable that when offending priests were moved from one parish to another, the movement was always down the socio-economic ladder, not up. People at the bottom of the heap do not have the education, the skills or the self-confidence to be able to take on a powerful establishment such as that of the church, but those at the top would not stand for what was being done. It looked as if decision-makers in the church were being strong with the weak and weak with the strong.

In later years I lived with a paedophile. He had been withdrawn from ministry, and convicted in court; the community was charged with watching him and seeing to it that he fulfilled a series of conditions that had been laid down for him. I found him blind to the significance of what he had done, able to talk about it as if it had nothing to do with him. He was unhesitating and skilful in lying, incapable of giving a straight answer to the simplest question and unremittingly devious in everything. When faced by lawyers' tough questioning in one of the commissions he admitted to a great many

more offenses that he had ever acknowledged to the community.

Why weren't such men simply thrown out of the priesthood and the order? I think there were several factors at work. One was that, being freed from the constraints imposed on them in the friary, they might have a free hand and abuse more than before. Granted that they use the priesthood as their mode of entry to the situation which made abuse possible, but they had enough manipulative skills to get around that if they wanted to. Another reason was that we always felt hope that those involved might come clean and make a full admission and ask for forgiveness. And forgiveness is a fundamental of the Christian life, available to anyone, no matter what he or she might have done. Yet another reason was that Rome was rejecting requests for laicization in such cases. Its mantra was, 'We must save his vocation.' What vocation? Rome was as much in denial as anyone. At one point it took the matter out of bishops' hands altogether and directed that all such cases be referred to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome. That didn't last long, as the CDF was overwhelmed by the number, and perhaps also educated a little as to the complexity of the cases.

A friend of mine was sexually molested by an adult at puberty; it lasted about a year. In later life, he married and had a family, but the marriage ended in divorce and alcoholism for both parties. Now, more than fifty years later, he still sleeps, not in a bed but on a sofa in the living room, not in pyjamas but in day-clothes, and not

in darkness but with the lights and TV always on. That's the kind of damage that abuse can do.

'Protect children and you'll protect the church,' said Ian Eliot of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church. It's true, but the converse is not. One could equally say: Protect justice, truth, etc. and you'll protect the church.' I fear that the lessons we have learned from the child abuse scandals, especially their mishandling, have not been learned or applied in other areas of the church's life.

Child protection sometimes took a strange turn. A neighbouring parish had a youth club which catered for four hundred young people at week-ends. Then officials from a government agency with responsibility for child protection came on an inspection. They said the club needed a much higher ratio of adults to children, and all would have to have a POCVA test. (POCVA meant Protection Of Children and Vulnerable Adults.) Another familiar with parish work knows that it is very difficult to get adults involved in youth work; they often want such a club as a way of getting away from their children for a while. In any parish, you would be lucky if you had four or five adults willing to help. Furthermore, this was a nationalist area, the memory of "The Troubles" was fresh, and adults were not going to consent to the police investigating their background. There was an impasse which resulted in the closure of the club. Four hundred youngsters, who previously had organized weekend activities under adult supervision, were thrown onto the streets – in the name of child protection! A taxi driver

told me of seeing young teenage girls at weekends, drunk and asleep on the roadside at three or four am. He used to call the police, who would bring them home. The parents would usually say they hadn't known.

Tom Rocks

One of the members of the community was Father Thomas Rocks, a Donegal man by birth. He was in his seventies when I was there, but was very active. He was guardian of the friary, did the shopping and much of the cooking – he was an excellent cook – helped in other parishes, visited a neighbouring school to help prepare children for the sacraments and much else. He and I had some great conversations. I really enjoyed listening to him, and found him broad-minded and generous, impatient with narrowness or pettiness of any kind. Once, in a hurry on a Sunday morning to get from one parish to another for Mass, he broke the speed limit and was given a ticket. His driving license had been issued in Britain, where he had spent many years as chaplain to Irish emigrants, and that meant he could not receive an on-the-spot fine but would have to go through a court process.

Some time later, when he was helping in Cushendall parish in Antrim, Tom suffered a heart attack and died, instantly, it seems. It was on the afternoon of the Grand National, a race in which he had likely placed some bets, and that may have played a part. I was in Lagmore and received a phone call from the priest of a parish near Cushendall to tell me of Tom's death. It came as a huge

shock. I do not remember experiencing such a sense of shock in any other similar situation, but I was grateful to the priest for telling me the truth. While I was still reeling from the news, the phone rang again: it was a woman from Cushendall who told me that she had some bad news about Fr. Tom. She said, 'He is seriously ill but he is not dead.' She was trying to "cushion" the shock. I was impatient with her approach and told her I knew Tom was dead. She said to someone near her, not realizing I could hear it, 'He knows he's dead,' and then hung up. How not to do things.

On the morning of Tom's funeral, an armoured police vehicle arrived at the door. I answered it and a policeman asked to see Father Thomas Rocks. I asked what it was about, and he explained that it was a summons. At this, I couldn't help bursting out laughing. I told him that Tom was inside and he could put the summons in his coffin if he wanted to. Then another friar, Seán Kelly, came along, and when he heard it he, too, nearly fell over laughing. We both felt that Tom would have enjoyed the scene immensely.

Snapshots from Lagmore

A child in the parish was left orphaned by an accident which killed her parents and siblings. She was about four years old and had been attending a pre-school in the parish. The teachers there had been considering expelling her: she was foul-mouthed, bad-mannered, angry and aggressive, often kicking, biting, or punching other children. However, following the accident, she was

taken into foster care by a family who lived elsewhere, so, for a while we saw nothing of her. Then, about a year later, she came back for some occasion. I didn't recognize her until a teacher pointed her out to me, and, with difficulty, persuaded me that she was the same girl. I saw a child who was calm, relaxed, playful, well-mannered and happy. A few months in a good home had transformed her.

About half-way through my time there, the police resumed street patrols, although still in armoured Landrovers. As one drove past, a boy sprang to life, and, as if by reflex, looked around for a stone to fling, found one, and was about to let loose when I shouted at him to stop. He did. The power of the clergy!

One evening, the police called me, asking me to intervene in a family dispute. It was the RUC, still a largely Protestant force, who had the illusion, not uncommon among Protestants, that a priest was such a force in the Catholic community that all he had to do was say 'Stop!' and things would stop. Foolishly perhaps, I went to the estate, a bright new, red-brick, middle-class area. Two grandmothers were fighting on the street, scratching each other and tearing fistfuls of hair from one another's heads. One called the other a prostitute – which I think she may have been. The other retorted with, 'You're a witch!' I don't think that was true, but she was into some odd "alternatives." I knew both of them, having visited their houses, along with all the others in the estate, on several occasions. I hadn't a clue what to do or where to start. What was worse was

that family reinforcements being summoned by both sides from other parts of the city. And a group of teenagers, fascinated by the sight, and enjoying every minute of it, looked as if they were warming up for a scrap, too. The police were there, although keeping back, and made an inviting target. Stones were available from a nearby building site. I decided to start with the teenagers: I told them I was trying to calm things down, and asked for their help. They asked what they could do, and I said the best way for them to help was to leave the place in the hope that this might help calm things. To my surprise and appreciation, they agreed to do that, and did it; they had more sense than the adults. I then moved back to the two sides and asked them to call off the reinforcements and to go back into their houses. Nothing doing. After half an hour or more of “talks about talks,” and several tense moments, they did so. The grannies were still outside shouting insults at each other, and they were the most difficult to persuade. Eventually they agreed to go back indoors, and I spent the rest of the evening listening to them, so that they could let off steam and, hopefully, calm down. In the days that followed I called back a few times. The animosity remained intense, but at least they were no longer fighting on the street. It wasn't a solution, but it was an improvement. The police said thanks.

Why did parents seem to shout at their children so much of the time? The decibel rating was high. Children, who learn by imitation anyway, learned to shout back. And small children, standing beside each other, shouted into one another's faces. That was how communication

was carried on much of the time. There seemed to be a lot of inbuilt aggression. Many women regarded it as a badge of honour to be tough, to be able to shout others down. Were they acted out a barging role they had seen in a soap opera? Or was it what they had learned from their mothers when they were children? Does violence in language contribute to violence in action? Was the aggression a by-product of the Troubles, or were the Troubles a by-product of the aggression?

I said in a sermon one Sunday morning that nationalists saw cheating the social welfare system as a patriotic duty; the congregation laughed.

I met a young woman, a separated mother of two, recovering from cancer. I asked her how she managed to cope. She replied that she took one day at a time, and gave me her outlook in a few phrases, saying, 'Yesterday's history; tomorrow's a mystery. Today is a gift, and that's why we call it the present.' Remarkable and wonderful.

I was called to anoint a man who had died. I knew him, and had been calling on him for several months. He had a terminal illness and everyone, including the man himself, knew he did not have long to live. But I knew also that, in this particular case, there was more to the story than met the eye. The family assured me that the doctor had seen him, and everything was alright. If I hadn't known the situation in any event, that would have made me suspicious, as people don't normally say things like that. I went ahead and said the prayers and anointed

the man. What I knew, but they didn't know I knew, was that the man had died the previous day, south of the border, in the Irish Republic. He had been born in the South, and had expressed a wish to see his home place before he died. So they took him, but he upset everything by dying there. What were they to do? If they followed the law, and informed the authorities in the Republic, there would have to be an investigation and an inquest - lots of hassle, bureaucracy and expense. If they quietly took him back across the border and said nothing, his burial could go ahead without fuss. But if they were caught trying to smuggle a dead body across the border, then they really would be in trouble. So what should they do? The nationalist reflex kicked in and they chose the illegal route. They put him sitting in the back seat of a car, held him in place with a seat belt, and with a passenger on either side propping him up with their elbows, and set out to cross the border by one of the many quiet – formerly 'unapproved'- roads. All went well along a narrow country road until they were stopped – by a cow, which inexplicably refused to move. Maybe they were townies, unused to animals, and didn't know what to do. But it held them up for twenty minutes. Eventually they got past it, and took to a main road. After a while the driver saw a flashing blue light in the rear-view mirror and heard a siren – a police car. But, to their great relief, it drove past, going elsewhere. They drove safely back to Belfast, placed the body in bed, and called the doctor. He pronounced the man dead, and then they called me. I was like Emmanuel in *Fawlty Towers*, 'Me, I know nawthing.' And they all lived – and died – happily ever after.

I was asked to give a talk in Derry to a group interested in the idea of small Christian communities. I was glad to accept. I spoke about my experience in Zambia, and gave the background of the situation I knew of along the border between Angola and Zambia. Then a man in the audience began heckling. He was a “defender of the faith”, said I was a communist, and that I should have asked the bishop’s permission before speaking. There are times when a person says something so stupid I don’t know where to begin in making a reply. The chairman of the meeting seemed also to be at a loss, but, when several people in the audience told him they had come to hear me, not him, he sat down. That was all straightforward enough, but what completely baffled me was when, at the end of the meeting, I proposed concluding with a period of prayer, to which the audience responded willingly, except for the champion of orthodoxy, who took to his heels and literally *ran* from the room the moment prayer was mentioned.

Weddings provided some unusual experiences: -

At one, the bride was on time, but the groom was late; he had come early, but then left to tank up at a bar and never felt the time passing.

At another, the bride was on time, but the guests weren’t; they were outside the church taking each other’s pictures. When the best man asked them to come in, pointing out that the bride was being driven up and down the street, looking anxiously at the church, they replied, ‘What’s you hurry? It’ll only take a minute!’

The bride was ready to leave the house for the church, but the taxis hadn't arrived; they said they had underestimated the traffic.

At another, all were present, except the musicians, who never showed up, despite having confirmed that morning that they would be there.

A bride, who had the generous idea of sending doves into the air after the ceremony in the church as a sign of goodwill to the world, was let down when the suppliers of the doves didn't arrive.

Simple weddings were the best. I officiated at several where the only people present were the bride and groom, the best man and the bridesmaid, the two sets of parents, and a few guests, making a total of perhaps ten or twelve in all. People were relaxed and at ease, free from anxiety about trimmings and creating an impression. This made it possible to focus attention on the essential, namely, the couple pledging their consent to each other before God.

Irish people have customs and traditions about funerals, such as the wake. One is that the body of the deceased may be brought home, so that relatives and friends can call and pay their respects. The coffin is placed in the living room, uncovered. On one occasion, an elderly man had died, and his family followed the customary practice. A daughter of his, who had emigrated to New Zealand, married a New Zealander and had a child there, returned with her family for the funeral. The child, a girl of about three, had never seen a dead body before, and her father said she should not see it; he felt she would be traumatized by the sight. But the

relatives said that, in their experience, children were not frightened or disturbed by it. His wife concurred in this view, so, after a time, he reluctantly agreed to let his daughter see the body. He carried her into the room in his arms, and together they spoke to her grand-dad. After a few minutes they left, but first, the little girl bent down, kissed her grand-father on the forehead, said ‘Bye-bye, Grand-dad!’ and left happy. For her father the experience was a revelation, and he was happy that he had agreed to let her see him.

I drove along Gawn Street, off the Newtownards Road in East Belfast one day. It is a strongly loyalist area. A mural caught my eye. It displayed the coat of arms of the loyalist paramilitary force, the Ulster Freedom Fighters, which, during the thirty years of The Troubles, had committed many sectarian crimes. I noticed the attached slogan: it read, ‘*Quis separabit?*’ the Latin for ‘Who shall separate?’ It was an abbreviation of a quotation from Saint Paul, ‘Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?’ (Romans 8.35) The slogan seemed a puzzling, even perverse, choice in view of the organization’s history of murder. At about the same time, I saw a letterhead of Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church; its sub-title read, ‘Christ for Ulster.’ Those sounded to me like co-opting the Christian faith to one’s political agenda, like telling Christ whose side he should be on.

A man was shot dead in a planned execution at the entrance to a nearby school one morning. His killers had been waiting for him, and, as soon as he left his child into the school, they shot him through the chest at point-

blank range in ritualized fashion. The reactions of the children varied greatly: some hadn't noticed anything, some were frightened, and some thought it was great – it was just like TV – and they hoped there would be more!

I met an elderly woman in her house when doing visitation, and she spoke to me with pride of how, unlike the younger generation, she had brought up her children to know the difference between right and wrong. She added that, to make sure they got the message, she beat them with a poker. It didn't seem to cross her mind that she was herself doing wrong in her method of teaching right from wrong.

A new generation of alcoholics is in the making around the local bar and off-license. Under-age children seem to have no problem getting money, or finding someone to buy drink for them inside. They can be seen going away with it in blue plastic bags. "Getting blocked" is a sign of coming of age.

One surprise: travelling shops, which I last saw in Donegal more than thirty years before. They're here because of the lack of local shops; they offer little choice and high prices.

On most week-ends there was death-riding. Youngsters could buy a car for as little as £50, drive it around at speed, and crash into ramps designed to slow vehicles down. This often ended with the transmission burning out, the car going on fire, and a mess left behind. Fortunately, there were no fatalities that I could

remember. When I arrived in 2001, a car would be set on fire somewhere in the parish about once a week. By the time I left in 2007, it was down to once a year.

At Mass each morning, I used to encourage people to contribute their own prayers of the faithful spontaneously after the gospel. I had done this in Carlow and Kilkenny, and the response came readily enough; after initial hesitation, people just did it, accepting the idea. In six years in Lagmore, trying this every day, only once did a person pluck up the courage to say a prayer, and, when he did, the congregation turned and stared at him, as if to say, 'Who do you think you are?' He didn't do it again. I often asked myself why people felt themselves unable to respond to something so simple, and so obviously good. I think it may have been passive aggression, as if they were saying that, for long, the priest was in total control and nobody dared open their mouth, so now that the priest was actually asking them to join in and speak, they were stubbornly refusing to do so as a punishment on the priest for the authoritarian control of the past. Maybe; I don't know.

I used to attend regular meetings of what we called the *Ministers Fraternal*, that is, Catholic and Protestant clergy together. Catholic clergy usually outnumbered Protestant substantially. One year, we visited each other's churches, simply to have a look at them, talk about why they were the way they were, and what different things meant. It was a good way of getting to know more about each other's traditions. I normally wore my habit to the meetings, but was asked by

Protestant clergy not to wear it when visiting their churches; they said it would cause them problems. One told me that, if he were seen talking to a Catholic priest, he would be called to account for it by his congregation; he would be asked what we had talked about, and it would be made clear to him that it was not to happen again. For me to be seen talking to a Protestant clergyman would have evoked either no comment from Catholics, or praise.

