

Maynooth Union Address.

June 7th 2016.

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I have wondered and reflected on the purpose of these after dinner musings for some time. Of course, I have also wondered how it came about that I pulled the proverbial short straw and found myself at this podium. Having attended these events fairly regularly in the past, and more regularly since I started working here with CPSMA, I have witnessed a change, as it were, in the format or content from being a 'Toast to the Hierarchy' to a sort of update on what the Silver Jubilee Class have achieved or endured, depending on your perspective, to a reflection on how the times have changed culturally, socially and spiritually since the oil was rubbed on the hands of the jubilee class twenty five years ago.

This little offering will be an amalgam of all three but I hope that it will also do justice to the virtue of brevity, bearing in mind the centuries that we have collectively wasted listening to After Dinner Speeches at GAA dinners and futile best man speeches at weddings the length and breath of the country and, in many cases, beyond during the heady days of the Celtic Tiger.

Like every other class here, we marvel at the speed in which time has elapsed, we fight the tendency to bemoan the change in the social context in which we work and we walk that tight rope between smelling the sheep and smelling *of* the sheep. We acknowledge that the Ireland that we were ordained into is a foreign country to the Ireland of today. That is a statement. It is neither condemnatory or laudatory because there was much to praise and regret in both. In that blissful summer of 1991, during which we traipsed the country attending each other's ordinations, memories were made and a corner was turned. It was a coming of age and we moved on! In retrospect, you could say that Church and Society had a similar experience around that time.

My abiding memory of that summer was of being stranded between Carna and Carraroe at 4am on a Monday morning after a Tuam Ordination, travelling with four or five classmates when the car broke down. While one may have expected the faith in Connemara to, at the

minimum, match that of West Cork, no passing car stopped for the young men in Roman Collars at the side of the road at that unearthly hour. It may also be a reflection on the activities in those parts in the days pre the Downing Street Agreement or a reflection on the guilt of those rushing home at that hour and their surprise at the level of inebriation that caused such an apparition. Still, in the meantime and thankfully, our cars have become somewhat better and more reliable!

There was time too, dare I say it, when we regarded Silver Jubilarian's with the reverence and awe that is due to venerable old age. Now, despite our classpiece moving perilously close to the door by Saint Mary's Oratory and preparing for a Poor Clare type seclusion, our perspective has changed. We are still, you might say unfortunately, the young priests, still to peak, still with time on our hands and not old at all.

Perhaps we are deluding ourselves with what Pope Benedict called, at the Mass *Pro Eligendo Pontifice*, 'the tyranny of relativism'! But the fact that there are more older than us than younger in every diocese does allow us to revel still in the generic, delusional and, sometimes, unflattering title of 'young priests'!

In fact, it is almost unfair of the Silver Jubilee Class to be hogging today's celebration. There are those here who have worked longer and harder in the vineyard, those who worked in harder conditions, those who ministered to ourselves and, indeed, who influenced us. One cannot but mention the Golden and Diamond Jubilee classes. In fact, I was an Altar server for one of these Diamond Jubilarians, Canon Michael Crowley, who, unfortunately, is unable to be here. We all owe a debt of gratitude to those who went before us, worked for, influenced and encouraged us.

I did glance at the content of these after dinner speeches over the past few years, as they invariably appear on *The Furrow*. Of course, the Editor, Professor Ronan Drury, appeared on our Class Piece, I think we were his third – and his last, though he may say 'latest'! This little offering will not reach those levels of erudition but to ensure that it will not appear on the *Furrow*, can I recall a little episode that happened during our time here at the Christmas Dinner, I would suspect thirty years ago. It was said then that when Ronan's hair was black, he wore a black suit and when it went grey, he started wearing a grey suit. The hope was

then expressed that he would never go bald. Whether he will or he won't, that should be sufficient to keep this little musing from the pages of *The Furrow*!

