

Des Flynn reflects on his Confirmation Day

Indelible Marks and Ice-creams

Russian Tanks were advancing. They were now within two days of Berlin and were about to close the most shameful chapter in human history. But, that was another world. My own real world was quite big enough to occupy my mind. The winter had over-stayed. It had stretched its bitter claws across the early weeks of spring with the result that manure was late going out and crops were late in. All of a sudden Lagoon, on the northern slopes of the Glenfarne Valley, found itself basking in beautiful warm sunshine. Over in Kelly's haggard the cuckoo sang her first notes of the year. The hens flew down off the roost and waddled across our street fussing and cackling, garbled messages, to the woman of the house.

"The extra handful of corn wouldn't go astray, Mam....there's another good egg for you...Ah, you're welcome...don't mention it...it'll put the bone in your childer...save them from goin a liftin...keep body and soul together..."

The cackling was interrupted by the sun's heat that morning and, instead of finishing their processional psalms, they ran in little good-humoured sprints flapping their wings, shaking off the last shreds of winter.

I was ten and a half that very day and was making my Confirmation. It was my first day on a bus, first time to see Manorhamilton, our local town, and first opportunity to lay eyes on a Bishop - at a distance or close-up. Out of our house, Vincent and myself were being confirmed - at nightfall Teresa would be the only one left in the house who was not a "strong and perfect Christian". Fresh trims from Paddy, the barber, two new outfits - white shirts, short navy pants, socks and sandals! Neighbours who saw us that morning used every adjective in the book to compliment us on how well we looked:-

"Oh, Lord, them is the boys, and surely!" while another, in amazement, exclaimed "Now, for ya!

The path downhill through the fields to Johnny Mattha John's was firm and dry but was, in other respects, a veritable mine-field. Here and there my mother shouted timely warnings. Paddy John Mary's



out-liers. long-horned malefactors who couldn't be taught manners, had wantonly laid down a maze of "booby-claps" - one foot wrong and we would have three years more to wait for the Holy Ghost - either that or receive the seven gifts, bare-footed.

Two buses were to collect parents and children - (mothers and children, what am I talking about - if the manure was spread and the loy sharp a man wasn't likely to drop all and head for the town). Panic. Only one bus turned up. The busmen felt, that by the time the sick bus was restored to health, the Holy Ghost could have come and gone. Decision time:- First bus, confirmation children only. Second bus (if it became roadworthy) all others. (I should, here record the fact that the second bus was soon repaired and all hands were taken to the church on time). Mothers didn't like the emergency decision but they agreed that it made sense and contented themselves with detailed directions:-

"Sit quiet in your seat, now, until you land in town...no tomfoolery, let you, do you hear me?...nor fighting...it's not a circus you're going off to...and go straight from the bus to the chapel..."

This last piece of advice was directed most earnestly at my big brother. In his twelve years on the face of the earth he had made quarrelsome contact with every thorn bush and each yard of barbed wire in Glenfarne. L-shaped tear designs decorated every stitch he had to his name. But, as the journey from the bus-stop to the chapel was short and without obstruction, my mother, waiting for the sick bus, could be expected to let us go off, with an easy mind. Mothers, why do they worry so much about unlikely calamities!

We arrived in the town, with out rip, injury or stair, and set off with a hearty step on our two hun-

dred yard walk from the Button Factory to St. Clare's. You could scarcely imagine a course so free of obstacles. But, two circumstances converged - as if to prove the inevitability of the dogged persistence of fate. Vincent had long ago decided that his hands were to be conserved for scratching the upper regions of his body. Any itchiness from the hip down was to be serviced by the unaffected leg, the itch-free limb. The second circumstance was provided by the weather. Though this was only April 19th, the scorching sun was bringing the tar up through the tarmacadam. Fifty yards along this innocent stretch, Vincent's left knee itched. Yes, you guessed it. Trained to know its duty and do it, up came the right sandal, straight from the bubbling tar, and decorated, smeared, savaged his left leg from knee to ankle, sock and all - My mother was spared two hours of anguish and would not know until all was over that he had received two indelible marks on the one morning - the 'Archangel' mark being the more conspicuous!

You are not to suppose that, in remembering transport and tar, I have forgotten the Bishop. Not so. I remember the man well. Bishop of Kilmore. He was sometimes referred to as "Pride of Kilmore", a title bestowed in his absence, not as a reward for lofty and virtuous achievement, but rather by virtue of his name being 'Lyons'. (Between ourselves, there was the odd, scarred Daniel in his diocese sorely tempted to misspell the Bishop's name!) He erupted from the back of the church, robed, it seemed to me, in three or four sets of vestments:- gold-coloured chasuble, ribboned mitre, and a highly ornate crozier - I tell you, if a shepherd had the likes of it you could be sure sheep were going a middling good price! I had no way of figuring out what size he was inside, but, in yon vestments, he looked truly gigantic. I thought they were referring to his vital statistics when the priests, in procession, sang out

"Ecce sacerdos Magnus" - Behold a great priest. Didn't I nearly shout:

"He's that, surely" and would have joined in if I knew the rest of the words. I confess here and now that I had fears for my own safety when I saw the size of the man who was going to give me a stroke on the cheek (it was enough to give a body a stroke in the seat), but that part of the ceremony was yet to come. First, the Bishop must meet the teachers and then he must come down and ask us questions - the butterflies were beginning to flap inside us. And whatever composure we had gained was soon lost, was fractured, I could say, when we remarked how the teachers - grown men and women, some as old as the Bishop himself, and no ways shy when they were on home ground - were jittery and nervous parading up to meet him. What hope had we? If the all-knowing shudder, what fate awaits the ignorant?