From time to time I met paramedics who had taken early retirement, in each case because of the stress of their job. For them, what had made the task so much more difficult was the experience of being stoned, or having bottles flung at them, when they went to the scene of a road accident, for example, and began the work of looking after the injured. It must be pretty stressful work at the best of times, I should imagine, and not everyone could cope with it. But, to have to endure that kind of irrational public hostility must have made things additionally difficult. Firemen had the same experience, and police, too, regardless of what their mission was. The three emergency services decided to launch a joint publicity campaign to try to dissuade people from doing this, but to just leave them alone. But they had to cancel it, as the level of attacks *increased* during it. There was something perverse and destructive about this. I don't know how to explain it.

I used to visit Saint Colm's Secondary School in Twinbrook each week, going to the fourth year students. At first I found it difficult, but I got into it after a while. One day, I heard a familiar mantra from one of the

students. ‘There’s nothing for young people.’ I had heard so many parents say this again and again as the explanation for teenage drunkenness, vandalism, litter, death-riding, burning cars, etc. I asked the student what kind of recreational facility he would use, and he replied ‘A sports field.’ I said to him, ‘Are you saying that there aren’t any?’ He repeated the mantra. Watching for his reaction, I replied, ‘Look out the window.’ There, directly across the road from the school entrance, in full view of the classroom, were three or four playing fields, fully equipped and well-kept. His jaw dropped, as if he were seeing them for the first time. In addition, there were leisure centres, with swimming pools, in Andersonstown and Lisburn, each of them about three km away. I asked the students if they used them; few did. Why not? They were too far away, they said, and their parents wouldn’t bring them. ‘Couldn’t you walk?’ I said. If I had blasphemed, they could hardly have been more shocked: nobody walked anywhere. ‘There are lots of buses to Andersonstown,’ I said. They shrugged their shoulders. I think they had heard the negative mantra so often they just accepted it without looking at the reality in front of them.

About 2004, I noticed a problem with my sight. I was developing “fog” in my eyes. It was becoming difficult to read and to see far ahead. An examination confirmed that I was developing cataracts in both eyes. Further checks some time later showed that they were developing rapidly. In 2006, a nurse asked me to read the letters on a chart, and I replied, ‘What chart?’ I couldn’t see it. The doctor told me I might have to wait thirteen

months before seeing a specialist, explaining that the delay was caused, not by lack of medical personnel, but by slow bureaucratic procedures. Fortunately for me, something cleared the logjam, and I had the first operation in February 2006. As I removed the eye patch after the operation, I thought, ‘This is like a resurrection!’ It was like changing from watching a black-and-white film to Technicolor. And I could clearly see things that were far away. The second operation, in May, was equally successful. Thank you, medical and nursing professions! I owe you a debt of gratitude. My sight has been excellent ever since.

My parents

My parents, Gerald and Clare, had moved to Dublin just two days after I joined the Capuchin order in 1961. My father was promoted in his job, rising to the rank of chief inspector of schools some years before his retirement in 1977. At first they lived in Boyle, Co. Roscommon, a place of natural beauty, history, and family links on my mother’s side. Near their home were the ruins of a Cistercian monastery and also Lough Key, with a forest park, a viewing tower, and more ancient ruins on an island lake. It is a quiet, peaceful place where they both enjoyed walks along the many paths of the forest park. They also liked going to the shrine of Our Lady at Knock, Co. Mayo, and expressed a wish to be buried there.

In December 1988, to the surprise of the family, they moved house across the border, to Northern Ireland.

They went to Newcastle, in Co. Down, a lovely seaside town with a large proportion of retired people. Situated at the foot of the Mourne Mountains, it has wonderful walks in Tullymore and Castlewella forest parks, and along the seashore, as well as great natural beauty inland, in places such as the Spelga dam and the Silent Valley. They liked their new surroundings very much and felt fully at home, spending the rest of their lives there. In fact, they spent more time in Newcastle than anywhere else in their lives.

In January 1991, my father was diagnosed with cancer of the colon. Cancer had been a great fear of his all through his life, and his nightmare had now come true. But his operation was successful, and he made a complete recovery. He met his enemy, and saw it off the field of battle. It was tough going, because, during his recovery, he suffered two heart attacks. This was a surprise to all, including the doctors: he had had no previous history of heart trouble, there had been none in his family, and he lived a healthy life, with no smoking, almost no drinking, regular daily exercise and moderate eating of a balanced diet. But it happened. He recovered from them, and went on to live another thirteen years. My mother, Clare, was devoted to him and was with him every step of the way. On one occasion, when she went to see him in the Downe hospital in Downpatrick, after one of his heart attacks, when he was semi-conscious and connected up to machines by tubes and cables, the ward sister recommended her not to see him. She said it would be traumatic, and suggested counselling. This made my mother boil but she exercised great restraint,

said she had been married to her husband for over fifty years, did not need counselling to see him, but, if the ward sister wanted to do something useful, she could bring her a cup of tea! And that was that.

I was still in Zambia at the time, but went home to see him. After I returned to Ireland in 1997, and lived in Kilkenny and Carlow, I used to north regularly and spend a day or two with them. Later, when living in Lagmore, it was only about forty minutes to Newcastle. Clare, living in Canada, visited annually, while Vin and Una, both living in England, visited several times a year. As a family, including the extended family, we saw a lot of each other. When the grandchildren, and then the great grandchildren, came along, they also would go to Newcastle for visits.

One of my happy memories from this period was the good conversations I had with my father. While the publicity about clerical sex abuse was at its height, he said to me that it was a hard time to be a priest, and indeed it was. I told him that it was my intention to stay in the priesthood, and he was glad to hear that. If I had decided to leave it, he would have accepted it, but would have been disappointed. He would have seen it as dereliction of duty, and he had a strong sense of duty. One of the things he told me was that since his youth he had prayed to God for three things: a good wife, to live to the year 2000, and – unfortunately – I've forgotten the third. But he said all three prayers had been granted and he was grateful for that. He was the most honest man I ever met; he had a simple, uncomplicated faith. In one

respect, his influence and my mother's coincided: they both taught us to be unafraid of having an opinion, to speak our minds, and to be true to ourselves.

My mother, by contrast, would have been delighted, I think, if I had told her I was leaving. I think she'd have said, 'You've done enough.' I don't think she ever wanted me to be in the order in the first place, or to be a priest. She was negative about things relating to the church or the order. A disappointment to me was that I was not able to have a conversation with her as with my father: she seemed unable to have one that went beyond talk about the weather or what was in the news, and avoided or blocked it whenever it tended to go beyond that. This was especially disappointing as I had had good conversations with her before I joined the order. I think it was the same with other family members.

On 4 August 2004, my parents celebrated their sixty-seventh wedding anniversary. It was a low-key affair, but with a lot of love and affection. Everyone, including my father, knew that he was dying, and, in fact, he died, less than three weeks later, on 22 August.

During the period of my father's illness, my sister, Veve, was principal of Saint Louis Secondary School in Dundalk, south of the border from Newcastle, about an hour's drive away. She went almost daily to visit and help them. This was the start of a period of thirteen years of caring for both parents and a further six years for my mother. Veve is the kindest person I ever met. She expended enormous effort, care, and attention on our

parents. I used to wonder if it was really such a good idea, as its effect seemed to be to increase their level of dependence on her. After Veve retired from teaching, she went to live with them, and then the job of caring for them became total, virtually 24/365, with only rare short breaks. This wore her down and her health began to suffer. I found myself questioning the idea of such sacrificial self-giving, and am still uncertain about it. Its effect on my parents seemed to be greater dependence, sometimes childishness and even wilfulness, while its effect on Veve was to seriously damage her health. Respite care was theoretically possible, but, when it was tried with my father, the various care homes said they could not give him the level of care he had grown accustomed to, as he would require a personal nurse twenty-four hours a day, and the cost of that would be beyond reach. When her health needs became similarly taxing, my mother refused to consider respite care. She died on Easter Monday, 5 April 2010. As they had wished, my parents were buried in Knock, Co. Mayo.

Leaving Lagmore

By 2007, I had been six years in Lagmore, the longest appointment I'd had, except for the seven years in Wellington.

The Irish province of the order was well aware that its numbers were declining, there were few new recruits, we were growing older, and problems of health and morale were affecting us negatively. At the same time, the number of our commitments remained the same, or was

growing; the province, like the clergy in general, was like a piece of elastic that was being stretched further and further. We had spent a period of perhaps seven or eight years, with many meetings, including province-wide assemblies, reviewing this situation, and reflecting on what might be done. Clearly, some retrenchment could not be avoided. We decided to draw up criteria for making decisions. These included taking into account the geographical spread of the order in Ireland, so as to have a presence across the country. As things stood, we had five houses in Dublin, three in Cork, and one each in Donegal, Kilkenny, Carlow and Belfast. We decided also to prioritize the retention of houses where there was a broad range of apostolic activity, especially in new fields. We felt also that houses, as far as possible, should be self-supporting, low-maintenance, and have as few paid staff as possible. They should not duplicate what was already being done in an area, and do work that was of value to the local church.

At the provincial chapter in July 2007, the crunch came. We knew we had to make decisions because circumstances imposed them on us. All the friars of the province were present, except those unable to attend because of age or ill-health. It was time to draw up what we called, tongue-in-cheek, a “hit list”. But, as the voting proceeded, it became clear that the criteria on which we had spent so much time and thought were being discarded in favour of people voting for the protection of their own situation. In fact, we pretty systematically did the opposite of what the criteria set out. No one wanted their house to close, and it was easy

for big houses to out-vote small ones. Lagmore, and Blanchardstown in Dublin, both of which would have been kept if we had followed the criteria were selected for elimination, while large old houses, expensive to maintain, requiring a lot of investment to make them suitable for the elderly, and usually places where the dominant apostolates were traditional ones that were dying out, were selected for retention. I found the chapter of 2007 a huge disappointment. When the challenge came, we flunked it.

We had voted for a comfortable exit for ourselves rather than have the courage to keep the flag flying. In Lagmore, our only house in Northern Ireland, we had one friar in a parish, one in prison ministry, one on retreat work, one giving specialized courses round the country, and one living a very active retirement. The house itself was small, compact, required little maintenance, had no paid staff, and was economically self-sustaining. But, by the end of July we had shut it down and left. I saw that as a black spot in the history of the province.

I felt I had aged much more than six years while in Lagmore. I found parish work mostly a treadmill with little meaning. In particular, I felt that the sacraments, especially for children in the school system, had become a kind of conveyor belt which did not call for faith or conversion. Everyone knew very well that, for many children, their first confession would also be their last; for many, their first Communion would likewise be their last until confirmation, and it was the exit sacrament.

They might not be seen again in church until their funeral. What I found most dispiriting was the failure by priests and bishops, as well as the wider church, to look these issues in the face and talk about them openly and honestly. There was no dialogue, nor structures for it. We seemed to close our eyes, not ask questions, keep going blindly, and hope for the best. It was low-level maintenance, not mission, a formula for collapse.

Men's work

While in Lagmore, I had developed an interest in men's issues. I don't recall where, when, or how this happened but I think the writings and website of Richard Rohr OFM and his Centre for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, may have nudged the process along in some way. Women's issues had been heard of since the sixties, but men were the silent gender. Issues like suicide among men (in Ireland it is four times higher than in women across all age groups), domestic abuse of men, homosexuality and the church, the minimalization of fathers in the custody of children after separation and in abortion, the role of men in parenting, men's denial of their health issues, the absence of a national organization of men, men's identity, men's spirituality, addictions in men, and so on were pressing but were being addressed only minimally. The Irish journalist, John Waters, for many years had ploughed a lonely furrow in this area. I saw the possibility of engaging in men's work as an opening into something fresh, new – and necessary. I asked for permission to go to the United States on sabbatical to study the work of

Richard Rohr in his centre. The provincial at the time, who had said at the chapter that we had to branch out into work which was prophetic if we wanted to get vocations, agreed enthusiastically. In August 2007, I went to the US, having first got a visa through the US consulate in Belfast, in the process of applying for which I was asked if I had ever been a member of the government of war-time Nazi Germany, was conspiring to overthrow the government of the US by force, or had ever run a brothel. No, no, and no to all three. Despite those *lacunae* in my CV, the visa was granted!

Sabbatical, 2007-2008

The generosity of the friars of the West American Province of the Capuchins gave me a roof over my head for most of the year; they were most hospitable and welcoming. I went first to the friary in Berkeley, situated close to several colleges of the University of California. I put myself on their mailing lists and received from them each week a list of their lectures or other activities which were open to the public - and free. I was not interested in doing an intensive course of study leading to credits - they were too expensive apart from anything else - but was delighted to participate in the great variety of activities on offer in the colleges and in Berkeley, San Francisco, and the Bay area. It's a lively and interesting place to be.

I found the city of San Francisco to be compact enough to walk around, but with an excellent system of public transport, especially the BART (a cousin of Dublin's

DART). It is full of galleries, museums, parks, places of historical and cultural interest, theatres, cinemas and places of natural beauty. I sampled them all, from the Golden Gate bridge to the Embarcadero, from Pier 39 to Castro, from USS Liberty ship Timothy O'Brien to Prohibition Speakeasy beer, from Chinatown to the barking sea-lions, from Sutro Tower Hill to the Lawrence Livermore laboratory. The only place I didn't like was Alcatraz. I found it depressing: it seemed such a waste of human lives, the prison guards' no less than the prisoners', but I had no answer to the nagging question 'What's the alternative?'

It was while I was walking one day in the Tenderloin area of downtown San Francisco, with the intention of making my way from Market Street via Jones Street up to Nob Hill to see Grace Episcopal Cathedral (modelled on Notre Dame in Paris) that I was happily ambushed by Divine Providence. I saw a line of people ahead of me, nearly all of them black men, obviously poor and on hard times. I stopped to ask what it was about, and an immensely large African American man explained to me that it was the Saint Anthony Centre for the homeless, run by the Franciscans, and they were serving lunch. Without thinking – my best decisions have always been impulsive - I signed up as a helper for three days a week, and after an introduction and short training period, began work. It was to be the highlight of my time in the US. The centre serves an average of 2500 lunches a day. During lunch a tray comes out of the kitchen every four to five seconds. The centre also offers its visitors help in English as a second language, with reading and writing,

clothing, job application skills, and with medical, legal, and housing problems. Saint Anthony's was a very efficient operation, but its essential characteristics were its courtesy and respect. Both were given, expected and received. The centre had about 30 full-time staff, and 60-70 daily volunteers. It was offered city, state, and federal aid, but declined because too many strings were attached: one example is that it would have had to close on public holidays. When a nearby publicly-assisted centre closed on Martin Luther King Day, the number for lunch in Saint Anthony's rose to 4000. The centre moved to new customized premises shortly after I left the US, build ahead of schedule, under cost, and funded entirely by private donations. While there I became an expert pourer of fruit juice, developing the ability to do it with my left and right hands simultaneously, pouring 1800 glasses or more at a session – an unexpected skill which I was happy to show off!

After a month or so in the country, I made a note of first impressions: -

People are friendly, courteous, and helpful, with noticeable respect for the person, especially the elderly (like me!) and the disabled.

There is self-discipline, as in respect for queues, pedestrians, the absence of litter or litter bins; there's punctuality: things start and end on time; and in a month I haven't heard a four-lettered word.

The US is a country that lives by law; you obey it, or you take the consequences.

The famous American “can do” mentality is still there, but not as much as before, I think. I can’t help a feeling that the US is a country in decline.

The US has lost its political innocence: its post-9/11 compromises with the ideals of the Founding Fathers, the Bill of Rights, due process and the traditions of war-time presidents like Woodrow Wilson and FDR have diminished its credibility as a moral force.

It’s insular: there’s little in the media about the outside world, except for Iraq and Afghanistan.

TV is unbelievably bad, especially Fox which is simply shameless. But there’s relief in National Public TV, Discovery, History and National Geographic channels; radio and newspapers are not very much better.

People have little sense of history, sometimes even of American history, I was surprised to find Americans of my vintage who were pretty clueless about the Vietnam War, for example. And there wasn’t very much general knowledge.

There’s a lot of obesity; meals are large, sometimes much too large, resulting in the waste of a lot of food.

Everything in the country seems big, spacious and well-built.

Smoking seems to be almost gone; I’m trying to think if I’ve seen *anyone* smoking since coming here. I suppose I must have, somewhere, but I don’t recall it.

I’ve never seen so many churches in my life; they’re everywhere, mostly Baptist of every imaginable variety and name.

