

MY PRIESTLY JOURNEY

By Father John Donworth

The year was 1967. I was a student at St Munchin's College, Corbally, Limerick. It was my final year, and I would sit my Leaving Certificate examination in June. A priest called to our classroom to talk about life in the priesthood. He was from Limerick, but he had spent a number of years as a priest in New York City and New Jersey. After his presentation, he asked to speak to me. I was somewhat puzzled as I had not yet expressed an interest in becoming a priest. He asked if I would be interested in studying for the priesthood for the Diocese of Paterson, New Jersey. I was not sure where New Jersey was in America, and I said I would have to think about it. Later, I said I would "give it a try".

Later that summer, on the evening news on TV, there was a report of racial riots in Paterson, New Jersey, the very place where I said I would serve after studying for the priesthood. The scenes on TV were far from inviting; they looked terrifying – violence, crowds marching and cars burning. My heart sank, and I wondered about what I had signed up for.

Sure enough, in September 1967, I set off from Limerick by train to Carlow where I would study for the priesthood. Fifty-six students from all over Ireland entered St Patrick's College that September; some northern accents were difficult to understand. The regime in the college was harsh, and the Dean was a bit like Hitler. He greeted the new students in the following manner: "Gentleman, these are the rules of the college, and if you don't like them and follow them, the gates of the college are always open so you can leave." What an unfriendly introduction and we were about to give our whole lives to the Church! The living conditions were basic. We were each assigned a cubicle in a dormitory where there was just a bed. Each morning, we got up very early and had to go to a washroom to shave in cold water – we washed our faces in silence.

I remember, after spending about two months in the college, thinking to myself and wondering how much longer I could endure the regime. Our every move was monitored by the same Dean, and every word out of our mouths was analysed for proper diction – few of us pronounced our "THs" correctly. He would say, "Gentlemen, open your mouths wide, lift your chests, breathe in deeply and spit

out your words correctly”. After about a week of total confinement in the college, we were allowed out for a walk in groups of two or three on Sunday afternoons. On that first Sunday, it was pouring rain. Three of us decided – rain or no rain – we needed to get outside. No sooner had we taken a few steps when we heard the Dean’s loud voice resonating, “Where on earth are you gentlemen going in this weather, if you get sick, you are no use to God or man”. So, we had to go back inside and wait for another opportunity to escape the torture chamber.

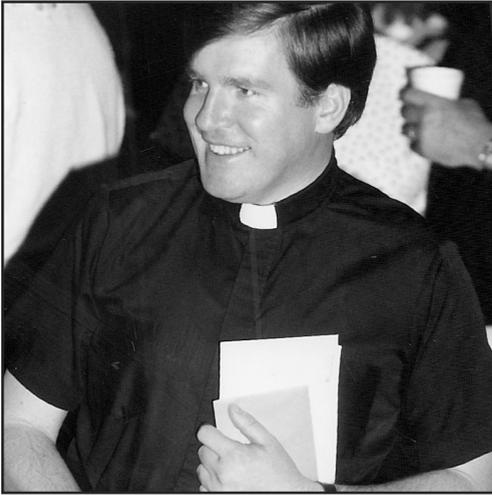
In the middle of all this oppression, steam needed to be released. The college students had a long tradition of throwing buckets of cold water out a top window on unsuspecting new students and even on the professors. On one occasion, we all got drenched and had to remain in our black soutanes for the day as we did not have replacements. Our class was not amused by these antics and vowed to end this tradition – and we did.

So, the years passed quickly, and my class was assigned a different pastoral activity each year. First-year students visited the poor in their homes, second-year students visited the sick in the hospitals and those from third-year class and more senior classes taught religion in the local schools. My first religion class was in the CBS, and there were fifty-four boys in the class. This was a lively class, and the teacher was a Mr Darcy, who would walk up and down the corridor as I taught his class. He would say, “If you need any help, just call me”.

I was just about twenty years old at the time when, one day, I was in the middle of teaching, and a terrible stench reached my nostrils. At first, I thought that one of the boys had an accident of nature, but then I realised that one of them had let off a stink bomb – a small vial crushed underfoot. I left the classroom immediately and informed Mr Darcy as to what had happened. He said very calmly, “I will fix them”. He didn’t say another word, but he went back into the classroom and locked all the windows and closed the door. He said to me that he would let them suffer the stench of their own making. After some time, I returned to the classroom and informed the students thus, “I do not get paid to come here, and if this kind of thing ever happens again, I will not be returning”. They didn’t know, of course, that I didn’t have any choice in the matter.

The next time I came into the classroom, I hung up my overcoat in the corner of the room, and I noticed one of the boys putting something into my pocket. I later discovered a letter of apology for his behaviour and saying it would never happen again. It turned out to be a great class.

Every religion class ended with a quiz, half on religion and half on current affairs. There would be a prize at the end of the year for the best pupil. The excitement in the classroom was unreal during the quizzes; I was afraid we would disturb the bishop who lived across the street from the school.



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Before I left Carlow to set off for America, four of the said boys called to the college to see me. They told me they all wanted to be priests. I said they were too young to be making decisions like that, and I advised them to think about it again when they reached eighteen years. Years later, I was approached by one of those boys, who was a youth worker in County Clare. He recognised me immediately and told me the story of the four boys, all of whom went on to

study for the priesthood. Three of them were ordained, while he dropped out in the seminary. I was flabbergasted as I had never heard of what had become of them. It was a complete surprise and a pleasant one at that.