When the last of the teachers had genuflected and kissed his ring, His Lordship stood up and, for a whole minute - it seemed ages to me - looked down at us, three hundred or so boys and girls, fresh faced and healthy looking specimens from the valleys of North Leitrim, the fringe of his sprawling diocese. There, he stood in silence and, isn't it a peculiar thing that silence, at the wrong time, is more disconcerting, more threatening, than a sudden rattle of thunder. What was going through his mind? What was he liable to do next? We wondered. We got scared. Who or what was he looking at? Wasn't it bad when we prayed, nearly! (The

bubbling tar had left its mark on a number of boys and also on two nieces of Rosie Pat Peters - however that happened. It occurred to me that the Bishop might have spotted some of them and sniffed the tell-tale trimmings of a secret society, a Left Leg Brigade, hell-bent on religious anarchy and civil disorder!). As we looked up at our Bishop all we knew about him was that he was a hearty believer in the principle "Early to bed...". He had done his bit to promote this principle too, by declaring it a mortal sin to have a shuffle or a dance in your own house, or to stand at the like, if it continued beyond twelve midnight. Moreover, if you offended in this respect, no ordinary priest had power to forgive you. Oh no! Murder, and the local priest could handle it, but one 'haymaker's jig' after twelve and you had to jig off forty eight miles to the Bishop for forgiveness. (I'll let you in on a wee secret; the hair might have stood on his dancing pastoral and it may have growled and snarled, but it lost its teeth before it had a chance to bite. Word got around that the priest down in Garrison - in a different diocese - would receive you with open arms - and so, you could go down and get absolution and white loaves the same evening - a double blessing in 1945)

Viewing us from above, the Bishop knew he was not facing a horde of pagans, for he had sent his religious examiner last week - an agent well qualified to sniff out, and quick to point the paw if he got the scent of heresy or ignorance. And he confessed himself well satisfied with our state of knowledge. But, naturally, Dr. Lyons was concerned. Here, before him, was a drove of free-range mountainy miscreants, who, for ten years or more, had been running 'in the short grass'. Before they headed into 'the long grass' he wanted to establish for himself, whose side they were on? Lyons' or lechery!

At long last the crozier moved and he moved after it down the aisle. Easy questions for a start, then some trick questions about Samson and Delilah, Naboth and Jezabel, flung at smart looking fellows from the town. I don't know, to this day, what a pantheist looks like. Does he develop bulging muscles and a belligerent scowl more so than the lad who believes in one God only? The Bishop, for whatever reason, got it into his head that he had stumbled on a registered pantheist when he confronted Joe Larry Frank. Poor Joe had broken a leg, falling off an ass, and had missed his own confirmation. At fifteen now, he was man - able and, I'm thinking, more interested in 'Woodbines' or 'Murray's Twist' than in monotheism. Joe made no bones about it and told His Lordship straight out that, in his belief, there was only one God. That was that, wouldn't you say, but because he stumbled trying to grapple with the Trinity, the Bishop thought he had him, that he had unearthed a scoundrel, a mountainy knave who believed in three gods - maybe forty three! - Dr. Lyons should have known well that, this mystery had baffled more nor the Larry Franks. Joe wasn't exactly bending under his load of religious knowledge. The few clods he had in the bottom of the creel were sound, but, he came ill-prepared for malicious scrutiny. Having led the five and failed to get his trick, he was no ways slow in figuring out that his wee drates wouldn't get him very far so he bogged himself into an adamant and vicious silence - which, in turn, goaded the Bishop into more stub-



born and irritable questionings.

"Is the Father God"? (very quietly).. "Is the Son God"?

Somehow, this sounded more like a threat than a question - and, as a final inflammatory blast, he demanded, aloud,

"Is the Holy Ghost God?"

We could see the back of Joe's neck getting dangerously red - a reliable barometer of smouldering ferocity. It was God did it, that day, if you ask me, that the Bishop was tied to time. You know Joe Larry Frank could have exploded handy enough, and brought mitre and crozier with him half ways to the fair green. I can tell you the Larry Franks cornered, weren't ones to stand on ceremony.

His Lordship was coming to my seat now. I could see enormous eyebrows and white hairs growing out of his nose and ears. Luck was on our side. All we had to do was tell him about Moses, and give out the Commandments. I got the ninth and, as luck will have it again, didn't he half trip on his alb at "...thy neighbour's wife" and forgot to ask me what 'coveit' meant. Now we were free and could listen in comfort as he moved to the seats behind us. Run-of-the-mill questions for two or three seats -

"Why is mortal sin so called?...when should we pray? What does St. Paul say of apostates...?"