I was shocked at the amount of poverty I saw; it’s widespread and more noticeable than in Ireland. There

was a significant number of mentally disturbed people begging on the streets.

Americans can easily be under-rated, and Europeans are not short of cultural arrogance towards them. They seem at times totally extrovert, making you wonder if there is any interiority at all – but there is. I met lots of reflective, thoughtful people, often troubled by the direction their country was taking. A great people, impossible not to like a lot, but not having a great government.

I found the pace of life in the US remarkably laid back and relaxed. That was a surprise. Some other surprises were how cold the weather can be; sunny California is far from sunny in winter, and San Francisco is cold even in summer. Mark Twain said the coldest winter he ever had was the summer he spent in San Francisco! The weather is often Irish. And things were cheap by Irish standards, with a few exceptions, such as chocolate and bread, which, surprisingly, could cost up to \$4 a loaf.

I flew to Albuquerque in New Mexico to work at the Centre for Action and Contemplation (CAC) founded by Richard Rohr. It was snowing when I arrived there, and cold to match. At an elevation of about 1600 metres, oxygen levels are lower than at sea level and I had a permanent headache while there. One day I saw the remarkable sight of a rain cloud overhead, with rain falling from it but not reaching the ground; the air was so dry it evaporated before it got there. The people at the Centre were a very nice group of people. You'd find it

hard to meet such a pleasant, helpful, welcoming and interesting group anywhere.

Albuquerque is a city of museums – twenty-two of them, on everything from nuclear power to rattlesnakes to turquoise.

An interlude in Santa Fé

I went to Santa Fé on Holy Saturday. Its full name is La Villa Réal de Santa Fé de San Francisco de Asis. It was given that name in 1610 by the king of Spain, and the city celebrated its fourth centenary in 2010. It has quite a history, with Spanish soldiers fighting the French, who attacked from Louisiana, both fighting the English, and the Indians being co-opted by all sides and fighting against each other – that sounds familiar, doesn't it? It's a beautiful city of only 70,000 people, about one-tenth the population of Albuquerque, even though it's the state capital. Every building has adobe walls, and only a few are more than two storeys, so it gives the city a camouflaged look; it fits perfectly into the desert surroundings, and, looking down on it from the Hill of Martyrs, you'd have to look twice to know there was anything there at all! The city is at a height of about 2200 metres, and was very cold at night, with 2007-8 being the coldest for years. The Santa Fé River, a tiny thing you could jump across, had ice on it in the morning. The city has twenty-three museums, one more than Albuquerque; it is very easy to walk around, although, like many cities around the world, footpaths

are an afterthought, and, where they exist, are often broken.

I went to the Easter Vigil in the Basilica Cathedral. We had the full treatment, the usual Vigil ceremonies, with baptisms, confirmations, and receptions into full communion. It took 140 minutes, but passed quickly. The *Exultet* was sung in Igbo by a Nigerian priest; no one knows if he got it right or wrong – he had lots of “chi-chi’s” in it. There was beautiful singing with the congregation joining in a lot of it. There was a great level of participation by the people with perhaps as many as fifty or more people having different functions at the Mass.

The cathedral was built in the 1880s’ by the first bishop, a Frenchman called Lamy. He used no local labour and brought in the entire team from France. That didn’t win him friends locally, and people were not displeased when he ran out of money before it was done. A group of Jewish merchants came together and loaned him enough to finish it. Some years later, when he got the money to repay them they declined it and said he should treat the loan as a gift. There’s an inscription in Hebrew over the front door of the cathedral in recognition of this.

I went to the Loretta chapel, built on the model of a church in Paris. It has a very unusual staircase leading to the choir loft, and no one seems to know what holds it up. It’s a spiral, without a central pillar or other supports, but it can take about twenty-five people at a time, and

has stood for a hundred and twenty years or so. It was built by one man, whose name is unknown, who left before he was paid, and who used timber that is unavailable locally, and local lumber mills say they didn't sell him anything. It's all a bit of a mystery. The stairs is springy when people walk on it. I think it's just very well dowelled – it uses no nails or screws.

I also went to see the state capitol, a round building, constructed that way, the locals say, so that no politician could ever be cornered on anything!

I visited the Palace of the Governors on the Plaza, the old Spanish governors' palace which now houses a museum. It had Inca, Aztec, and Maya artefacts, as well as those from earlier civilizations going back to about 500 B.C. In front of the palace, on the plaza, is a nineteenth-century monument celebrating the Union victory over the "rebels" in the Civil War, and over "the savage Indians" in various battles. No political correctness there.

Back to the CAC

The pace of life at the Centre was slow and easy. I think I was the hardest worker, and yet I worked less and easier than I had in Belfast. My work was sorting out Richard Rohr's somewhat chaotic business affairs. He's a man whom I like a lot and respect greatly, but he is no businessman. I'm sure he knows that and it doesn't bother him; he has better priorities.

But there was not much men's work there, properly speaking, except for helping in a day centre in downtown Albuquerque. It offered an extra and very useful service for homeless people in that it gave them an address which they could use for official purposes. And it also offered massage, which gave a little extra comfort to people who have little of it. But the centre was poorly funded, and it showed.

The highlight of my time at the CAC was when I went to the John Knox ranch (named after the man himself who wrote *A Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, which sounds a little misogynistic, especially from a man who married a fourteen year old girl when he was in his seventies!) It was a retreat centre in a beautiful country setting, with a good pool on a small creek, and a larger river, the Blanco, nearby, which was very clean and clear. The woods around the ranch had lots of wildlife – wild turkeys, deer, squirrels, buzzards, small bright red birds (cardinals?), fish, insects, butterflies and flowers. A group of sixty-five men including myself made a sort of retreat. They were young, old and in between, urban and rural, married and single, and from many walks of life, lay and clergy.

We engaged in what are called Men's Rites of Passage. These have been developed by Richard Rohr and his associates. The focus was on participation and experience. Rites of initiation, like life itself, are for participants, not spectators. You do the rites, they are not done to you or for you. The best approach is simply to go with the process, and not stand back analysing or

critiquing. A man is encouraged to come with a beginner's mind, open and receptive to deeper questions. They are a process of initiation into one's manhood, one's humanity. They are a journey of self-discovery undertaken by each participant, learning about his false self and his true self. They involve a process of suffering, dying and rising, in a way that is metaphorical but real.

The themes of the five days were, firstly, an introduction to the process, then separation, grief, initiation, and communion. These help a man to bring to the surface un-addressed or suppressed issues and questions in his life, and, with his fellow pilgrims, to begin a process of moving forward and deeper. A powerful sense of solidarity develops as men realize, perhaps for the first time, that we are walking wounded, that no one is exempt from brokenness. Indeed, a sense of failure is a denominator common to all human beings. The rites were not easy; nor were they meant to be, and no attempt was made to soften them. They make substantial personal demands, especially at the emotional level. They involve facing what we would rather avoid. They require a clear break with the ordinary routine of life, and a significant degree of self-discipline. Among the activities was a day of solitude, when each man went into the woods alone for a "desert" experience, creating a sacred space and reflecting on five tough counter-cultural themes.

What struck me particularly was the powerful sense of solidarity that developed so quickly. It was like Lough Derg or Croagh Patrick in that respect, only more

intense. Conversation was not the usual chatter about sport or politics or games of one-upmanship. It was a road less travelled by men, of emotions and the experience of grief and loss. I think that for some men the experience may have been the first time they opened up in a deep and honest way to another human being, perhaps even to themselves. To be listened to with respect, in silence, without comments or proffered “solutions”, was for many a new and soul-connecting experience. It was tough love at work.

Each evening there was a campfire with drumming, stories, and singing. The experience of conviviality was heart-warming and memorable. On the last day there was an *agapé*, not a sacramental eucharist, but a common prayer of praise and thanksgiving, sharing bread and wine in the Lord’s name. It was informal yet reverent, prepared yet fresh. It was a ritual of belonging, communion, and re-incorporation with the Divine, the self and fellow men, celebrated in the open under a majestic oak tree – being present to the Presence.

Throughout the rites, I was struck repeatedly by the abundance of talent, and the willingness to share it, among ordinary men. They responded magnificently to what they felt was real and authentic, replacing the head with heart and soul. Men supported each other with care, sharing tears, hurts and anger, journeying deep inside themselves, sharing life experiences, and enriching each other. I believe that, for many of the participants, the rites of passage were a life-changing event.

The Men's Rites of Passage were a beginning, a step on the spiritual journey. After the rites there were follow-up events, practices and activities for continuing spiritual growth, transformation and service to others. These were intended to encourage men to reawaken to their masculinity and spirituality, to connect to their true self, and to discover how to live an authentic life with more depth, energy, focus and courage. Thirty-seven of the original sixty-five came to a follow-up weekend a few months later.

Snapshots from the sabbatical

I went to a Sunday "Mass" in a Gnostic church, where the woman priest had received her orders from Old Catholics and Anglicans. We were told the occasion was to be inclusive, so animal lovers had been invited to bring their pets. Fortunately only one did, a dog that ran around the church throughout the service, barking occasionally. All were invited to Communion, and that included the dog, who "received". It was the best argument I'd seen against the ordination of women!

I went to meetings of a group called *All Together*. It's based on the Twelve Steps of AA, and is for people with multiple addictions, such as to alcohol, drugs, and sex. About thirty people attended each meeting. They were probably the most grounded people I ever met, utterly down to earth, realistic about themselves, and fully accepting of responsibility for their actions. They supported each other in all sorts of ways, such as with accommodation. They offered friendship, warmth,

consolation, and challenge. I asked myself what I could say to them, as a priest, that would be of any use; I don't think there was anything. There was nothing I could say that they hadn't already said, and said better, because it came from a depth of experience. They were priests to each other and great people to be with.

On a number of occasions I went to Sunday Mass in the cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. It's a really beautiful building. I especially liked the brownish colours, the colours of the desert, which merged with others so well, and the tapestries with their real and lifelike images of the saints. On each occasion the cathedral was full to capacity, about 3,500 people. Everyone participated, and the congregation, who came from all over the US and even further afield, sang along with the choir. There was Communion under both kinds for all. In parish churches I found that priests and people alike take their time at Mass. There's no atmosphere of hurry, and a normal Sunday Mass would last about an hour and a quarter, with lots of singing. Mass is relaxed and reverent, prepared and spontaneous. There's a maturity and adulthood about American Catholics, and this was especially noticeable among the young. They are proud to call themselves Catholics and are open about it. There is also polarization in the US church, and not much dialogue going on to bridge the gap. But the US church has much vitality.

On one occasion, when on a train, we pulled into a siding to let a goods train pass. It was immensely long, as American trains tend to be, with about a hundred

wagons, each of them very big, and some of them two-storey. This one had a lot of flat cars with military vehicles of every kind on them, painted in desert camouflage. This generated a lot of excitement, especially among teenage boys, who took lots of pictures. And then, in a surreal moment, everybody went quiet; it was as if they suddenly realized there was a war on.

I went to a Quaker (Society of Friends) service one Sunday morning. There was no singing, reading, sermon, prayers, ritual – or collection. There was just silence, nothing else, for forty-five minutes or thereabouts. Then someone's mobile phone rang. The owner apologized noisily and profusely, and again a little later when it rang for a second time. He didn't seem to know how to shut it off or have the sense to take it out. There are idiots everywhere. The time passed very quickly and closed with the "leader" saying, 'Speak, if you have something to say that is better than silence.' No one did. I found it calming and restful, but I wouldn't want it every Sunday.

On a trip around San Diego harbour the guide on the boat was exuberantly enthusiastic about the military hardware we were looking at – the place was full of naval vessels and planes. He almost floated away in ecstasy talking about one insignificant-looking ship which he said 'could take out a Third World country at the press of a button without even breaking out in a sweat.' He was so hypnotized by the wonder of the technological gadgetry that he seemed to have given no thought to the human consequences of what he was

talking about. He directed our attention to a machine gun on the stern of a Coast Guard cutter, and said, ‘See that! It fires 650 rounds a minute. One burst of that could cut a man in half.’ He pointed to a cruiser which he said had Aegis class tracking and guidance systems that had four times more computing power than the space shuttle. I would love to have been able to meet him to point out that it was a cruiser with that system on board, the USS Vincennes, which shot down an Iran Air passenger plane in 1988, killing everyone on board, some two to three hundred people, because of human error: the sailor manning the console misread the information it provided. If the cruiser had had an old-fashioned bridge with someone on it using a pair of binoculars they could have seen that the jet was a civilian passenger plane, climbing up and away from the ship, not, as was thought, a jet fighter descending towards it.

On Holy Thursday 2008, at the local church of the Holy Family in Albuquerque, the priest did the washing of the feet for just two people. Then chairs, water, and towels were brought around the church, and everyone was invited to give and receive a washing. About one-third of the congregation did so, and it was great – a very good atmosphere. People joined in willingly; there’s much greater lay participation here than in Ireland. The special ministers also renewed their commitment to service. In all, the Holy Thursday ceremony took 110 minutes. They have communion under the forms of bread and wine at all Masses on Sundays.

I went to a prayer vigil at a university in Albuquerque for victims of the war in Iraq, both American and Iraqi. It was a good experience, not bashing anyone, not pointing accusing fingers or apportioning blame, but simply praying for the dead, and for an end to the war.

My abiding impression of the American people was of their extraordinary courtesy, respectfulness, hospitality and good manners. That was true of everyone I met. But, for a country with such great influence in the world, it's scary that they are often so uninformed about history, geography and general knowledge - especially about world affairs, and naïve, even clueless, in their judgments. Thank you, men and women of America!

Back in Ireland

I arrived back home in July 2008 and went to see the provincial of the order. I was looking forward to engaging in work with men's groups in Ireland, as he had been enthusiastically supportive of my going to the US to learn more about it. There was no shortage of scope for such work in Ireland. Men were often dispirited, confused and even demoralized, unsure of their role vis-à-vis their wives or partners, and unsure, too, about traditional images of the man as breadwinner in an economy where most women worked outside the home, might earn more than the man, or even be the sole breadwinner. I already had contact with groups around the country where I could begin.

My meeting with the provincial was a great disappointment: he didn't want to hear about it. He just wanted me to plug a gap, and gave me a choice between Carlow and Ards. I had been in Carlow only a few years before and didn't think it was a good idea to go back to a place not long after leaving it, so that left Ards. It's a beautiful place, and I've always loved it, but I didn't think there was anything very much happening there. But he made it clear that it was one or the other, no more. So I went to Ards.

I could not understand the decision-making process involved. In the first place, it was a reversal of what the same provincial had said so clearly only twelve months before. Secondly, I could see no good reason for my going to Ards, and my experience there confirmed that. And, thirdly, I felt I was being treated just like a cypher, moved from here to there at the whim of the provincial without regard to what I might think or where my abilities or interests lay. That didn't seem to me to show much respect for the person, an almost flippant way of using manpower.

Ards, County Donegal, 2008-2009

Ards was as beautiful as ever. It radiates an atmosphere of peace and people go to it from all over the country and find rest for their souls there.

I was given the use of a car but couldn't help noticing that it had moss on parts of the windscreen and cobwebs around the wing mirrors! – not a good omen, I thought, not a sign of great activity.

The community were welcoming and the local people as friendly as ever. But there simply wasn't much to do. In the years since I had been there as a student in the late sixties the friary had been converted from a theological study house into a retreat centre. It had flourished for a time but had clearly been in decline for a decade or more. I felt that part of this was the failure to adapt its offerings to the changing needs of its clientele. It was confining itself to a declining constituency, and that was self-defeating. "Playing it safe" by doing that is like the captain deciding to keep a ship in harbour in case it might run into a storm; it's safe there alright, but that's not what ships are for. The typical participant in its retreats or other activities would have been an elderly woman of lower than average education, and the retreat house seemed content to focus its efforts on them. The young, liberals and men were left out of the picture. In the long term, that could result in only one outcome.

In addition, those who came were mostly from a highly conservative spectrum of church thinking, even Irish church thinking, people such as the Latin Mass Society, or the lecturer who asked participants in a scripture course to vote against the Treaty of Lisbon (a referendum on it was due) because it was the harlot of the *Apocalypse*, or the leaders of a revised form of the *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* who left leaflets in the bedrooms of the retreat house asking people to pray for the return of a good Christian king to France. A local group who had organized yoga classes in Ards ran into opposition from self-appointed "defenders of the faith",

supported by a priest who preached that any Catholic who took part in yoga should confess it as a sin. We began to get phone calls, clearly from people reading from a prepared script, all saying the same thing with the same wording: Ards, they said, had for long been a great centre of faith but now witches were circling above it looking for a way to destroy it, and the friars had given them an opening through yoga. Shame on us! They went on local radio and threatened demonstrations. The manager of the centre felt intimidated and cancelled the yoga classes. There was no discussion in the community about this.