The Dean finally got to me. I sat in the middle of the lecture room, and when he asked a question of the class, it was nearly always directed to me. He couldn't remember my name. "Mr Ledwith, or whatever is your name" was his opening remark. I paid a visit to his room one evening and complained that he was making my life a misery. He assured me by saying, "This will not happen again", and thankfully he kept his word.

After my third year, I continued to teach in the local secondary schools – one class of all girls and the other all boys. Thankfully, I never had any trouble with them.

At the start of my final year in Carlow, my mother died of cancer. It was a heavy blow as I had already lost my best friend in a farm accident a few months before. Planning for an ordination in the midst of grief was very difficult; the death of my mother threw a dark cloud over my ordination.

A few months later, I headed off to New Jersey to minister in the Diocese of Paterson. I arrived there in the middle of August and was met at the airport by another Irish priest. At first the diocese did not know what to do with me. They had already twenty-four men for ordination and were unaware of another one coming from Ireland. I stayed with a lovely American priest, who was more Irish than myself. He spent every summer in Ireland, driving around visiting friends. His housekeeper was from Dungarvan. His parish was new – he was the founding pastor – and everything was very modern including the rectory and the church. His parish comprised of a very well-off area; the avenue beside the church was labelled "Millionaire Avenue". The people dressed very well for church, and it was

more like a fashion parade. Even the men looked like male models with their white pants, white shoes and bright coloured jackets and shirts.

Shortly after I arrived there, the pastor received a phone call from the bishop, “Frank I want to see you and that Irish priest down here in half an hour”. I could hear Frank responding, “Your lordship you cannot be serious, even if I left immediately, it would take me an hour to get there”. So, the bishop agreed that the hour was needed.

When we arrived at the diocesan office called the “Bishop’s Office”, we were summoned into a large dark room upstairs where the “personnel board” was meeting. The bishop sat at the top of the table and about fifteen priests sat all around it. It was the most intimidating introduction to a new diocese. The bishop spoke briefly about his recent visit to Ireland, and of how he caused great excitement when he booked a room in a hotel in Kerry. The staff thought it was going to be “Bishop Eamon” as they shared the same surname. Then suddenly, he changed the topic and asked me what kind of parish I would like. I told him I grew up in a rural part of Ireland and felt I would be more at home in a rural setting. I had just passed through the City of Paterson to get to the bishop’s office, and it didn’t look good.

When I came out of the meeting, my American priest friend told me that I had made a terrible mistake. Apparently, when the bishop asked me what kind of parish I would like, I should have said, “Any parish your Lordship wishes to send me”. I asked my friend if that was the case, why the bishop bothered to ask my opinion?

Thankfully, I was assigned to an excellent parish in Chatham, New Jersey, where everything looked beautiful. All properties were well kept, and all gardens were neatly manicured. The pastor was 72 when I arrived. The other priest was also Irish. There was no adjusting period, and I was thrown into the deep end immediately. I had to follow the pattern of ministry whereby one of the three priests preached at all masses over the weekend. Of course, it had to be me on my first weekend. I wrote out my homily and delivered it in the best manner that I could. The Gospel was the story about storing up treasures for the next life and condemning the storing of treasures for ourselves here on earth. There wasn’t a sound as I delivered the Gospel message. I had condemned a sizeable part of the congregation, who worked on Wall Street, Manhattan, for storing up treasures and for not following the values of the Gospel.

After Mass, there was a reception in the basement of the chapel to welcome the new priest – me. Some expressed their irritation at the content of my homily, but I did not back down. The message of the Gospel is what I preach, and that is that. It was a shaky start, but, thankfully, it only got better.

As the youngest priest, it was my duty to organise all activities for the youth of the parish as well as performing regular parish duties. I had to arrange religious instruction for those not attending Catholic School. Firstly, I had to recruit volunteers to help me and then devise a suitable programme of instruction. I called

a meeting of all the secondary school parents, and I presented the draft parish programme. They were all given the opportunity to input – adjustments were made – and those parents gave the revised programme their one hundred percent support. Most of the pupils attended weekly for instruction. Since I had never devised and introduced such a programme before, I thought this would be a regular activity in every parish. When I subsequently ministered in other parishes, that high level of interest and support for a programme of religious instruction was never repeated. I was blessed to have commenced my ministry in Chatham Parish.

Sadly, my stay there came to a sudden end as the pastor had reached 75 and had to retire. He continued to live in the house, and when his replacement arrived, I was asked to move to make room for him. It was a very difficult time for me as I was just settling into life in an American parish when I was uprooted. This was the beginning of a pattern of mobility that left me very unsettled; I was assigned to six different parishes over fourteen years. I got along well with all the people in each of those parishes, but sharing a home with other priests was very difficult owing to differences in personalities and lifestyles.

After fourteen years, I decided to return home to Ireland. Since 1987, I have served in four different parishes in Limerick City and County. The people of those parishes have been great to work with, but the climate for the Church has changed; many people no longer want to be involved in the Church. I see the signs of a whole generation who will have no connection to the Church, which sustained centuries of Irish people. This is a sad time for anyone who has ever loved the Church. It is a sorrowful time for me.

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