

For Whom The Bell Tolloed in 1957

by

This month marks the death of the Rev Francis Eugene O'Loughlin sixty years ago. He was the Parish Priest in Valleymount between 1928 and 1957. He is laid to rest in Glasnevin Cemetery and I was one of the altar boys who made the Latin responses at his graveside on that January day in 1957. That was my first visit to Glasnevin Cemetery. In fairly recent times, I found his grave. He is laid to rest in what appears to be a family plot. It is near the grave of Charles Stewart Parnell, a good Wicklow man. Glasnevin Cemetery has been revamped in recent years and especially for the 1916 Commemoration celebrations. It now boasts a Museum, a cafeteria, a shop, bathrooms, an information area and parking. The formal guided tour of several well known graves (including a chance to go inside Daniel O'Connell's burial vault) takes about 1 hour 20 mins and is very good value.

In the late 1940's, our family was living at Baltyboys (Eileen Pender's house). I was about 5 years old. One Sunday my father, Pa O'Brien, picked me up with the ease of a hand-pack, planted me on the crossbar of his bicycle and we headed off to Mass in Valleymount. I was not forewarned, had no instruction, just brought. Like most of the men, my father stayed close to the back of the church on the 'mens' side and he kept me beside him. I disliked my situation because I was too small to put my elbows on the armrest in front. I was low in the seat and when I knelt down, I felt like a curiosity in a cage. Out of sheer boredom, I looked all around me and, from my cage, I saw the men cling to the gallery steps like bats. I noticed a man (I later knew as Tom) finger his big rosary. It was so big, as Seamus Heaney later wrote, "you could tackle a donkey with it". Tom also had another set of beads, coloured red. My curiosity seemed to annoy another man, whom I later knew as Peter. He would point a reprimanding finger at me insisting I stay quiet and face forward. I did not even know I was at Mass. I remember standing up, sitting down and kneeling. I could also hear mumbled prayer and I know that I heard singing. I later discovered the Church choir who performed unaccompanied. Several years later the church organ was acquired. On that first day I was also aware of special unidentified noises coming from away up in the front.

It was probably about Mass number 3 that I observed something move up there in the front. My first 'moving' statue. Later I discovered the brightly coloured moving figure was the Mass celebrant, one Fr Francis E O'Loughlin, Parish Priest of Blackditches, then known as Valleymount or known to some of the older people as The Cross (or Crosslands), apparently the Penal settlement of the Arch Diocese, a punishment block. Fr O'Loughlin was incapacitated and was assisted from the Parochial House to the Church in a specially adapted push cart and he was helped to the left side altar by the Parish Clerk, Matt.

I never served Mass for Fr O'Loughlin. His Masses tended to be long, beginning with the reading of the long Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity. Then came the Latin Mass followed by the rest of the ceremony. Communion was not given out at first Mass but was distributed at the second Mass. Because of his incapacity, Fr O'Loughlin gave out the Eucharist one at a time. He turned his back on the altar and propped himself on the altar rail. Then, whilst holding the Ciborium on the rail with his left hand he proceeded to distribute the host with his right hand. On special days, like

Christmas day, Mission Sundays and Easter his procedure was tedious as, after giving Communion, he would proceed with the rest of the Mass including the long prayer, De Profundis. (Here I ask the question "was the De Profundis a special prayer for the victims of the Great Famine?"). Again, after the second Mass came the ceremony of Benediction. Second Masses were long, long ceremonies. During Fr O'Loughlin's time Parish affairs were run on Winter time throughout the whole year. So you could be late for 8 o'clock Mass in Blessington but if you hurried, it was possible to be in time for 8 o'clock Mass in Valleymount. He always engaged the Passionist priests from Mount Argus for the annual retreats in the parish. Within the sacristy, I was often in Fr O'Loughlin's presence but I was never in his company as he had his own Mass servers so I never had a conversation with him.

In those pre -Vatican days there were processions on special days of devotion, usually on Sundays. Ballyknocken Quarries Band play their music on these occasions. The processions wound from the Church up the road, right at Dymphna's house, back through the Parochial House grounds and back to the church. It was a short enough procession but, as the proceedings passed by the Parochial house, you could see the reverend PP watching through the window (looking for absentees perhaps).

I seem to remember that Fr O'Loughlin was born in Melbourne, Australia so he would have been a ripe good age, maybe 83/84 years at the time that I am writing about. I seem to remember that he was celebrating 50 years of his priesthood when Valleymount was switched on in 8th December 1952 (arrival of electricity). I am just putting that out there but am open to contradiction. Sometime around 1955 Fr O'Loughlin was ill and was absent from his ministry for a protracted period. Visiting priests covered for him at weekends and I served several of their Masses. During his absence, we were exhorted to pray for Fr O'Loughlin, pray for him and then pray some more and our passionate pleadings would be documented for posterity. So, each morning in school, our prayerfulness was recorded i.e. Rosaries, Masses, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Benedictions, evening Devotions. You name it, we did it. Some of our visits to the Blessed Sacrament might only have lasted 4 seconds. You see, numbers or bulk was important and so we stormed the Golden Gates. When Fr O'Loughlin resumed his duties the impressive file was presented to him. I presume that he read it from cover to cover. One particular Sunday he spoke his thanks to all for their supplication and in an emotional few sentences he told the congregation that "only for your devout prayers I would not be here this morning".