I found I had little to do even during the “busy” period during the summer months. But, in winter, I had the experience of numerous occasions “on duty”, that is, being on call, of finding that in the entire day I did not have to answer one door bell, take one phone call, or hear one confession. No one was coming. It wasn’t always as stark as that; sometimes there might be a few, but nothing that anyone could call a day’s work. I found it frustrating, and filled the time out of doors by picking up litter (including a remarkable number of Euro notes!), pulling ivy off trees, walking in the woods or on the shore - occupational therapy. Indoors, especially in winter, I read and wrote, and completed several courses by email in teaching English as a foreign language despite the difficulties created by the absence of broadband. As a student, I had often been asked to help Capuchins from abroad to learn English, and I had done that work in Madagascar also, and so, as a way of passing the time, I acquired some qualifications. It was

better than doing nothing, but far from what I wanted to do. I had met a local group of men called *Forever Fathers* who were occupied mainly with helping men who found themselves shut out of their children's lives by court decisions on custody following marital breakdown. They were an active group whose dramatization of their situation was broadcast on nationwide TV. All I really had to do was to be present to them and lend a listening ear; they appreciated that.

Of course, I also helped in the retreat centre. When a parish group came one day I couldn't help thinking that, before very long, probably within my lifetime, they might find themselves without an ordained priest. It's a conclusion that's difficult to avoid to anyone who looks around at a clerical gathering such as the funeral of a priest. It seemed to me that people like the parishioners coming to Ards would find themselves helpless in such a situation. They were not being prepared for it in any way that I could see; their role in the parish was passive. I offered them *lectio divina* as something which I felt could help them to sustain their faith without an ordained priest. (*Lectio divina* is a form of group reflection and prayer on scripture.) But the people I met had not the slightest familiarity with the bible, nor any idea of how to use it; they had never been taught. When I gave each a printed text and went through the process with them, the response was simply zero. There was no response; no one said anything, or joined the process in even the smallest way. It was the only time in my life that I experienced 100% failure in a pastoral venture. The people had become so inured to passivity, to clerical

control, that a step beyond that was too far. How will they manage when they find themselves on their own? I don't know. The time to start preparing them for priestless parishes came a decade or more ago.

Meanwhile the world around us was undergoing an upheaval. In the US, Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers banks had collapsed. In Ireland, factories were closing at a rate of several a week. Donegal was especially hard hit, and the closure of several *Fruit of the Loom* garment factories in the county frightened people. The *Celtic Tiger*, the roaring economic bubble of 1995-2008, based on a construction boom and inflated property prices, both facilitated by irresponsible and reckless banking and a financial regulatory system which was either incompetent or corrupt, was imploding. People were losing jobs everywhere in large numbers, wiping out the gains of previous years. Emigration was once again part of the vocabulary. Young people who had never heard the word no were discovering that reality could be a harsh teacher.

I found my time in Ards frustrating and asked for a change so that I could engage in men's work. This time my request was granted and I was posted to Raheny on the north side of Dublin in November 2009.

Raheny, Dublin, 2009

The friary in Raheny had been a retreat centre since the end of the Second World War but had ceased to function as one in the eighties. The retreat house was made over

to the local Health Board for use as a hospice, and a beautiful new building, named after Saint Francis, was opened in 1991.

A pleasant surprise came with the activity in the small chapel attached to the friary. The congregations, mostly elderly, were aware and awake. I had the sense, saying Mass, that they were with me in it, not watching the clock, that they actually listened to what was said – whether in prayers, readings or sermon. I sensed a community at prayer. We also had Morning and Evening Prayer of the *Divine Office* together. These were said slowly, and there was a chance to absorb the meaning of what was said. The Office and the Mass were, I felt, the way they should be. It was welcome.

I began my work by undertaking a tour of the country for about three weeks, meeting with those men's groups that I knew of. Everywhere there was a welcome and a sense of surprise and appreciation by men that the church had assigned a priest to work with them; they were glad of it. One of the things I felt was needed was a national organization of men, and I worked with others, notably Joseph Egan of Athlone, to call a meeting of representatives. We met in Athlone and succeeded in getting it off the ground. At the last minute, the Irish tendency to begin every new organization with a split almost took hold; it was a near miss, but we got there – just.

I had the idea of bringing together in one website information about what resources were available for men

in Ireland. When I first checked, by Googling men's resources, Ireland, to see if there was already one there I was surprised by what came up – a website offering me the services of 800 Russian women who were willing to oblige by making women's resources available. That wasn't what I had in mind, so I started on my own. At my age, I was still thinking in pre-digital terms, and the result of my effort was a website - www.irishmenresources.com - which, while useful enough, probably duplicated much of what was available elsewhere. Nonetheless it was there, and it was a start.

I also participated in a Men's Rites of Passage in Wicklow. Seventy three men gathered at *Slí an Chroí* (the Way of the Heart), in Kiltegan, County Wicklow, in June 2009, for a five-day Men's Rites of Passage. They came from Ireland, Britain, Canada, the United States, France, Norway, Gibraltar and Australia. A follow-up meeting later on drew almost forty of the participants back for more. As with my previous experience in the US, it illustrated for me that men are open to the spiritual when it comes to them as participatory and, above all, as touching the reality of their lives.

I also began working one day a week at the Capuchin Day Centre in Bow Street in Dublin city centre. This was begun by Brother Kevin Crowley in the Sixties at the back of the friary on a tiny basis. It grew from there with increased demand from immigrants and then from casualties of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. It reminded of my time in the Morning Star Hostel not very far away

in 1968. It was work which I found satisfying and I was ready for more of it.

Then, in July 2010, we Irish Capuchins held our three-yearly chapter at which we elected a new leadership team, listened to reports, and discussed policies and priorities for the next three years. I presented my report on the work I had done in the previous year with men's groups; it was well received by the friars. Much of it was new to them but they responded positively to it.

About two weeks after the chapter, the newly-elected provincial asked me to leave men's work and go to the parish of Gurránabráher in Cork city as curate. I could not believe it; it was the last thing I had expected or wanted. I had just been getting going in men's work, liked it, believed in its possibilities, and so was confident of being left where I was. I had discussed parish work with the provincial when he was a parish priest in Dublin city centre and I was in Lagmore, and we had similar views on it. We had shared similar experiences and were under no illusions about it. I had no liking for parish work and felt little aptitude for it. It would also involve the tiring task, more tiring as the years went by, of uprooting and started all over again in yet another new place. I was in shock and disbelief. But he said he wanted it, and that was that; there was no choice. To me, it was another example of the bush-in-the-gap method of making appointments. Four friars were being withdrawn and I was being put in, to work alongside a diocesan parish priest, Father Kevin O'Regan. I felt I was being thrown to the bishop as a sop because the order was

withdrawing from Gurránabráher. I asked the provincial if this was the case, and he acknowledged that it was. That didn't do anything for my morale.

Gurránabráher, Cork City, 2010-2013

Cork city had changed a lot since the days when I lived there before joining the order. The industries and businesses that were its economic mainstay were nearly all gone – Ford, Dunlop, Verholme dockyard, Irish Steel, Harrington's Paints, Rank's Flour Mills, Goulding's Fertilisers Cudmore's fruit shops, Thompsons bakery and cafés, along with many small bakeries and cinemas. The city was a strange, if charming, mixture of the new and the dilapidated. The new I found uninteresting; they were just concrete and glass boxes, and the Opera House deserved a special prize for ugliness. The Celtic Tiger seemed to have largely bypassed Cork, an empty high-rise tower block of apartments a monument to its memory.

I went to the parish of the Ascension in Gurránabráher - known to everyone as Gurrán - in August 2010. The parish had been diocesan from its inception in 1955 until 1981 when the Capuchins became its pastors. There were usually four friars in the parish, three priests and one lay-brother. Then, in 2010, our declining numbers made it necessary for us to withdraw. The bishop must have been puzzled by the whole operation, since, on the one hand, the order said it couldn't afford to let him have three priests any longer, but, on the other, it gave him one for a hospital chaplaincy, one for the university

chaplaincy, and one for the parish (me), none of whom he'd had before. One plus one plus one equals three! He was happy.

My strongest memory of my first days in Gurrán is that of many people speaking one word, 'Welcome!' It made a difference for the better. I found the Gurrán people easy to like, especially the elderly. Thank you for that, people of Gurrán.

The parish comprised two areas, Gurránabráher and Churchfield. Gurrán was old, both people and houses; Churchfield was fairly new and youngish. Gurrán still had some significant level of contact with the church, especially among the elderly, but in Churchfield little. Between them, they had about 1,540 households of roughly 5,500 people. Many moved to the area in the Fifties and Sixties when Cork City Council undertook several new house-building schemes.

There was a parish primary school named after Saint Padre Pio. It had about 222 pupils – a good proportion of them from other parishes - and a staff of some sixty teachers, classroom- and special needs-assistants. I used to go there each week, visiting each of the twelve classes. In the parish there was also a complex of flats for the elderly – the *Share* flats - run by the Presentation Brothers, Heather House for fifty geriatric people, and Grove House for the severely mentally ill, both run by the Health Service Executive in the grounds of the former Saint Mary's Orthopaedic Hospital.

Each year, the parish priest, Father Kevin O'Regan of Cork and Ross diocese and I conducted some seventy funerals. In the three-year period, 2010-2012, we conducted some two hundred baptisms and just ten weddings. Combined attendance at all weekend Masses averaged about 410, of whom perhaps one person in twenty would be under fifty-five years of age, that is, about twenty-one people in all. I was in the parish about eighteen months before I saw a child from Padre Pio school at Sunday Mass. Combined attendance at the two daily Masses varied from 35 to 50, the solid core of the elderly who support all church activities. In the fifties and sixties, there had been four Masses on Sunday morning. Each would be full, and, if a person wanted to be sure of getting a seat they had only one option, and that was to come early; otherwise they might be left standing at the side despite the best efforts of ushers to squeeze people in, and that in a church with seating capacity for a thousand adults. This change was expressive of the fate of the church in my lifetime; it collapsed like a sand-castle in the face of an incoming tide.

I visited each home in "my" half of the parish - 767 households - once each year, but more often if there was a special need. At half or more of the houses, there was no reply; people were away, so I left a card with my name and contact information on one side, and a summary of what was on in the church on the other. It was a handy source of information for the household, and perpetuated a memory. On the first round of visitation, if there was an answer at the door, I was

mostly left standing on the doorstep, with an unspoken message of, 'No further! State your business and go.' The ready trust that had existed in the past was gone, mostly, I believe, due to the sex abuse scandals and their mishandling. Some people, on seeing me at the door, suspected that I was there to bring them bad news, or that I was collecting for something. On the second round, the ice had broken a bit; there was recognition - maybe hazy - but I might occasionally be invited indoors. On the third round, there was recognition and usually some warmth; an invitation indoors became more common than not. I was surprised at this in one respect: the Capuchins who had preceded me in the parish did visitation regularly, so the sight of a man in a brown habit knocking at doors should not have been a surprise to anyone.

I think that visitation is often over-valued, especially by those who have not done it. (I remember a Zambian bishop who advocated it enthusiastically – but who didn't do it himself, either as a bishop or earlier as a parish priest!) But it may be a way of saying to people that, even if they're not interested in the church, the church is interested in them. Maybe visitation is a form of pre-evangelization. On visitation I have – very occasionally – asked people what the faith meant to them. As in Belfast, the answers I received always related to fulfilling, or not fulfilling, the Sunday Mass obligation. I don't recall any mention of Jesus or God. People's understanding of the faith was usually expressed in terms of observances rather than a

relationship with God. Have we got beyond the mindset of the Pharisees; are we still into justification by works?

Not all my memories of Gurrán are happy ones. There was what seemed to be a high death rate from cancer: I never heard the subject talked about so much as there, and average life expectancy was, I believe, significantly lower than in the rest of the country. Of the seventy funerals or so each year, many were of people in their fifties or sixties, occasionally lower still. Alcohol abuse was a factor. People's lifestyle was often unhealthy: drinking, smoking, fast foods, little exercise, and often the demoralizing effect of long-term unemployment and dependence on social welfare. As something of an aside from this, I learned that the difference between a dignified funeral and a messy one usually comes down to keeping it simple, leaving aside the dramatics, and communicating.

When funerals came in a cluster, as they sometimes did, especially in winter, I would sometimes ask myself how many funeral services Jesus conducted. The gospels are silent on the matter. Along with other more important things, this made me wonder how far our priesthood had moved from that of Jesus. Were we living out an Old Testament model of priesthood, like the Jewish priesthood of the Temple? Our understanding – priests and people alike - of priesthood seemed to be that the priest was a cultic figure whose primary focus was worship in the church, leading Mass, the sacraments and funerals. But Jesus was more like the prophet than any other Old Testament figure, someone who spoke the

truth to power, who proclaimed the kingdom of God to the empire of Rome. He was a teacher, a healer, a pastor. I remember discussing this with a bishop, who was annoyed by it, saying, ‘All this talk about a prophetic element in the priesthood is just an excuse for arrogance and disobedience!’ The priesthood as it is today seems something tame and domesticated compared to that of Jesus; I asked myself were we much more than mere functionaries of a self-serving ecclesiastical power-structure. At a simple practical level, a great deal of time and energy in the parish went into maintaining the church building, which was several times larger than it needed to be for today’s congregations.

An unpleasant intrusion

It had been known for a long time that the English-language translation of the Missal was being revised. Work had been underway for many years, and some 10,000 pages of suggestions had been compiled from people all over the world. Then, to the disappointment of many, and the anger of more than a few, that work was set aside and the task entrusted to a new body in Rome called *Vox Clara*. (The same was done when the new *Code of Canon Law* was being prepared.) It sought to make the translation of the original Latin as literal as possible. The approach previously taken, that of “dynamic equivalence”, was dropped. An example might be the translation of the Latin phrase *lacrimae rerum*; literally, it means *the tears of things*. Translated according to dynamic equivalence it might be rendered

as *the sadness of life*. It seems to me that the latter is better.

The new text, imposed from the first Sunday of Advent 2011, is in a hybrid Latinized English; its use of multiple convoluted clauses often makes sentences heavy, long, unwieldy, and difficult to read intelligibly. The sentence structure is often quirky, as if designed to trip up the reader. Its vocabulary, which it calls “sacral,” is, to many people, arcane, stilted and awkward.

Sometimes it appears to differ from the 1969 text simply for the sake of differing: for example, it takes a time-honoured phrase like *faith, hope and charity* and renders it as *hope, faith and charity*. (I can’t help but suspect some personal animus in *Vox Clara* against the International Committee on English in the Liturgy.) The use of words like *ineffable, oblation, hosts, and consubstantial* raises unnecessary obstacles. A friend said to me, ‘Doesn’t anyone die any more? In the new missal, they *fall asleep*.’ Furthermore, its language is dualistic: body/spirit, earthly/heavenly, nature/grace, etc.

Its attempts at inclusive language were half-hearted and inconsistent; For instance, it translates *homines* as *people* in the Gloria but as *men* in the Nicene Creed.

English is the official language of about seventy countries, but, for many people in those countries, it is not their first language. While the 1969 translation took account of this, the new translation seems to have only Anglo-Saxon congregations in mind, especially those

with a liking for the *arcana* of pseudo-Cranmer. But, as an African said to me, ‘We can always fall back on the vernacular.’

The new Missal represents a setback to ecumenism. The thinking in Rome was that liturgical language should emphasize *differences* with non-Roman Catholic Christian traditions. (Why?) Agreed ecumenical texts of common prayers were set aside. Furthermore, the new translation is greatly concerned with *worthiness* and *merit*. The theology of merit led us into pitfalls in the past, especially at the Reformation. So why risk re-opening old controversies? If the language of *worthiness* achieves anything, it may be to restore the unhealthy scrupulosity of the past.

Did a new missal need to be a translation of the Roman missal in the first place? Why have a ‘one size fits all’ approach instead of one that respects diversity? Why not have local missals that reflect the life and character of the church? What happened to subsidiarity, collegiality and inculturation? I believe that many English-speaking bishops tried to dissuade Rome from imposing the new missal, but it persisted. It is not just that the new missal lacks pastoral awareness and sensitivity; it is also, and more seriously, that the manner in which it was imposed against the wishes of bishops’ conferences, and setting aside many years of liturgists’ work, suggests an attitude towards church governance that alienates not only Catholics but Anglicans and Protestants also. It should not be a surprise if, in the light of the imposition of the missal by Rome on an unwilling church, Anglicans come

to suspect that communion with Rome will mean control by Rome. When they are given assurances that their liturgical traditions will be respected if they “come over” to Rome, I don’t think they can be expected to believe them when they see Rome ride rough-shod over its own bishops. What sense did it make for final approval of the text to be placed in the hands of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, which had no trained liturgists on its staff, but only canonists and theologians?