Then, as he faced Corracloon and Kiltyclogher schools, he switched suddenly, almost viciously, to the ramifications of the sixth and ninth commandments. The switch at this juncture may have been entirely fortuitous. I, for one, was not aware that these outlying regions had blazed a trail in promiscuity -

"What is commanded by...? what else is commanded by...? What is forbidden by...? What else is forbidden by...? Is there anything else forbidden by...???" Do you know what; Had they been from Tyre and Sidon, the children would not have been harrowed with such thorny exactness.

I knew, without looking around, that he was coming now to a lad of John Tom The one Man's - oh, a top-per!; It was said he never went out but he brought the rabbit home, and often not one but two. I had met this lad a few times when I was 'going down across', and had him written down as one not overly keen on doctrine but well versed on smuggling. No more than myself he was on the simple side, and you might say he had a high-pitched voice. Honesty forces me to

admit that I didn't quite grasp the Bishop's question but I'd swear he asked Francy:

"Is there anything that is not forbidden by the sixth commandment?"

The high-pitched answer was heard from Buggaun to Gortinar.

"Nothing, only white loaves, me Lord".

Could it be that he didn't grasp the question so well, either. Some said after that Francy suspected the Bishop was a Customs man in disguise - 'twas well he didn't offer His Lordship a couple of rabbits just to be left alone...Troth, I'll swear you, nobody laughed but a burly looking curate beside the bishop, for some reason or another, took a sudden interest in his own shoes and smiled down at them, biting his lips.

Only a few seats left now, the investigations continued, following a certain pattern - quiet harmless questions and answers about patron saints, indulgences, and charity. Then, tumult! Loud and fractious cross-examination on heresy, adultery, poteen, fornication, damnation and all-night dances. A wee girl from Cornamon gave such details of St. Brigid and the butter you would swear she was there and took a bash at the churning - I'm thinking the butter would have melted middling quick in the mouth of the same wee girl. In the very last seat, sheltered by St. Philomena, Micky the Bawn's second lad, with hedge-hog hairstyle and beetroot jaw, denounced, in no uncertain terms, "theatrical representations and other amusements in which sacred things were ridiculed". He as much as said that no Bawn would stand for it and assured the bishop that any man, down his side, who was villain enough to try it on, wouldn't be much the better of it; he was no addition and he'd live to regret his rascality, so he would. Boys but John Patrick sent it home! Dr. Lyons asked, in admiration:

"Who teaches this boy?"

And it's my opinion that he walked with a lighter step back up to the altar. Truly, this was the spirit a Bishop wished to behold in his diocese. (As he bounced to the altar he reflected, with sullen satisfaction:- the whip had worked. The club had not been wielded in vain. Catholic Ireland had been rendered proof against the poisoned arrows of half baked artists and down at heel scribblers. Micky the Rope had sent them shuffling back, to shiver in their Godless caves!).

Maggie the Bawn was telling, after:

"Our John Patrick learned the Bishop, so he did", Maggie didn't understand too well what the whole thing was about, but John Patrick - no wonder the rascal got so worked-up - understood that it was all about one's laying down poison for stray dogs! (The Bawns had no sheep).

If there was confirmation after the questions, my memory, I'm afraid, has dropped its notes, but it must have been conducted in Latin. Aunt Annie asked me when I was taking my tea:

"And what name did you take, today, in confirmation?"

Between gulps, I announced that my new name was "Omnibus". And right enough, in learning to serve Mass, I had stumbled on an awkward fellow called "Omnibus Sanctis". It must be his name I was getting - either that or, in a rare moment of flippancy, the Bishop named me after a bus, indicating that I was apt to spend a lot of my time on the road.

After Confirmation my mother brought us into the town to have our photographs taken. Then, out with us to Aunt Annie's. On our way long the "New Line" we saw a group of teachers coming towards us on the far side of the street and, from this group Master Carr stepped across to us.

"You're not thinking of going home already Mrs. Flynn, are you?"

My mother explained that her sister lived beside the town in Skreeny.

"Well, hold on for one moment, please".

He disappeared into a shop and came out carrying two giant sixpenny ice-creams. That was my first ice-cream and, to this day, I can see it, feel it and taste it. I don't remember one word of the Bishop's half-hour sermon that day but I have never passed the "New Line" without remembering that perfect gentleman, who left his group of teachers to come and talk to us - Master Carr - and his two ice-creams. Wouldn't it make a body wonder, too, which of them gave me the confirmation!

That's it.

AWARD WINNERS



● Teresa and Brian Kennedy, whose guest house, "Glenview", at Aughoo, Ballinamore, won a Regional Award this year, receiving the award from Frank Logue, A.I.B., Ballinamore.

KILTYCLOGHER, NOT ALASKA!



● John Joe McMorrow, Dessie Ferguson, Raymond Evans and Mick Maguire in snow-covered forest near Kilty.