I found myself reminiscing recently on one of the books that we read for Spiritual Reading during our time here. It was, if I remember correctly, in the format of a series of letters to a seminarian. One of the images in one letter was that of the seminary being compared to a bag of stones. As the stones moved in the bag, they rubbed, clashed and grated off each other. In the end, the rough edges were knocked off and they became smooth.

The analogy was slightly inaccurate in that the process for ourselves did not end with Ordination. We are still a work in progress, still having our rough edges smoothed, still on the way to what we can or should be. We started that here with each other, subsequently, we experienced the shock and sorrow of some of our number leaving before and after Ordination. We experienced the shame and sorrow when some of our colleagues, be it at a class or diocesan level, committed crimes against children and, we realised, to our horror, that ontological change can be trumped by original sin. Our parishioners and the situations that we encountered knocked a few more corners off and made us realise our own vulnerability, our dependence, our lack of faith and our own deficiencies. Pope Francis has used the image of a 'Field Hospital' to describe the Church. He is right though on some occasions with our involvement it has resembled more a scene from MASH!

That encounter with our parishioners was seminal. I remember the musings of a Professor of Sacred Scripture from Kerry here in my time. Let me say, before I am forced to, that it was not the current Professor of Scripture from Kerry, Seamus O'Connell. Professor Quinlan said, amongst other things and on more than one occasion, that 'The Holy Spirit wears country boots and can be found walking any Irish Road'. We have, I think, despite our initial distain, come to agree with that judgement. We have been privileged to witness and experience a vibrant faith, be it during personal conversations, on First Friday calls, at hospital beds or at gravesides. I have often commented that our clerical students should accompany us on those calls to witness theology interacting with faith. The Pastoral year, an innovation here and developed since our time, recognises that need. We have also witnessed and, in many cases, shared in some way that pain at accidents, suicides and at the same

hospitals and gravesides. We have, if you like, all of us, experienced in our priesthood, both Good Friday and Easter Morning.

In many ways, our time here provided the foundations for our dealings with those situations. But no formation can form perfectly and pre-empt every event. The lack of such knowledge was brought home to me in my second parish, by a woman, a bit like the devout Anna in Luke's gospel, who asked me why there was a cure in the Easter water that was absent from ordinary Holy Water. Conscious that reputations could rise or fall on such, as Patrick Kavanagh would call 'Ballyrush and Gorteen' moments, I opined that it was 'because the Pascal Candle was dipped in it'. Despite the National Director for Liturgy being one of our class too, my answer is still waiting the liturgical *Nihil Obstat!* I might also mention that the same parishioner caused the closure of the church after the Easter Vigil to be delayed one Holy Saturday night as she was completing her Stations of the Cross!

Our own faith and our sense of vocation have been strengthened by those we were privileged to work both with and for. Long may it remain so!

We are a class with a somewhat higher proportion of Diocesan Secretaries, four last count, Tuam, Ferns, Killaloe and Cork and Ross. We were taught by three members of the hierarchy, Archbishop Neary and Bishop Drennan in Scripture and Bishop McAreavey in Canon Law. A further three bishops overlapped with our time here, Archbishop Eamon Martin, Bishop Denis Nulty and Bishop Phonsie Cullinan. That may have had an influence and changed our perspective too. While the emphasis has been very much on the changing context in which priests work over the past two decades, there has been a parallel and, perhaps, a more dramatic shift in what is expected of bishops and how they are engaged with by parishioners and society as a whole.

When one of the Reports into the Churches handling of Child abuse was published, I was a curate in a parish. It was the week in which I was most supported, most affirmed and a distinction was drawn between what is euphemistically called 'the institutional church' and the local priest who was well known. A while later another report was published. By then, I had left that parish and was working as the Diocesan Advisor for Post-Primary Religious Education. This time, the reaction was different. I represented an institution and had no relationship, history or reputation. I experienced anger and aggression.