Furthermore, the new translation creates unnecessary difficulties. For example, in the consecration of the wine, it reads, ‘This is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out *for you and for many* for the forgiveness of sins.’ The 1969 text read, ‘... *for you and for all.*’ At the same time, priests were asked to explain that when the new text says *for many* it means *for all!*

The new text is verbose, with the Eucharistic Prayers employing from 9 to 25% more words. I was accustomed to using all thirteen Eucharistic prayers of the old translation, but I now use only the second, and, like every priest I know, I edit the text as damage limitation. That’s less unsatisfactory than wondering day by day what new tongue-twisting verbal silliness was to be imposed on us.

At a time when greater lay participation in the liturgy and the life of the church generally would seem to be more necessary than before, the missal appears

deliberately, especially in its rubrics (rules), to underline the difference and the distance between cleric and lay. They express a move away from the church as the People of God back to that of the church as a hierarchical pyramid. For instance, the priest is now directed to offer the sign of peace in hierarchical order to any ministers who may be present, but not to go to the body of the church to give it to the people. Liturgy shapes belief and practice (*Lex orandi, lex credendi*) The new rubrics subliminally, and therefore most effectively as they go unnoticed, point the church back to the past.

In Ireland, the timing of the change could hardly have been worse. The morale of the church was at a low ebb after years of scandals and cover-up of them. The new “reform of the reform” expressed in the missal squandered the precious but diminishing good-will of those who still come to Mass. I have met no one who likes it. The responses confuse the congregation who fall between the various translations they have learned over the years. Some have given up and say nothing.

There is another and deeper question: does it make any difference what texts we use unless we have a sense of the sacred?

Snapshots from Gurránabráher

I took a walk one day along the banks of the River Lee, on what are known locally as the Lee Fields. It’s a

beautiful place, with grass, trees, the river, and, across it, old historic buildings, all in all, a pleasant place for a walk. I saw a young couple coming towards me – boyfriend and girlfriend. They were holding hands and chatting happily, a scene as old as human history. But there was a difference – each of them was holding a mobile phone to an ear and was chatting to someone else, shutting each other out. The technology of communication has expanded unimaginably, yet there seems to be less listening than before. Society is becoming more impersonal, individualistic and anonymous, while at the same time showing a great preoccupation with the *minutiae* of the private lives of others, especially the more prurient parts.

I was called by the Guards (police) to a house where a dead body had been found. As I went in and up the stairs it was difficult to find a place for my feet. I had to push aside the empty beer cans and bottles to find a footing. A Guard showed me into one of the bedrooms, saying that was where the body was. I looked around: there was nothing on the bed; the floor was covered with bottles and cans, with heaps of rubbish here and there, some of it smelling. But I could see no sign of a body. Thinking that I had made a mistake I went back out and asked the Guard, who pointed to a heap on the floor among the rubbish. It was only then that I recognized that it was a person, a small man, seemingly shrunken and shrivelled. He had drunk himself to death. In Gurrán, alcohol was the drug of choice. I couldn't help feeling, 'This is not the way things should be. No one should die like this.'

On one occasion I was conducting a funeral in another parish. All went well until the end, when there was a muddle about the pall-bearers. (This is common, usually due to non-communication.) But this time things took a different turn. A woman who objected to one of the pall-bearers threw a punch at him and tried physically to block him from access to the coffin. I intervened, telling them to go outside if they wanted to have a fight. They calmed down, and the rest went ahead smoothly. The best funerals, as with the best weddings, were the simple ones.

A group of elderly people were having an organ recital: 'my eyes', 'my ears', 'my knees,' 'my hips', etc. And they were comparing notes: which medication are you on? – the blue tablets or the red ones? 'How many do you take a day? Only twelve? That's nothing. I take thirty. They have me killed,' etc. And then an 87 year old woman said, 'Medication? What do I want that for? Haven't I got grandchildren? With them around the house, I don't have time to be thinking about meself.'

One of my responsibilities was to attend the Sunday evening Bingo sessions in the parochial hall. It wasn't my favourite way of spending an evening. My job was to help count the money, and bring it back to a safe in the parish office for banking the next day. It struck me that it was a risky venture, as some three to four hundred people would see me walking out of the hall with a travel bag which everyone knew contained the money. As the parochial house was in a quiet, isolated place, and I was on my own at the time, I realized that I was

vulnerable, and considered what to do if attacked. I decided that I would let the thieves have the money, as they might not hesitate to use a knife on me in order to get it. I was not going to put my health or life at risk for the sake of money. One evening, when I went out to my car, I found that a tyre was flat; it had been slashed. Since it would have to be replaced anyway I drove home on it and put the money safely into the safe. In the morning, I found that, in fact, a second tyre had also been slashed. I gave it no more thought, assuming it to be an act of casual vandalism. But, about two Sundays later, when I arrived home with the money and went to open the door of the house, three young men, their hoods up, came bounding out of the darkness towards me. One of them went to the door of the car, on the side where the money was, grabbed the bag, said to me, 'I'm taking this' and then took off with his friends. There was no point in running after them as they could easily outrun me, so they got away. I called the Guards, who came quickly, but I could not even give them a description of the men as I was facing into a floodlight when looking towards them and their hoods threw a shadow on their faces. The money, about €3,500, which belonged to the local people, was probably spent on drink.

Conducting a funeral ceremony in Saint Catherine's cemetery, Kilcully, in my first winter in Gurrán, a very cold one, one of the grave-diggers passed me the holy water stoup; I took the sprinkler, but the stoup came with it; the water had frozen solid. I blessed the coffin with holy ice.

Meetings of the parish assembly (a kind of parish council) were chaotic, happy, generous, witty, cooperative and humorous. With their constant cross-talk and interruptions, they would give management consultants ulcers - but they worked!

In October 2011, my golden jubilee in the order came and went, quietly and without fuss, as I wished. The other friars who also had their jubilees that year, for the most part, took the same course of action. I have never liked being the centre of attention and feel embarrassed when complimentary speeches are made about me.

In 2012, the long-awaited state report on the handling of allegations of clerical sex abuse in Cloyne diocese was published. (Cloyne adjoins Cork and Ross diocese, to the east and north.) The report was a shock, when I had thought we were past being shocked. It seemed that nothing had been learned from the past; the same failures, the same evasions of responsibility, had been made again. I had seen the bishop of Cloyne about ten years earlier on TV appealing for people's patience in the matter, saying that the bishops were on – I hate the jargon – 'a steep learning curve.' They seemed to be in a special class of slow learners. What on earth was the matter with them? On that day I had left my car into a garage for a service, and took a taxi home from there. The driver, a local man, brought me back, and, along the way, we talked about the report. On arrival at my house, I made to pay him, but he would not accept anything, saying, 'I know ye're not all bad.' That was extraordinarily generous. Later on that day, when the car

service was complete, I took another taxi to the garage. The driver was an Indian; he told me that, as a boy, he had been taught by Franciscans in Rajasthan. He would not accept payment either, saying he owed the Franciscans a debt of gratitude. More generosity. In between the two trips, I had wondered whether to show my face outside the door at all, given the intense public anger over the report. I decided to venture out and visit some homes. On the street, and in people's homes, I received everywhere a warm welcome, even where people were angry about the report. Thank you, Norries! (North-siders) You are good people.

There were saints in the parish, as in every place where I've lived and worked. They had no haloes on their heads or wings on their backs. They may have had blisters on their hands, or frazzled nerves from worrying about children, correcting them, cajoling and encouraging them, or from trying to make ends meet. One was a man whose wife left him; he brought up their four daughters on his own. I asked him what helped him as he faced the difficulties. He said it was daily reading of the Bible and saying the Rosary.

When Éamon Gilmore, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, following the publication of the Cloyn report, closed Ireland's embassy to the Holy See, combining it with that to Italy, I wrote to congratulate him, as, I believe, did many other priests. I regretted that he had not gone further and broken diplomatic relations, because I think that Rome's involvement in the world of diplomacy, far from inserting the gospel into political or

diplomatic life, as is claimed for it, compromises the gospel and involves the church in shady deals. Christ and Caesar were never good partners. It's time for a divorce.

In the first half of 2013, there was a lengthy, and sometimes acrimonious, debate about abortion, as the government introduced legislation to allow it. Two things struck me especially, two matters which received little or no attention. One was what the act of abortion actually does to an unborn child: it was as if the foetus just disappears painlessly by magic. I think that if women knew what an abortion does to their unborn baby, they would not think of having one. The other was that, despite current focus on sexual equality, the rights of the father in the issue of abortion are almost universally ignored. It's as if he had nothing to do with it and no legitimate say in the matter.

Pope Benedict XVI

While shopping one day, I met the chairperson of the parish assembly. 'Did you hear the news?' she said. 'No, what?' I asked. 'The pope has resigned.' I was stunned and stood there in disbelief. I knew her to be a sensible person, unlikely to have picked up news incorrectly. My immediate reaction, to myself, was, 'Thank God. Now there's some hope for the church.' I felt that Pope Benedict had, in a word, tried to take us back to the past, to undo Vatican II. It had been the same under Pope John Paul II, but more intensively under Benedict.

He seems to have been a part-time pope. He spent the best part of his time writing books, while leaving the running of the church in the hands of the curia, which, it seems, he trusted. It was incompetent and corrupt. An illustration of the incompetence was that an Irish bishop described how he wrote to one Vatican congregation about an issue and received one answer; then he wrote to another congregation on the same matter and received a quite different answer. Each cardinal guarded his turf jealously, and inter-congregational meetings were rare events. Individualism was the name of the game. So there was no policy; there were policies, sometimes at odds with each other. It was like a government which operated without cabinet meetings.

The corruption was there in the Vatican Bank (the IOR), for instance, which had its status downgraded and credit card and other facilities withdrawn by other banks because it had failed to meet normal international standards, especially regarding money laundering. There had been crookery, too, in the matter of contracts for work in the papal gardens, in erecting a crib, and in using inside information about the sale of church properties, including churches, in the United States. Those within the system who spoke up about this were side-lined and silenced. There was also, it seems, a homosexual circle of Vatican clergy. Thanks to Vatileaks, all this was world news and anyone and everyone had access to it.

The cardinal secretary of state was a noted flatterer of the pope, publicly delivering a fawning address in which

he urged him to take no notice of people accusing priests of having sexually abused children, saying they were just gossips. And the cardinal prefect of the congregation for the clergy stated publicly that he had written a letter of congratulation to a French bishop who had gone to jail rather than give a court information about a priest in his diocese who had abused children. The cardinal added that he had told Pope John Paul II about this and he (the pope) had instructed him to forward copies of the letter to every bishop in the church. An eminent Irish archbishop, who, for long, had been trying to get rid of a particularly notorious paedophile among his priests only to meet with refusal after refusal from the same cardinal, finally, at a meeting in Sligo of the bishops with the cardinal prefect, stamped his fist on the table, and shouted at him, demanding action, saying he would go to the pope and get it from him if the cardinal wouldn't move. That finally got the dismissal.

Yet when the Vatican was taken to task about its practices in the matter, it consistently pointed the finger of blame back to the bishops, saying, in effect, that every bishop was king in his own castle and it wasn't Rome's fault if they had failed to act. And it went further. Pope Benedict wrote to the Irish bishops that, 'It cannot be denied that some of you and your predecessors failed, at times grievously.... Serious mistakes were made in responding to allegations.... Grave errors of judgment were made and failures of leadership occurred.' (*Letter* of 19 March 2010, n.11) True, but, 'Physician, heal thyself.' (Luke 4.23)

Pope Benedict's resignation was a service to the church. I doubt that his stated reason for it – his declining health and tiredness - was the full one. I'd say he felt betrayed by those around him and perhaps blamed himself for not having had a more hands-on approach. Whatever about that, his resignation de-mystified the papacy, puncturing the inflated balloon of self-importance built up around it, especially since Vatican I. It's a job and it needs a person of energy to do it. Benedict was not that man. I find it highly ironic that Benedict, seen as the epitome of tradition and conservatism, introduced a startling innovation unheard of in Catholic tradition. By resigning, but retaining the title of pope, he created a situation in which the church, for the first time, has two legitimate popes. I thought he would revert to being a cardinal, or, better still, simply to Father Joseph Ratzinger. The picture of the two popes, shortly after Francis' election, sitting at the same table, obviously at ease in each other's company, is a quiet revolution in Catholic life. It helps dissolve the demigod image of the papacy.

The sacraments

As in Lagmore, I found myself questioning the value, the sense of realism and the integrity of what we were doing. Every priest engaged in parish work was well aware - sadly, wearily or angrily - of being asked to baptize children of parents who rarely or never appeared in the church. Older children of theirs showed no sign of being reared in the faith. And so the priest asks himself, 'Is it right, is it honest, of parents to undertake on behalf

of their child an obligation which they themselves give no sign of fulfilling? What sense of pastoral responsibility facilitates this? Should I do this baptism?’

Every priest has had experiences with parents and godparents who are clueless about the baptism ceremony, unable to join in the *Our Father* or even say *Amen* at the end of a prayer, their behaviour in the church making it patently clear that it is unfamiliar territory to them. Baptism ceremonies have become quasi-secular rites of passage, the occasion for a family get-together which commonly ends in the pub. A judge in an Irish court recently asked whether ordination wasn't the only remaining sacrament not celebrated with drunkenness. I have no problem with people who have intellectual or moral difficulties with the faith – I have them myself – but I find it difficult to be patient, or to see a reason for being trying to be, with people who seem to be using the church and its sacraments simply as a convenience, a stage for a social occasion, an excuse for a party, and who sometimes lack even basic good manners in their conduct of themselves in the church.

At one point I decided that I had had enough of this, so I introduced a baptismal ceremony by asking people, firstly, to check and ensure that their mobile phones were switched off; secondly, to ensure that small children were not allowed to run around the church during the liturgy; and, thirdly, for adults to refrain from engaging in conversation with each other during the ceremony. I added, ‘If you do not wish to observe these rules, please leave now; it is better than having to be asked to leave

during the ceremony.’ I watched for the reaction, and noticed that it appeared to be one of approval. I went ahead with the early part of the ceremony; after perhaps five or ten minutes a group of people arrived, literally in the middle of the congregation, noisily and obtrusively, seemingly oblivious of anyone but themselves. I was about to say something when, instead, the congregation turned on them and told them to sit down and be quiet. They did. When the ceremony was over, something happened that I had never experienced before: I got a round of applause. I did the same at a baptism the following week, and received another round of applause. I have repeated my *spiel* before every baptism since then. Lessons learned all round, I think.

A simple desire to have a child baptized is surely not sufficient evidence of a commitment to educating him or her in the faith. Wishful thinking is not reality. Parents sometimes ask for baptism for their child because of pressure from grandparents, or because they want to get the child into a Catholic school, or because they have a lingering fear that, if the child dies unbaptized, s/he will go to hell or limbo so they had better not take the chance, or because they believe that children thrive after baptism, or that it’s unlucky for the child not to be baptized. I don’t think those offer a realistic basis for the sacrament. ‘Before people can come to the liturgy, they must be called to faith and conversion.’ (Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n.9)

For a long time Irish schools did excellent work in teaching the faith to children and preparing them for the sacraments. One could say they did the job too well and

became victims of their own success, because a side effect was that most parents felt this relieved them of their responsibility in religious education. Today most parents do little or nothing to bring their children up in the faith. Family prayer is almost unknown as are religious symbols in the home. Family meals have mostly disappeared, and mentoring of children comes, as often as not, from grand-parents rather than parents. (What will happen when that generation is gone?) One could say that, in such situations, the role of the school is even more necessary, with the argument that, 'If it wasn't for the schools, the children would have nothing,' The argument has a point, but it's a *cul de sac* we have allowed ourselves to walk into by not facing hard facts earlier.

