Homily

The journey to Emmaus began in grief and ended in joy. Along that way two sad and lonely hearts were joined by a stranger. At journey’s end they could say to one another ‘Did not our hearts burn as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us’. They spoke of Jesus but they could have been talking of Fr Paddy. In his seventy one years as a priest I think all who met him on that long road of life would say the same; very often, through his listening ear and his wise counsel, he took us from sadness to peace and joy. He talked to us, not at us. He explained the scriptures to us for over thirty three years from this very pulpit and he inspired us by his life. When we were with him did not our hearts burn within us; meeting him was very special.

Monsignor Gallagher had four titles. To some he was Monsignor, to others Canon and especially  to his family and his fellow priests he was Fr Paddy or Paddy. Let me refer to him as Fr Paddy, because I think that is what he would want. He served this diocese under five bishops for almost three quarters of a century. Ordained a priest in 1949, he spent almost one year with Bishop Naughton, before he died in February 1950. His first five years of priesthood were spent in London, in the diocese of Southwark, in Woolwich, Dartford and Stockwell. He then returned to Ballina, where he worked in this parish for thirty-three years, before his last appointment as PP in Crossmolina.

My pen picture of Fr Paddy is that of a caring priest, a gifted musician, a cultured man and a wise counsellor. The caring priest was good with everyone and particularly good with young people in his early years in this parish. His gentle manner, fatherly presence and noteworthy absence of longwindedness instilled a confidence and respect in young people which was truly exceptional. Fr. Paddy never either talked at young people or looked down on them.   In particular, his work with the Boy Scouts and the Boxing Club won him the admiration and respect of many of the sons of this town.

The gifted musician is probably one of his best known attributes. Fr. Brendan Hoban, in his book Kilmoremoy Parish, notes that from 1915 to 1987, only two men, J.S. Corley and Monsignor, were Directors of the Cathedral Choir. Between them they served as organist/directors for over seventy years and they built a steady reputation for excellence in the Cathedral choir. They laid the foundation for a great tradition which has, happily, continued to this day.

Fr Paddy’s musical ability was recognised while he was a still student in Maynooth; when he was appointed to the prestigious position of College Organist.  It was further developed during his years in London, where he not only went to great musical events like the Proms but furthered his education by attending the London School of Music.  Back in Ballina he became deeply involved in music in the Cathedral and in the community.  Writing in 1977 to mark the 21st anniversary of the Music Club he wrote: “in regard to music everybody agrees about one thing; you can’t learn anything about it unless you listen to it.  I suppose it was this fact that led to the formation of a Gramophone Society in Ballina in the 1950s.” Then he went on to say; “The present Music Club as founded under the name of the Ballina Gramophone Society brought many famous Artists to the town: people like Charles Lynch, Bernadette Greevy, Los Angeles Brass Quintet, Allegri String Quartet, Irish National Opera, New Irish Chamber Orchestra, John O’Connor and the list goes on and on to other names that keep appearing, Veronica McSweeney, Frank Patterson, Eily O’Grady, the Belgian Boys Choir and so on.” In a real sense he made this town a centre for music culture. But the lasting monument to his work as a musician is the Cathedral Choir which we enjoy and which continues the long tradition of excellence he inspired.

His artistic side revealed itself in the building of St. Patrick’s Church and the renovation of this Cathedral to bring it in line with the liturgical insights of Vatican II. St. Patrick’s is the monument to his personal taste. He commissioned local artists to do some of the work;  Mona Curry, friend, neighbour and four months older than him, happily still with us, designed the four large stained-glass windows which stand out so much nowadays at night with the new lighting; Anne Fitzgerald, a Limerick artist was commissioned to paint the Stations of the Cross.  Liscannor Stone, Dublin Granite, and a noted Silversmith, were all commissioned by him to enhance the church and in many ways, they reflect his personal taste.

The wise counsellor is also one of his most noteworthy attributes. Someone said to me recently, when talking about him “He’d tell you nothing. He is like a member of a secret society”. It was his trusted ability to be confidential that won him many friends and allowed him to be a confidant who supported many people. In modern jargon, his counselling methods were non-judgmental.  Bishop Finnegan appointed him his Vicar General and he depended greatly on him for advice and support.  I know that his wise counsel guided the bishop along paths he might not otherwise have taken.  If he were alive, I know that he would want me to acknowledge this.

I also know that the priests of the diocese, living and dead, would want me to acknowledge their delight and pride in having Paddy as a colleague, a brother priest, and a standard-bearer for priesthood.  When many priests nowadays feel greatly challenged by the changed circumstances in which we minister, Paddy continued to sail calmy in a turbulent sea, understated in his accomplishments, hopeful in his outlook and supportive in his friendships; trusting God at all times.

Thankfully, recognition of him and his work came to him while he could still enjoy it. In 2013 Ballina Town Council gave a Civic Reception for him, an honour not given to many. Pope St John Paul II appointed him a Monsignor and Pope Francis gave him the honour Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his ordination and later, the Bene Merenti, together with Una Loftus and Regina Deasy, for his work with the Cathedral Choir.

To me, he embodied all that is best in priesthood; a man of faith, a man of the people, cultured and civilised, a wise counsellor, a loving and loved pastor; a man of whom many could say of him, with fondness and gratitude, to the end of his days; ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the way and explained the scriptures to us’.

Fr Paddy, rest in peace.