Working in a Diocesan Office and from speaking to others who do, I appreciate that our bishops have, despite their efforts, work and commitment, been faced with that institutional anger over the past few years. In addition, while we bemoan extra work due to a decline in numbers - we are, as I said earlier, despite the silver aura, still the young priests - our bishops are filling gaps, plugging holes, dealing with delegations, fulfilling civil and canonical obligations and becoming, by default, mediators, HR experts and counsellors. While the notion of a toast to the hierarchy may no longer be part of this proceeding, we do appreciate the enormity of the expectations that they carry, we do not underestimate their task and we hope that we are more part of the solution than the problem.

While some of us are now more familiar with Maynooth than others for no other reason than our work, we do sense and hear those whispers in the corridors, in the college chapel and even on the Graf of staff long gone and characters that are no more. We smile and we remember Maynooth affectionately. In many ways, we were lucky! We lived here in a time of larger numbers, we experienced not just the formation of the College and the Deans and the formation of theology but that critical formation from each other, common sense, if you like, straight talking, peer pressure or fraternal correction depending on your perspective. We experienced the liturgies and music of this place and we missed the Saturday nights evening prayer, exposition, night prayer and Benediction with the Dom Casey's quavering voice, and the ever present fear that he would drop the monstrance, when we went to our parishes and when we had to make do with the *Late Late Show* and *Saturday Live*, after our Vigil Mass.

We resisted the new psalm tones that the then newly appointed Director of Sacred Music, John O'Keeffe, introduced, being somewhat conservative, and we went apoplectic when the same Director refused a rather triumphant Gloria from Fr. Sean Lavery's *Missa Turbae* and Widor's Toccata in F as a recessional to our Diaconate during Lent, on April 1st of all days, 1990. Our Recessional today righted that perceived and treasured ancient wrong!

Twenty two years later, when I returned here, I went to Evening Prayer on Saturday night. The new Psalm tones came back effortlessly, John O'Keeffe was still here and my voice blended in with that of a new generation despite the years. That what we fought to retain, I could not remember and at Benediction, I could swear I heard the Dom Casey's voice as I can hear Frankie Cremin coughing before praying the words of Consecration in one breath in the Lady's Chapel in the Gunn in the afternoons.

We are what God made us and we are, in many ways, influenced by our experiences. Today, we return to greet and congratulate our chronological seniors and juniors who continue to have an influence on us and who are celebrating jubilees too, we return to congratulate our fellow class mates who also had a significant role on our journey and, above all, we return to Maynooth, our *Alma Mater*, to say thanks, to reminisce and renew friendships and to celebrate twenty five years working as priests in dioceses and parishes throughout the country. It is in Maynooth at times like these that one catches a glimpse of the eternity of Melchizedek and one realises that we are part of that lineage!

Opportunities like today's are times when we can support and encourage each other, times when we can ignore the negatives and focus on the positives, times when, despite our differences, we can focus on what we have in common. Times when we can remember that we are John's branches of that One vine. In Paragraph 109 of *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis states that 'Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment'. Losing our joy, our excitement and zeal are the biggest threat to all ministries.

Pope Benedict, in his Homily to the Ordinands of Rome in April 2007 prefigured those sentiments when he prayed that 'the certainty that Christ does not abandon us and that no obstacle can prevent the accomplishment of his universal plan of salvation be a cause of constant consolation and steadfast hope.'

Perhaps we have overlooked that and deprived ourselves of that constant consolation. It was St. Teresa of Avila who said 'May God save us from gloomy saints'. While we have never claimed to be saints, we have the tendency to be gloomy. The real value of events like today's is that they remind us of our enthusiasm, our joy and our somewhat eroded youthful idealism.

There is a line in the rite of Ordination, 'May God who has begun the good work in you bring it to completion'. Like everyone else, we are still on the road to completion, perfection and fulfilment. May God be with all of us 'till our silver turns to gold and until 'we see him face to face'!