Many children leave school after twelve or more years of Catholic education with a level of ignorance of the faith that is often startling. At times, I could only wonder how they learned so little in so many years. More seriously, they had been inoculated against it, and trotted out the mantra about religion being shoved down their throats as children. It was an academic subject they were happy to drop on leaving school. What children retained from religious education, what they internalized and made their own, seemed to be what they absorbed at home rather than learned at school. That might be little or nothing, or sometimes a weird folk religion difficult to distinguish from superstition. (When I was a student at university, we used to talk about "First Arts atheism." Now it's sixth class atheism among twelve year olds. The hardening of attitudes and closing of minds is

already evident at that stage.) Recently I heard of a grand-mother who said to her grand-child, 'You might as well pray to Harry Potter as to God, because neither of them exists.'

It is not uncommon to find that teachers do not practise the faith in terms of going to Mass or the sacraments. Some teachers choose to live in a parish other than the one they teach in so that this will not be evident. But children do not remain unaware of this for long, and, when it happens, it cannot but give rise to their complaint that, 'Religion is all hypocrisy.' How can children be expected to see it otherwise when parents or teachers insist that they make first confession, communion and confirmation when it is plainly evident to the children that those adults do not themselves take Mass or the sacraments seriously? Some teachers are asked to teach Christian doctrine even when they do not believe it themselves. That is simply wrong.

The former partnership of home, school and parish was viable and effective. It provided a nurturing environment which enabled the child to grow in the faith. It was good; it worked well in its day. But that day is gone; the past is not the present, and wishful thinking will not make it so. Parents, for the most part, have opted out of their children's religious education, leaving it almost entirely to schools, which have too much expected of them. The schools are unable to fill the gap, and perhaps also are increasingly unwilling to attempt it. This creates a no-win situation, and the longer the church remains wedded to it, the weaker it will become. The process is

permeated by a demeaning and self-defeating dishonesty.

It is sometimes said that priests should postpone a child's baptism until parents show that they are ready for it. But parents see postponement as arm-twisting, pressurizing them into going to Mass and the sacraments or attending a preparatory course because of the desire to have their child baptized. They may comply in order to have the baptism, but do so through gritted teeth, with a smouldering resentment that will likely assert itself in a determination not to go to Mass again once the child has been baptized. It has happened, too, that priests who postponed baptism found that parents appealed to the bishop who then contacted the priest and told him to baptize.

I came to dread baptisms. I constantly asked myself whether I should do them. (Baptism, for some, is just "wetting the baby's head.") Our present willingness to be endlessly accommodating with the sacraments has brought the church only contempt. If the church and its priests are not seen to stand for something, if there is no bottom line, how can we, or what we represent, hope to be respected by anyone?

The same applies with equal truth to the other sacraments. Every bishop and priest engaged in parish work knows this. One bishop said to me wearily after a confirmation ceremony that he felt it meant nothing to most of the children; I agreed. It has been like this for twenty or thirty years. Yet the sacraments need a basis in

catechesis (teaching); catechesis needs a basis in evangelization (taking the gospel to heart). Conversion is a requisite; otherwise we are just white-washing. I believe we should abandon infant baptism, except when a child is in danger of death. We should withdraw religious education from the school curriculum, and have a single state secular education system. In place of the present system, put responsibility where it belongs - with parents; they are the primary educators of their children. My experience is that when responsibility is placed on people's shoulders, and they see it clearly, they respond. Create an extended period of preparation, a modified Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, with a little help from the parish. (Why only a little? Because if there's a lot, then the problem of parental abdication of responsibility merely moves from school to parish.) Then, if there has been a conversion, and the child reaches a level of maturity in faith, with a sustained spiritual growth, and practice in terms of prayer life and going to Mass, and if the young person asks for it, baptize. In such cases, there would be a well-founded hope that baptism would be fruitful. This would not normally be before the age of eighteen. Otherwise postpone. I believe this would bring a measure of realism to the process; baptism would be an informed commitment by an adult.

Shifting the focus of catechesis from the child to adults would help lift us out the current logjam whereby adult Catholics are adult in everything except faith. They seem to be almost lobotomized where it is concerned, unable to explain or defend it in the face of challenge despite

many years of religious education. I found this to be the case in New Zealand, Zambia and Ireland, and I know many other priests who felt the same way. Our mode of teaching seems to have rendered people unable to think.

In Zambia, children were not baptized simply at the request of the parents. Parents had to prepare for it and be examined in their knowledge of the faith, including the basic prayers; otherwise the baptism would be postponed. I remember saying this in the Eighties to a friar in Ireland. He was horrified, and I think he wondered if I was really a Catholic at all. About twenty years later, the topic came up again in conversation with him. In the meantime, he had spent a few years in a parish. This time he agreed with me; he had learned from experience.

Is the above approach possible, workable? I can only say that I have seen it work. In Livingstone, in Zambia, I saw parents meet every Saturday morning and work together to teach their children the faith. I remember the vicar general of the diocese express his admiration for their work, saying it was better than anything we missionaries had provided. People respond to responsibility; treat them like kids and they behave like kids; treat them like adults and they behave like adults.

I don't see any prospect that the church will do the above. Given a choice between perpetuating a sacramental system which reaches large numbers, but is often hollow and empty, and one which reaches only a few, but on a basis of reality, I think it will opt for the

former. There is great evidence that the cultural Catholicism of former times evaporated like dew in the morning sun in the face of secularism, yet we still cling to it with a blinkered nostalgia. I don't think the church's leadership has the will, the vision or the courage to make a large leap; it is like the man who wants to leap across a wide chasm, one step at a time. It is locked into the numbers game; it works reactively, not pro-actively: 'Do anything you like, but not in my time,' was one bishop's response. What I'm proposing would mean a huge drop in the number of baptisms; of that there is no doubt. But it would mean an increase in realism, or truthfulness, and Jesus said, 'The truth shall make you free.' (John 8.32) If the church is concerned with nothing more than self-preservation, and perpetuating present pastoral practice is the means of achieving that, then it will fail, and will deserve to. 'The church exists for evangelization,' said Pope Paul VI. (in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.14.) Without a basic elementary proclamation of the faith and conversion to it, the church is a house built on sand. That is what it is at present, and therefore it is collapsing. Church leadership is offering *Band Aid* solutions instead of facing the matter. The pastoral system is so individualized at the level of parish, diocese, country, and even internationally, that there is no spirit or structure of dialogue to enable the logjam to be broken. There is a collective unwillingness to face it; we just put our heads down, keep going, and hope that something will turn up that will make things better. But if you keep doing what you've been doing, you keep getting what you've been getting. It is already evident where that has led us.

But change will come anyway, whether we like it or not, because the middle and young generations, with few exceptions, have little contact with the church, or desire for it. Anyone born in Ireland since 1990 knows no church other than the church of the scandals. They are unlikely to pressure their children to have the next generation baptized. Those will grow up without contact with the church, so at least they will know that they do not have the faith. At present many people reject what they think the faith is, although, in reality, what they are rejecting is only their own misunderstanding of it. Better to start with a clean slate than with a mind already inoculated against faith and with chips on the shoulder towards the church.

Reflecting on parish life

Individualism is a feature of clerical life that pervades the church. It is noticeable first at parish level, where each priest operates as an individual, each parish a self-contained unit – “my” parish. There is co-operation between parishes in very limited ways, but with clear demarcation. You look after your parish, and I’ll look after mine. The same applies at the level of the diocese. In 2012, for example, the International Eucharistic Congress was held in Dublin. (It was imposed on the Irish bishops by Rome against their will, but that’s another matter.) In practical terms, it was Dublin’s Eucharistic Congress, the other dioceses giving it only tepid support. Archbishop Paschal Robinson, the first nuncio to Ireland, famously remarked on one occasion

that there weren't twenty-two bishops in Ireland but twenty-two popes! And the same applies in Rome. The different "dicasteries" a Vaticanese term for the congregations, secretariats and other offices of the Roman Curia, operate as separate fiefdoms, each jealously guarding its autonomy. My belief is that the structural system of the church is beyond reform; the fifty years since Vatican II have shown that. It needs to go, and it is going, as personnel, finance, and, above all, credibility evaporate. *Pereat curia ut floreat ecclesia.* (May the curia perish, so that the church may flourish.)

Leaving Gurrán

The people in Gurrán were down to earth; what you saw was what you got; they told it like it was. There was a decent honesty about them, and a warmth and humanity that leaves me with good memories. I loved them. But I did not like parish work; I felt it was mostly a performance that was not engaging with the reality of people's lives, though funerals were a saving exception. The sacraments seemed like empty rituals floating in the air. I found it hard to keep going in Gurrán for those reasons. Each of the three years I spent there I asked to get out of it; in each case, the answer was, 'Stay till the next chapter.' In addition, the experience of living alone in Gurrán was lonely and isolating. I'm a community bird. So I wrote a letter to the provincial and definitors (councillors) on 23 May 2012, stating,

'Greetings and good wishes to you! I'm writing to you well in advance of the next Chapter as this letter may have implications for the bishop of Cork regarding my

presence in Gurrán. The request I'm making is that, when you come to make appointments after the next Chapter – I expect some of you will survive the elections! – you give me work which does not involve the exercise of the priestly ministry. What I would like to do is work in the Day Centre [Brother Kevin's in Bow Street, Dublin], not in an administrative or managerial capacity, but on the floor, e.g. serving food, clearing up and washing dishes, mopping floors and toilets, etc. With whatever span of life the Lord has left to me, I want to do something that engages with the Gospel and human need. That is what brought me into the Order in 1961, and I would like to keep doing it.'

'Since I returned from Zambia in 1997, I have been looking for something worthwhile to do, but haven't found it. I have filled the gap, or had it filled for me, with other things, e.g. six years in Lagmore parish and three in Gurrán. I found value and satisfaction in men's work in Raheny. I think it was worthwhile, and had potential, but I was asked to leave it after a year. Much of the rest of the time was spent footling around friaries, filling the day with things that made little difference to anyone, like pulling ivy off trees or picking up litter in Ards to fill the day.'

'Why do I not want to continue in the exercise of the priestly ministry? Firstly, let me say that I have no doctrinal problem with it, with the Mass or the sacraments. I have a problem with how they work out in practice. The Mass, or at least my saying of it, has become formalized and rigid; I could do it on automatic

pilot. I used to find saying Mass uplifting, but the new translation and accompanying rubrics have helped end that; I think they have been deliberately crafted to increase the distance between priest and people. I find it a struggle to say Mass intelligibly and with some element of devotion. For me, it is no longer a celebration but has become a functional ritual.'

'The situation with the sacraments is worse. Here in Gurrán parish, and in Lagmore before it, they operate as if on a conveyor belt, a system of rites of passage, an excuse for a family get-together (often ending in drunkenness), having little to do, that I can see, with grace or God. An honest child said to me just a week before his first Communion, 'All I want is the money.' I know this experience is shared by many, perhaps most, priests in parish ministry. I have asked myself for long why we keep doing it.'

'Take baptism as an example. I find it demoralizing to baptize people in situations where I'm asking myself, 'Who's the worst liar here, the parents or me? They are making promises they have given no sign of intending to fulfil – neither they nor their other children take part in the activities of the faith community – or is it me, acting as if I believe what they say, when the truth is that I don't?' Should I persist with a charade which belittles the sacrament, reinforces parental perception that, in matters of faith, a token will do, and invites ridicule from the public? (I think of the journalist's remark that the church is like a society of steak-eating vegetarians.) It's the same with confession, first Communion,

confirmation and marriage. To respond by saying, ‘Ah, sure, don’t take any notice; just keep going,’ is to say that meaning doesn’t matter. For me, parish work is mostly a matter of propping up a façade and hoping that something good comes of it.’

‘Furthermore, I see the current model of church as unfit for purpose. Its leadership, especially in Rome, has, in my view, no desire to lead it towards Vatican II’s vision of the church as the People of God. The years since the Council have been a time of opportunities ignored, wasted, or thrown away unexamined. I feel alienated from the church’s leadership and from its direction of the church for several decades. I feel angered by the bullying I see the leadership use, and by its dishonesty, for example, in its politicization of issues of truth, as when, for fear of losing authority, it is unwilling to deviate from what it said in the past - yet truth is the only authority that matters. Examples are *Humanae Vitae*, and Rome’s responsibility in child protection issues.’

‘It is often said that we should work within the church to bring about renewal, and, in principle, that is the right thing to do. But there are no credible structures for doing so. The church’s structures are not participatory, accountable, or transparent, and therefore not credible. The current model of church is self-serving rather than Gospel-serving, power-serving rather than people-serving. I think Enda Kenny was exactly right when, in the Dáil, he described the Vatican as “narcissistic.” It is self-referencing - the church is the religion of the church

- and has reduced local leadership to impotence. I think Irish bishops might lead if they had breathing space, but they haven't. I recall a bishop saying he had learned from experience that, any time he said or did anything out of the ordinary, Rome would be on to him within a week calling him to account. In the church we need dialogue most of all, but what we have in its place is pretended dialogue, within circumscribed limits, and usually with predetermined answers and decisions.'

'I see no good reason to spend what is left of my life propping up such a structure. This model of church is better left to die - I believe it is dying, and thank God for that - so that something new may arise on a foundation of honesty. Perhaps, with God's grace, there may still be fire in the ashes. And so, I would like to keep the door open for a possible return to priestly ministry at some time in the future. That is why I am not asking for laicization but for a change of work from something I find largely meaningless to something meaningful. I have had experience of working in day centres, and I think I have a reasonable idea of what it's like.'

'As you may have noticed from what I've written, this is not a decision that I've arrived at quickly or lightly. (The anger is not a sign of haste.) I've sought advice and listened to it. I've prayed about it. I've found support and encouragement from friends within religious life and without. And I hope, with God's grace, to be able to go forward in his service as I committed myself when I joined the Order.'

‘I look forward to hearing from you.’

‘Yours fraternally,

‘Owen O’Sullivan’

The provincial replied, acknowledging the letter, but stating that nothing could be done until after the next chapter, and that any decision would be a matter for the new provincial.

That was understandable, so I waited until the chapter of July 2013, and then handed the provincial and each of the newly elected definitors a revised copy of the letter, almost identical to the one above but with the addition that I had discussed the matter of working in the day centre several times with its director, Brother Kevin Crowley, and that he had warmly welcomed the idea.

The situation regarding the above is analogous to that in Zambia when I concluded that the best contribution I could make was to leave the country. I came to that point through reflecting on the tiny number of Western Province vocations to the Capuchins that had come and stayed since our beginning there in 1931. I felt that our continuing presence was an (unintended and unwitting) obstacle to them: as long as we were still there, visibly, on the ground, the local people would not see the need. I could not decide about that for others, but I needed to do it for myself. Some friars tried to dissuade me saying that we should stay to promote and form vocations. I felt we had gone past that stage. I left Zambia, and vocations

came, and there is now 100% Zambian Capuchin leadership in the country and the number of local friars continues to grow steadily.

The situation regarding an awakening of lay leadership in the church in Ireland is analogous to that. As long as we clergy are still here, engaging in make-shift responses like clustering of parishes, running around from church to church saying Mass on an *ad hoc* basis like the fire brigade answering emergency calls, and a largely dormant laity, the longer will be the postponement of facing the problems of the church. That will simply mean waiting until the moment of collapse to start thinking. As long as people go to a church and find a priest there for Mass, the longer they will fail to see that there is a crisis. The time to start making changes is when there is still some vitality left in the church, not wait until it is almost dead.

In Lagmore, and especially in Gurránabráher, I commonly said two Masses a day, frequently three, and occasionally four. I find it difficult in such circumstances to say Mass with real engagement, and it is difficult for it not to become a rote exercise. Multiplying Masses is not good pastorally for the people, or spiritually for the priest, but people often expect it and the priest is under pressure to oblige. People often expect the same standard of service in a parish with one priest as they did when there were two, three or four priests. It hasn't registered with them yet that priests are a declining breed, and it may be that they will not come to realize it until they go to their church one Sunday morning for Mass and find

no priest there, because their local priest has died and there is no substitute. That is leaving it till too late to begin to work for alternatives. Saying ‘God will provide’ sounds pious but is simply irresponsible.

Leaving Gurránabráher in 2013, as also with on leaving Lagmore in 2007, I had feelings of great respect for the local diocesan clergy. They are at the church’s front line; they are generous, loyal and good; life is an uphill struggle for them, and they face it alone. I have lot of affection for them. And, as far as the people are concerned, I believe that there are saints in every parish, people of quiet heroism and great fidelity. They would be puzzled and embarrassed if anyone told them they were saints, but, by any reckoning, that is what they are. They don’t wear haloes, but they are the real thing.