Well, he lived on for another few years and as 1956 drew to a close, we knew that he was rapidly going downhill and the end was nigh. We also knew that when he crossed the Great Divide that 'Matt' would ring the church bell. It was on a school day, as we raced out from school, that the church bell rang out the sad news that he had passed away. Preparations were made for his funeral and that is when I made my first visit to Glasnevin Cemetery in 1957. I was 12 years and 2 months old. In the cemetery, Fr O'Loughlin joined one million Dubliners and notables like C.S. Parnell, Daniel O'Connell, O'Donovan Rossa, Michael Collins and poor old Paddy Duignam from James Joyces' *Ulysses*. After the funeral we lads were taken for evening tea before heading for home sweet home.

Preparations began to clear the way for a new Parish Priest. Probably Archbishop Mc Quaid could have ordered some curate to take the position but, as it happened, a senior curate, based out in North County Dublin (Donabate, I think) took the Archbishop off the hook by taking the posting and, on a Saturday morning in the early spring of 1957, Rev. John Moynihan said his first mass in Valleymount chapel. I was his first Mass server. After the Mass, having established my name, he gave me a half crown. The era of the professional altarboy had arrived. Twenty five years ago I wrote my memories of Rev. John Moynihan and I sent a copy to Fr. Cantwell. My efforts may be in the Parish archives. I remember that it was published in the Parish Newsletter.

I do not know what politics if any Fr O'Loughlin followed but sometime, about the middle 1950's, there was an election in the air. I do not remember if it was local or national but word reached my

late mother's ear that De Valera himself would be attending an after Mass political rally. Now that was something that my mother could not miss. As a young woman she had joined the rally (bonfire) on Baltyboys Hill (a sort of Dinn Seanncas or Sacred Place) when Fianna Fail won the General Election in 1932. On that Sunday we waited for 'Messiah' Dev to appear. The 'bit parts' of the afternoon were played by local politicians. Eventually the Parochial house door opened and De Valera appeared. I am sure that he had just stepped away from a good Guinness stew and afters. His minders escorted him to the Election platform where he took the microphone but he did not mount the platform. His speech was very short. He then got into a large black motor car and sped away leaving the locals to finish off their 'woodbines', turn their trap carts, bicycles, Ford motors and their faces towards home where, I am sure, they dined on rabbit stew. If Fr O'Loughlin was a supporter of De Valera and Fianna Fail, I wonder what was his attitude to the big Poulaphouca reservoir that decimated his parish. Sean Lemass was Dev's right hand man and was enthusiastic for the Poulaphouca project.

I wonder if Fr O'Loughlin discussed the mid 1950's state of our economy. Things were bad locally, rural electrification was winding up and the quarries were shortly to close. The lure of post World War England was sucking away many of our young, thus decimating communities including our own. De Valera's frugality was not working. But we did display a prayer for our emigrants, a section which goes as follows:

Far away from all that is dear to them
And faced with the difficulties of a new life
They are often exposed to grave temptations
To the salvation of their souls.
Be thou, Our Lord, their guide along the way
A support in their labour
And a consolation in their sorrows.
Keep them loyal to their Faith, free from sin
And faithful to all their family ties.
Etc etc

Protestant England should not prevail, but send the money. Such was the desperation that, at one Sunday afternoon prayer service, Fr O'Loughlin had the congregation say t^he 'Prayer for our Emigrants' twice. Maybe the prayer worked in a roundabout way because the Dr Kenneth Whittaker/ Sean Lemass/programme of economic expansion was shortly introduced and resulted in more jobs, more confidence and the return of many of our emigrants.

Throughout the mid 1950's Vallemount GAA club and others had difficulty fielding a team but by the 1960's the club could put out two teams and won Junior and Intermediate Championships in 1963-1964. I was delighted to have been a team member on both occasions and a witness and beneficiary of the new modernising Ireland of the Lemass/ Whittaker era. In these rapidly changing times came Vatican Two. I feel Fr O'Loughlin would have found the changes too much too soon.

Fr O'Loughlin was attached to Rathmines Church at some stage before he came to Vallemount. He is credited with the rescue of the Blessed Sacrament when there was a fire in the church. People, including a relative of mine, went to him for cures for their ailments. I was told he had a relic of St Camillus de Lillis (Italian 1550-1614), patron saint of the sick. I have heard it said that it was Fr O'Loughlin who ministered to the pacifist, Francis Sheedy Skeffington who was murdered by British soldiers under Bowen Coldhurst (Coldstream Guards) in Rathmines Barracks in Easter Week 1916.

I revisited Fr O'Loughlin's grave recently. It is in St Brigid's site – B.H.19.5. His date of death is shown as 28th Jan 1957. The inscriptions on the monument show it to be a family grave, suggesting that his family members held positions of some importance within the social /political system of the

time. The Melbourne connection is also mentioned. Many people saw Fr O'Loughlin as a gentle, saintly man. A memorial altar to him was unveiled in Valleymount and later dedicated by the late Fr Patrick Mc Cabe, a curate in the parish at that time.