Clerical sex abuse

In the early nineties, when I was still in Zambia, stories began to percolate through the grapevine about a priest called Brendan Smith, a Premonstratensian from Kilnacrott Abbey, County Cavan. He was alleged to have been involved in sexual abuse of children over a long period of time. These came as a real shock to me and my confrères. I felt that whatever sexual activity people might indulge in, children should be left out of it – their innocence should be respected - and that this applied all the more to a priest, a man who had vowed himself to chastity. After a time it became clear that the allegations were well-founded; Smith was later convicted in court and sent to prison, where he died.

One thing I found baffling about him was that he appeared to see nothing wrong with what he had done. He freely acknowledged doing it, but as if to say, 'What's the fuss about?' I was disgusted by his self-defence, in which he said, 'It was just a bit of uncle stuff.' As an uncle and grand-uncle, I found it disgusting that he seemed to think that sexual involvement with children was as right and normal as playing with nieces and nephews. There were other aspects of his case that baffled me: given that complaints had been made against him since the late nineteen forties, what had the superiors of his order been doing during all that time? How could they, with decades of complaints on record against him for abusing children, give him a posting as chaplain to a children's hospital? How could they possibly have been so stupid and irresponsible or was there something worse than those in it? Did they simply lack a moral sense? I couldn't make sense of it. But, at the end of it all, I put the issue away with the thought that, after all, he was only one man and you couldn't draw larger conclusions on the basis of one person's action, no matter how bad they were.

But then a case involving another priest came to light, and then another, and another, and then, it seemed, there was a flood that went on for twenty years. A priest in Dublin spoke publicly of sexual abuse by clergy as being 'endemic' in Dublin diocese. But, of course, it wasn't just Dublin: there was Ferns and other dioceses, and then institutions such as industrial schools, reformatories, orphanages, special schools such as those for the blind,

and the so-called “Magdalen” laundries. The list seemed endless.

What was going on? I knew several confrères in Ireland who had been convicted. And yet I had never suspected them of anything. Had I been blind? Admittedly, I had been abroad since 1971, but, even so, had I been living in cloud cuckoo land? After returning to Ireland in 1997, I was embarrassed to see bishops on TV, again and again, asking forgiveness for their past failings, appealing for patience, promising to deal with the issue, only for it to become clear that they were still not dealing with it, that promises made had not been honoured and that they were still, essentially, in denial and cover-up. One bishop stated publicly that there were no cases in his diocese; there were. At times it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that some bishops had simply lied; they denied covering up when it was evident that they had. It came as a welcome breath of fresh air when Archbishop Dermot Clifford of Cashel, acknowledged, in response to a journalist’s question, that there had been a cover-up. Healing became possible from there on.

There was much denial by clergy, saying, for example: the media were exaggerating everything because they were anti-Catholic; complainants were just out for money; some of those who called themselves ‘victims’ were actually seducers; what about other groups of wrong-doers we heard nothing about? Denial took different forms: first, there was denial of facts; when that became unsustainable in view of the published volume

of evidence, it shifted to denial of the significance of the facts; it was said that too much was being made of it, and, if nothing had ever been said in the first place, the child would get over it and forget about it. (I don't think people who said that could ever have listened to a victim of abuse tell their story.) There was denial, too, of responsibility in the refusal to accept that the structures of the church, especially its authority structure, with its lack of internal communication, its secrecy and self-protectiveness, facilitated, and even at times required, the cover-up of abuse, and penalized whistle-blowers, both lay and clerical. There was a consistent pattern of deny-delay-dissemble instead of admit-accept-act.

Leaving aside moral or human considerations, and looking at the issue purely from the pragmatic viewpoint of damage limitation, I find it difficult to imagine how the issue could have been more badly handled if we had contrived to do it. Instead of making a clean sweep, we allowed a drip feed of scandals to go on for twenty years, so that anyone born in Ireland after, let us say, 1990, knows only one church, that of the sexual scandals. The mishandling of the issue was more damaging, I believe, to the church and society, than the issue itself. And, of course, it wasn't just bishops who were to blame; heads of religious orders had been equally irresponsible and inept; there were extraordinary levels of incompetence. There were provincials who seemed incapable of answering a letter in six months!

Within the ranks of the clergy and religious orders, one result was a great loss of respect for and confidence in church leadership. It had been shown to be morally

shallow, sometimes lying and devious – as in explaining that when they promised cooperation with state inquiries they had not promised *full* cooperation, or in offering excuses based on inadequate record-keeping, when they had destroyed the records – incoherent in facing the media, unable to see the bigger issues or look to the long-term, but to see only how they could wriggle out of the immediate predicament. How could we, in religious orders, have elected such people? What was wrong with us? And yet many felt, and still feel, that all we have is to do is keep our heads down, stay quiet and the crisis will blow over when the media find something else on which to focus.

The effect on the wider church was large: a loss of respect and of trust, and, at times, hatred. As I know well from doing house-to-house visitation, the trust of the past is gone, replaced by a culture of suspicion. Confidence in the church as an institution has evaporated almost to vanishing point, except among the elderly. It will take generations to recover and then only if the church changes to a culture of openness, transparency and accountability. It has done so to a considerable degree where the issue of sexual abuse is concerned, but, in every other respect that I can think of, it has not done so and makes it clear by its actions that it does not intend to. The top-down hierarchical mind-set prevails, with its secrecy, the absence of credible structures of participation and dialogue, and the exclusion of laypeople, especially women, from leadership. It is a model of hierarchy that disables rather than enables; it

evokes infantilism and passivity, and there is much of both in the church.

What I saw was that the church sacrificed children to protect its institutional image. Then, when the storm broke and everyone wanted to appear squeaky clean, bishops sacrificed priests to protect themselves – an example would be the response of US bishops after Cardinal Law of Boston was forced to resign for his mishandling of abuse cases there; and, in the next stage, Rome sacrificed bishops to protect itself. When journalists beat a path to its door calling for an explanation of its action and inaction, it replied that responsibility rested with the bishop of each diocese; each was king in his own castle, so to speak. Rome re-discovered the principle of subsidiarity when it wished to off-load onto bishops blame for its failings in child protection! About its own failings, Rome is still in denial, not acknowledging that when bishops tried to have paedophile priests expelled from the priesthood, Rome would not allow it, saying that the man's vocation had to be saved, and binding the bishops to omertà. I ask myself at what point "denial" becomes simple lying and criminality. The ordinary people of the church are neither blind nor stupid, and they could see this as well as I could. The result was a large loss of credibility for the church; without credibility the church is nothing. I believe that the church will regain credibility when it comes to love Christ and humanity more than it loves itself.

At first, I saw no link between the prevalence of clerical sex abuse and celibacy. While I have, for nearly fifty years, felt that the law on clerical celibacy for diocesan clergy should be changed, I did not question celibacy itself as a gospel value. Now I am not so sure; I think it is a mistake. I know too many colleagues who, in my view, are affectively stunted, psychologically immature, and socially maladjusted. I think that, if they had married and had had families, they would likely have been better people.

Whatever about others, this much, at least, I can say with certainty, that, although I have been faithful to my vow of chastity, I feel diminished by it. I think I would have been a better person if I had married and had a family. Celibacy represents a psychological neutering, a diminished humanity, not having fully lived, loving no one and imagining that meant I loved God more.

The theology and spirituality built up around celibacy/chastity is beautiful, and I could write an article on it, but I see it, in its reality on the ground, not as something which enables a more universal love - as presented in the theology - but as something which diminishes most people, making them self-centred. I can say – and this is open to misunderstanding – that I do not know many priests and religious who are celibate. If celibacy is understood simply to mean the avoidance of sexual relationships, then I believe that the overwhelming majority of my colleagues are habitually celibate. But, if celibacy is a means to an end, namely, that of enabling a love that is open to all, I don't see that

happening in reality. In that sense, I believe that many of my colleagues are not celibate, but simply bachelors. While it may have been written tongue in cheek, I think there is something in the scriptural text which reads, 'When a man has no wife, he is aimless and querulous.' (Ecclesiasticus {Sirach} 36.30)

The sexual drive in a person is primal, instinctual and deeply embedded in humanity. To deny it is a high-risk venture, and so I am no longer surprised that some find it too much and veer off at a tangent into deviant sexuality such as that with children. If it does not find a moral and legal outlet, there is a high risk that it will find immoral and illegal ones. Sexual activity on the part of an adult towards a child is a sexuality which has turned sick and sour. It's about power more than sex, and abusive power at that, but the will to power is as innate as the will to sex, and maybe they live next door to each other. I think the church's insistence on celibacy for the clergy (with a few exceptions, such as in the Eastern churches and for Anglican clergy who become Catholic), is about fostering an aura of specialness about the clergy; it feeds into a clerical caste mentality, and is essentially about controlling money and property and maintaining the present clerical/hierarchical power structure in the church. The extra availability for pastoral work which it facilitates is something functional rather than relational or indicative. To be plain, I think the theology and spirituality woven around celibacy is mostly hype, generated with a view to consolidating a particular model of church. That model, I believe, has outlived its usefulness and is collapsing in the Western world.

Although it is growing in Africa, South America and Asia, (are the clergy there celibate?) I think it is only a matter of time before that, too, changes in response to the same pressures that have affected the church in the West. I hope it is not misunderstood when I speak of a “model” of church in contrast to the reality of the community of the disciples of Jesus itself; they are not synonymous.

Dublin, hospital chaplain

About two weeks after the provincial chapter in July 2013, the provincial phoned me. He explained that he and his definitors (councillors) had given a lot of thought to the letters I had written them before and during the chapter. But he said that they were finding it extremely difficult to fill positions in view of declining numbers, so would I please accept the job of chaplain in the Bon Secours Hospital in Glasnevin, Dublin? I knew that what he said about declining numbers was true. Anyone with a pair of eyes in his head could see that. When I joined the Irish province in 1961, it had about three hundred members, more than half of whom were serving abroad, in Zambia, South Africa, Western America, New Zealand, and, later on, in South Korea. Indeed, the Irish province had the highest proportion of any Capuchin province in service overseas. By 2013, however, there were only seventy-three friars in Ireland, with an average age of seventy-two, and only nine friars under the age of sixty.

But I was stunned. I had really believed that I would be given the appointment I had asked for. I felt it made no sense to ask a man who had expressed a wish to opt out of the exercise of priestly ministry, as I had, for the reasons given, to take up an appointment which involved precisely that.

I asked for time to think about it. I phoned the incumbent chaplain, who was also a Capuchin. He liked the job, wanted to stay in it, and had asked to be left there. Yet he was going to be asked to leave it, while I, who didn't want it, was being asked to take it! It's no wonder that, in the ecclesiastical world, it is often said that, if you do not want a particular job, ask for it, and there's a better than even chance you won't get it!

I was shocked and mystified in equal measure. It made no sense. I had often thought, and I was not alone in it, that there was a practice, if not a policy, of *not* giving people an appointment they asked for, supposedly on the ground of spiritual benefit to them in going against their will. That sounded suspicious to me; it seemed like a rationalization for using people like pawns, or for simple bloody-mindedness. I knew well that I did not want the job: I would find it physically and psychologically claustrophobic. Hospital chaplaincy ties a man down; he always has to remain within the orbit of the hospital, and this appointment meant I would be not only working in the hospital but living in it as well. Being confined to a cluster of buildings day after day, always having to be on the end of a phone in case of a call, felt confining to me.

But neither did I want to say no. That would have felt like disloyalty, and even betrayal of my brothers in the order. So, reluctantly, and asking myself if I wasn't just what Americans call a "patsy," I said yes. I went to Glasnevin in mid-August 2013. It became the twenty-sixth place I had lived in up to that point in my life (I was sixty-eight years of age), making an average of two years and seven months in any one place since my birth. That leaves me with a sense of rootlessness, of not belonging anywhere. I find the constant changes of appointment disruptive, tiring, and even, at times, disorientating. It is difficult to be the constant newcomer, always starting from the beginning, learning new work and roles, relating to new people, and dealing with the many new practicalities that a change brings with it. I sometimes had the feeling of being a perennial outsider. It would be nice to stay put, but I was afraid to say that in case they decided to leave me in the hospital chaplaincy for long. I still held out the hope of being able to work in the Day Centre, encouraged by Pope Francis' call in Brazil urging priests to leave what he called 'the comfort of their churches' to work among the poor.

I was formally assigned to the friary in Church Street on Dublin's north side, but, unusually, I was not given a room there. I was told that an Indian friar was coming and the room was needed for him. (He never came.) I was told that the job in the hospital would leave me free in the afternoons and so I could fulfil my hope of working in the Day Centre. But, on taking up work in the hospital, I found that afternoons there, far from being

free, were the busiest time, and, in any event the Day Centre closes at 3 p.m. I began to wonder if there was not something else at work in the decision to send me to the hospital chaplaincy. Was it a process of constructive dismissal?

Work in “The Bons”

Everybody I met in “The Bons” – caterers, consultants, cleaners, car park attendants, nurses, receptionists, Bon Secours sisters, doctors, laboratory technicians, fellow-chaplains – was very welcoming. It makes a difference. The hospital is a private one which receives no public money; it has 130 patients and a staff of nearly six hundred. It caters for people who have private health insurance. Its standards are high, from cleanliness to everything else that I could see. There is constant re-training and up-skilling. It does not have an A&E department or engage in the more high-risk type of operation; patients with those needs are referred to other hospitals. The average patient stay is about five days which means a fairly constant flow of comings and goings. Some patients become familiar figures, coming back several times in a year. About three out of five patients, or perhaps a little more, are female.

The hospital is open and explicit about being a Catholic hospital and I liked that. This is expressed, among other ways, by having a staff of five in the pastoral care department. Its director was a Bon Secours sister, and there were three female chaplains, women who had trained for the purpose at their own expense, all

of them people committed to the faith, hard-working, and really helpful to me especially at the start. I was the fifth. There is a beautiful chapel there, and religious symbols in wards and corridors. An orientation course is given to all new staff to explain to them the hospital's ideals and ethos. The sisters, now severely reduced in number – just two were active in the hospital – aim to communicate their ethos (Bon Secours means good help) to those who will come after them. There are many nationalities among the staff and many religions, and none.

The age of the great majority of patients would be above sixty-five, and nearly all are Catholic. They are people of the pre-Vatican II generation, when “Holy, Catholic Ireland” was in full swing and catechesis in schools placed strong emphasis on doctrine, and learning by heart, both of them, in the minds of some, much better than today's methods. But what I found was that the practice regarding Holy Communion was no different from what I had seen in Saint Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny fifteen years before, with a younger age group. It still seemed to me that it was unthinking, a kind of holy magic, which worked automatically. It might be that patients were having their hair done, or in the toilet, washing or shaving, or watching TV, reading a magazine, making a phone call, etc. They saw nothing incongruous in wanting to receive Holy Communion in the middle of such activities and continuing with them after swallowing the Host. They were genuinely surprised and puzzled when I declined to give them Communion in such circumstances and offered to return

later with it. They would sometimes say, ‘But I can take it now.’ There was no deliberate irreverence in this, I believe, but a seriously defective appreciation of what Communion is. We need to go back to the drawing boards in this regard as with much else.

I found the “Communion round” the only stressful part of the day, and it often taxed my patience sorely; I always breathed a sigh of relief when it was over. In contrast to this, I found the rest of the work quite easy. More than that, it was a privilege to be able to be with people and listen to them at a time in their lives when they were vulnerable, often worried or frightened. Relatives, too, especially those of someone with a terminal illness were grateful for a visit by a chaplain, whether me or one of the lady chaplains. Most patients, I found, were simple and down-to-earth, were glad of someone to talk to, welcomed a visit from a priest and were happy to receive the sacrament of the sick. Occasionally, someone might see it as “extreme unction,” their boarding card for take-off, but, once they were assured on that point, they were glad to receive it. I used to emphasise one of its prayers to them, ‘May the Lord who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up,’ especially the last phrase. I think the sacrament is helpful to people of faith; it did lift them up, and it wasn’t uncommon for people to say that. Confession is a rarity; I heard perhaps three or four in my first six months.

Visitations of different kinds

About six months after I went there, an international hospitals' accreditation body called the Joint Commission International carried out a five day inspection of the hospital. Its accreditation means a lot to a hospital in terms of its standing among hospitals and in how health insurance companies see it. The Bons already had this accreditation, and it was coming up for renewal after three years. A team of examiners arrived and went through the hospital, its procedures and practices with a fine comb. At the end, it gave a provisional finding, which was that the hospital measured up to standard and its accreditation would be renewed. This was followed shortly after by a formal letter of re-accreditation. There were sighs of relief all round. Well done, Bons. As a thank you, the staff were given an extra day's holidays.

I couldn't help contrasting this with the apostolic visitation of the church in Ireland which had taken place early in 2011 on Pope Benedict XVI's instructions following the sex abuse scandals and their mishandling. A group of cardinals, archbishops, priests and religious came to Ireland and conducted an examination of the church's life. Some people found meeting with some of the visitators – that was their official title - to be helpful and positive. Others found that some visitators conducted their meetings with obsessive secrecy, were obtrusive to the point of invading privacy, and unfair and high-handed in their actions. At the end of it all, a bland statement of generalities and platitudes was presented to the Irish people in March 2012. There was little in it that could not have been said at any time. A detailed report was made available to the four archbishops, but the

ordinary bishops did not receive a copy. My mind went back to what Pope Benedict had written in his letter to the Irish people on 19 March 2010. In a section addressed to the bishops, he had stated, ‘Only decisive action carried out with complete honesty and transparency will restore the respect and good will of the Irish people towards the Church.’ (n.11) And the bishops were supposed to be able to do that without having seen the report? That was Rome’s idea of ‘complete honesty and transparency’ Is it a surprise that the visitation, apart from resulting in unfair dismissals of staff in the Irish College in Rome, came and went without making a difference? Truly, Rome has well-practised skill in snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

For me, life in the Bons was relatively easy. A welcome change from the parish was the absence of funerals and the presence of a weekly day off. In theory, I had had one in Gurrán, but, as often as not, something or other would prevent it from being a reality. In the Bons, I used my day off in the winter of my first year to print and bind most of what I had written over the previous fifty years. I call the books “my children” - but I’d rather children walking round on two legs.

I lived in a comfortable flat in the hospital. A downside to living on the job was, at times, a sense of claustrophobia. This, combined with loneliness through diminished contact with my confrères over the last four years, leaves a void that it is not good for the soul. Genesis is right, ‘It is not good for man to be alone.’ (2.18)

Francis

On 13 March 2013, Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires was elected pope. When he appeared on the balcony he struck me as a man at ease with himself. He did not seem overawed by the responsibility, but looked calm. He began with 'Buona sera' - Good Evening - which was relaxed and informal. He asked people to pray with him – that was good. He spoke of himself as bishop of Rome – that, too, was good, putting himself on a par with his brother bishops.

He took the name Francis. Since he was a Jesuit, I wondered if this might be after Francis Xavier or Francis Borgia, both Jesuit saints. But I hoped it might be our Francis, and was delighted when it was.

In his public appearances, he kept things simple: just the papal white without the bling; and he sat on a chair, not a throne. He went and paid his hotel bill, and then chose to live in a modest apartment, not in the Apostolic Palace. As archbishop of Buenos Aires and cardinal, he had lived in a flat, did his own shopping and cooking, and took a bus or train to his office. A welcome breath of fresh air.

I like this guy. I have read two of his interviews and liked both of them; he spoke candidly, and is not afraid to call a spade a spade. When one interviewer, Eugenio

Scalfari, said, ‘Many church leaders have been [narcissists],’ Francis replied, ‘You know what I think about this? Heads of the Church have often been narcissists, flattered and thrilled by their courtiers. The court is the leprosy of the papacy.’ I was stunned; even I wouldn’t have said that! I like this man even more.

But he will need to be more than a nice guy to change the direction of the church. Will his eight-man commission of cardinals be willing and able to point the direction and give him the muscle he’ll need to deal with the curia? Having read mini-biographies of them in *The Tablet*, I do not feel confident. And his methodology? The end must be prefigured in the means, and I don’t see that there. Will it just mean giving the old clowns new noses? He’s seventy-seven, the same age as John XXIII was at his election, so time is not on his side. The curia knows how to lie in the long grass, waiting, biding its time till it recovers its position. It did so before after attempts at reform by Paul VI who had spent all his adult life in it as an insider, and by John Paul II who came to it as an outsider. The late Cardinal Martini said, ‘The curia is impervious to reform.’ I think he’s right. But will Francis take the big step of abolishing and not replacing it – a replacement would in time come to be the same thing – and build instead a new model of church from the bottom – not the bottom **up** – but a community of communities, where the heart is in the family and small Christian communities, served by the priesthood of all the faithful, and where a greatly diminished hierarchy would be enablers, operating on principles of openness, transparency and accountability.

Francis needs prayer and support; he's got mine. I see in him the power of love; it's a refreshing change from the love of power so evident in the curia.

One thing I fear is that, while Francis has raised hopes and expectations, he may not be able to deliver on them, and that could lead to disappointment, and even perhaps, on the part of some, a final parting of the ways with the church.

Would I do it all over again?

If I were starting from the beginning, would I live my life with the same basic choices? I've thought about that for the last twenty years or so and see it like this. I think that the best way any person can spend their life is by serving God as whole-heartedly and generously as possible. That is how I have felt since I was a boy.

In my teen years, it seemed axiomatic that a young man with such an intention would enter the service of the church as a priest, a member of a religious order, or both. It was a sequence: God, church, priesthood, religious life - as simple as that.

Now I see things differently. If I were starting all over again, I would want to serve God outside the structures of the church, in the Kingdom of God, for example, in ordinary civil society. I believe that I would have been a better human being if I had married, had a family and worked at an ordinary job. Why not in the church? I see it as having lost its bearings, turned itself from a means

to an end, from mission to self-preservation, a self-serving power structure. That is why the church has lost credibility and is dying. A narcissistic church is, at its heart, an atheistic church.

I have never been in love, and that is a great human loss, an emotional void, a diminution of questionable value in view of Jesus saying, 'I have come that they have life and have it to the full.' (John 10.10) The church has been the great love and also the great disappointment of my life. What disappoints me so much are its lack of intellectual honesty and moral courage. Those are hard-hitting things to say, and they would offend many people. But I believe they are true. I believe that the church as it has existed for a very long time, maybe almost from the beginning, has to die so that it may rise again on a different foundation. That's an old story but it's one that's at the heart of the Christian faith – death and resurrection.

If I feel like that, why have I stayed? (This year, 2014, I have been a priest for forty-four years, a friar for fifty-three.) Partly, it's out of a sense of duty. Ought, must, have to, should – these words are a big part of my inner vocabulary. It's not wanting to go back on a commitment undertaken. I would **feel** guilty if I were to leave, no matter what my mind said. Perhaps also there is inertia or self-interested calculation. The prospect of leaving, at seventy, a way of life I have known since I was a teenager is daunting, to say the least. The practicalities, too, are pretty over-powering: a place to live, work, money, health care, not to mention parting with the friends of a lifetime. I have sometimes wondered if the

three vows of religious life were structured so as to produce that effect, to make it all but impossible for an older priest or religious to leave. I sometimes ask myself if I am intellectually honest, if I have moral courage, in staying. I don't know, but I have learned to live with ambiguity, with unresolved tensions, with the knowledge that everything is provisional, limited, contingent.

What sustains me spiritually?

Much of the spirituality I grew up with was body-denying and world-denying. The text 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?' (Mark 8.36-37, Douai version) was frequently interpreted to suggest that salvation was an evacuation procedure; the only thing that mattered in life was getting out of it safely. This life was a dress rehearsal and didn't count on its own; the real one came after. On your death-bed what difference would it make how many Olympic medals you had won, or what "worldly" achievements you could point to? They were merely transitory. Or what importance had political or social issues alongside saving your soul?

That was a spirituality of disengagement; you didn't get involved. What an extraordinary view of life for a religion whose foundation is the Incarnation, God coming into the human situation, getting involved in it, becoming like us in all things except sin! I'm glad I left it behind. Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is within you,' meaning, I believe, that it is about relationships –

with God, with others, with oneself and with nature, and the constant interaction of those.

To return to the question, ‘What sustains me spiritually?’ It is nature first and foremost. My experience of it fed into an intuitive learning process about the world that began in my childhood and has continued ever since. Through it I have come to see –

- that everything is linked to everything else; the name of the game is inter-dependence, not independence; the great cannot exist without the small, nor the small without the great.
- that life is not just about us humans; we are a small part of a big picture; we need nature, it doesn’t need us;
- that everything in the macro- and microcosm speaks of intelligence, purpose and meaning. Innumerable things had to be right, and are right, for us to exist, for earth to exist, and even more for the universe to exist. Philosophically, this may be a weak argument for the reality of God, but, for me at least, it is psychologically a compelling one. I just look up into a starry sky on a clear night and “see” it.
- that creation transcends human differences;
- that all of nature is pure gift; we humans had no part in its making. (Sadly, we have a large part in its unmaking.) Religion begins with wonder, and culminates in thanksgiving.

The dark side of nature disturbs me. Throughout the animal kingdom, the big creatures eat the medium-sized

ones; they eat the small ones and they in turn eat the tiny ones. The “cruelty” of nature is troubling. How could a good Creator God allow animals, who have no freedom to choose alternatives, to be “programmed,” whether by evolution or by something else, to do things which inflict so much suffering? The lion cannot choose to become a vegetarian; it has to kill the impala in order to live. I think of the ragged-toothed shark which has six or seven young in its womb but only one emerges because it has hunted and eaten its siblings in the womb. Or the gall midge, whose young hatch inside their mother and eat their way out through her? Or the Xenon peckii fly which spends all its life inside a paper wasp, feeding on it? Or the mother octopus who lays up to a million eggs for one to survive? Or the female praying mantis which consumes the male, while he, headless, continues to mate with her. Saint Paul, in Romans 8.19-22, seems to say that God intended nature to be that way. I hope not. But if creation was God’s first word to humanity, it is an ambiguous one.

Personal prayer sustains me, more so than liturgical. The latter often seems like theatre, or, on some occasions, such as those in Rome, pageantry, designed to impress as a spectacle. As a priest engaged in the liturgy, I find it rigid, something of a strait-jacket. I have to speak to it more than it to me and I think it’s not meant to be that way. I find it valuable to spend an hour each day in an attempt at silent prayer. My preference would be to spend this time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament but find that the relentless chatter in churches makes this impossible, so I do it in my room. This prayer

is almost entirely dry, distracted, boring, and seemingly pointless, and yet I would not want to abandon it. I would like to be able to give more time to it and I cannot explain why. If I dropped it I would miss it, perhaps like missing the sound of the sea when you move inland. It sustains me like the way the sea upholds a floating person. During my “atheistic” periods, described already, I used to find myself asking if the Christian faith were not just a beautiful dream - beautiful because it speaks of a God who is infinitely loving, forgiving and caring and who has called humanity to union with him. But what if it was all no more than a dream? It is the beauty and wonder of nature more than anything which has led me to believe that it is not a dream, but a reality. I have a sense of God sustaining me through the good, bad and confusing times in my life.

What means a lot to me spiritually is found in a document which I find up-building, hopeful, and imaginative. On 24 January 2002, religious leaders of many traditions gathered at Assisi, Italy, in response to an invitation from Pope John Paul II. They adopted the following ten commitments in what has come to be called the *Decalogue of Assisi*. It reads: -

We commit ourselves

- 1.** To proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, and, as we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or of religion, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.

- 2.** To educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions.
- 3.** To fostering the culture of dialogue, so that there will be an increase of understanding and mutual trust between individuals and among peoples, for these are the premise of authentic peace.
- 4.** To defending the right of everyone to live a decent life in accordance with their own cultural identity, and to form freely a family of his own.
- 5.** To frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognizing instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.
- 6.** To forgiving one another for past and present errors and prejudices, and to supporting one another in a common effort both to overcome selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence, and to learn from the past that peace without justice is no true peace.
- 7.** To taking the side of the poor and the helpless, to speaking out for those who have no voice, and to working effectively to change these situations, out of the conviction that no one can be happy alone.
- 8.** To taking up the cry of those who refuse to be resigned to violence and evil, and we desire to make every effort possible to offer the men and women of our time real hope for justice and peace.
- 9.** To encouraging all efforts to promote friendship between peoples, for we are convinced that, in the absence of solidarity and understanding between

peoples, technological progress exposes the world to a growing risk of destruction and death.

10. To urging the leaders of nations to make every effort to create and consolidate, on the national and international levels, a world of solidarity based on justice.

I see these ten points as representing a charter of action for the church which would lift it out of its navel-gazing, restoring to it a sense of mission in the service of humanity. I think that the environmental sins of our past and present are catching up on us and that we may be heading into a situation where the only item on humanity's agenda will be survival. If that is the case, we humans will either sink or swim together and everything else will be subordinated to that.

I have also found much help about ageing in the following: -

‘We live life forwards but understand it backwards.

Growing old gracefully is mostly about learning how to forgive and be reconciled. When we forgive, we self-heal. We can get bitter or get better; the choice is ours.

Old age is God's school where we learn to let go, to let be, and to let come... gracefully. We let come the fears and regrets, and face them within ourselves.’

(Anonymous)

What about Jesus?

Jesus is the human face of God. He is God's answer to the human question, ‘What's God like?’

Jews say about Christians that we have turned Jesus into a Gentile. I think they're probably right. If we understood Judaism we would understand him better. (As an incidental but worthy by-product, that would help us turn our backs on the long and shameful history of anti-Semitism by Christians. That healing process could give us better bearings.)

Jews also say, in jest, about themselves, 'We don't do theology; we leave that to the Christians; we just tell stories.' What has happened is that despite Jesus teaching in parables (stories) and in hardly any other way, we have largely dropped them and use instead a system of ideas, language and teaching method drawn from Greek philosophy. As a broad generalization, it may be said that Greeks thought in ideas, while Jews, like many other peoples, thought in images. In Jesus, the Word became flesh, but two thousand years of Christian theology have been spent trying to turn the flesh back into words, which we sometimes absolutize, freeze in dogmatic statements, and then, even go so far as to fight wars over them.

When I was in Zambia the people used to say of themselves that they were like frogs. 'When there's trouble on land the frog jumps into the water; and when there's trouble in the water, the frog jumps onto the land.' We're like that in speaking of Jesus, hopping from his humanity to his divinity and back again as the needs of the moment require. When Jesus says, 'The Father and I are one' (John 10.30), we say that he speaks of his

divinity. When he says, ‘The Father is greater than I’ (John 14.28), we say that he speaks of his humanity. That “amphibian” theology does not help anyone very much. In an analogous way, the tension between the Jesus of history and the Christ of theology makes it difficult to know the “real” Jesus. Indeed, as I look back on the theology of my student days, I can recall little of it that was of help to me as a human being. It shouldn’t be like that. Maybe we need to say goodbye to Athens and make our way to Jerusalem.

In addition, Jesus is, I believe, a man for all religions. We Christians have turned him into our religion as if we had the trade mark rights and copyright to him. We have locked him up in our theology and our church. There are times when we even make the church a substitute for God.

I have studied the Bible, especially the Gospels, since my student days, reading commentaries and even writing one. (It was on Mark’s Gospel; it was not very good and I did not try to get it published.) I have not found much nourishment in the commentaries for my understanding of Jesus. They are mostly dry, exegetical tomes which fill the head but don’t get near the heart. But I have found real benefit in the writings of the American Franciscan, Richard Rohr, who has a depth and breadth of vision that I find unique.

I wish to know Jesus better and to love him more. I think of him as an older brother accompanying me on my journey towards God our Father. And I have great

trust that, whatever happens in life, good or bad, we are always in the hands of God and I am content with that.

What lies ahead?

Well, death for one thing – the only certainty in life. I have never been afraid of it, but am afraid of some ways of dying. I am afraid of dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Having seen some people with them, I would dread being afflicted in that way. I think sometimes of my father's brother, Michael, who went to bed one evening and died in his sleep, or my confrère Tom Rocks who, it seems, literally dropped dead. I would love to go like that. But, like everyone else, I have no say in the matter, and will have to take whatever comes. I'm not very brave in facing illness and pray that God will give me a quick and easy passage when the time comes.

On 2 November 2004, my sixtieth birthday, I sent a letter to the provincial council of the order, with copies to each of my siblings, and to my GP, stating that, 'In the event of my experiencing serious illness, I should like to be told the full truth about it, without ambiguity or concealment. If I am unable to speak for myself when that time comes, I ask that no extraordinary measures be taken to prolong my life. I also wish that my bodily organs be given for transplant purposes, but not for medical research.' I hope that these wishes will be respected when the time comes.

I don't fear judgment after death because I have great trust in God. The friars' funerals that I have known were

happy occasions, and that is what a funeral should be, a celebration of a life and of a person reaching life's goal, which is union with God. I would like the homily at my funeral to consist of two sentences: 'Owen was a sinner who trusted in God's mercy. Pray for him.' Enough said.