'Moladh go deo le Dia'

Kevin J O'Connell

Ah, Irish!

SEPTEMBER 2004 marked the twenty fifth anniversary of the Pope's visit to Ireland. References in the media to that historic occasion coupled with speculation about a possible papal revisit served to stir up memories of the visit for just about everyone, who lived through one of the most significant events in Irish history.

For me, it brought back memories, not only of Ireland's encounter with the Pope but also of my own personal experience of meeting him face to face.

The occasion was the 1984 meeting of the Technical Committee of the European Broadcasting Union. Most television viewers will be familiar with some of the fruits of the Union's activities, such as the Eurovision Song Contest, great sporting occasions like the Olympics, and the annual Mass on August 15th, the Feast of the Assumption, which is produced in a different country each year.

The Technical Committee meets annually, and its meetings are hosted on each occasion by one of its member broadcasting organisations. In 1984 the host was Vatican Radio, and the location was Vatican City.

Our meetings took place in the conference hall where the Pope presides over gatherings of the world's bishops. For those , who are familiar with the environs of St Peter's basilica, the hall in question is approached from St Peter's Square by exiting the Square between Bernini's columns on the left side, and entering Vatican City through the gates immediately to the left of the basilica. Entrance through these gates is controlled by members of the Swiss Guard, carrying their medieval halberds and dressed in those very striking uniforms, which were designed by Michelangelo.

The conference hall was situated to the left of the Nervi Hall, called after its designer, Pier Luigi Nervi, the renowned engineer and architect. This is where the Pope holds his public audiences when the weather is too wet to allow St Peter's Square to be used.

The Technical Committee meetings begin on a Monday, and involve a fairly tight schedule, as there is always a long agenda. If progress is good, and especially if the location is very interesting, the chairman may call a midweek break on Wednesday afternoon. On this occasion, many of the delegates had enquired about the possibility of a Papal reception for the assembled delegates, but were told that the Pope's schedule was too tight to allow him to fit us in. Imagine our delight when, as we broke for lunch on Wednesday, the chairman advised us to be back in good time, since the Pope had invited us to meet him that afternoon.

Our meeting with His Holiness took place in the Sala Clementina, named after Pope Clement VIII. It is a most impressive room, situated on the second floor of the Papal Suite. As with most such rooms in the Vatican, it is magnificently decorated with frescoes, in this instance by Giovanni and Cherubino Alberti and Paul Bril.

At the appointed time, we all took our seats, in number about five hundred, including all the delegate couples.

As we waited for the Pope's arrival, we were told by a Vatican official that the Holy Father had taken time out from his busy schedule to meet us, but busy as he was he had specified that he wished to greet each of us individually. Since there were so many of us, the official requested that we should not try to engage our host in conversation.

We were not waiting long until the Pope arrived. He was greeted and thanked officially on behalf of the EBU and the delegates by our Chairman, Carlo Terzani, who spoke in English. The Pope replied in English, saying how glad he was to meet the men and women, who controlled the functioning of such an influential medium as broadcasting.

He then went on to talk about the role of broadcasting in this Information Age, laying particular emphasis on the role which this powerful medium could play in bringing about a more peaceful and just society.

At the conclusion of his speech, he joined the delegates for a photograph, and then stood in front of the assembly to greet each one individually. Carlo Terzani stood beside him, performing what I judged to be an amazing feat of memory, for, without the aid of notes, he introduced each couple as they arrived in front of the Pope.

As Celine, my wife, and I waited in line, we agreed that it was a great pity that we had been asked not to engage our host in conversation, for the memory of his Irish visit was still very fresh in our minds. As we discussed our dilemma, we came to the conclusion that we would not be guilty of a breach of faith with that Vatican official if we were to say just one phrase to the Holy Father.

As we took our place in front of the Pope, he extended his hand as Carlo intoned 'Mr and Mrs O'Connell.' Immediately, we both spoke the phrase we had agreed on. 'Moladh go deo le Dia,' we said in unison.

For an instant he seemed nonplussed as he tried to grasp the significance of that phrase. Then his face lit up, as he recalled the first words in Irish, which he himself had spoken in the Phoenix Park, and which Father McGee had taught him.

He reached out with both his hands and gathered our four hands in his as he exclaimed with a huge grin -'Ah, Irish!'

It was over in an instant, but the memory of those few seconds will live with us forever.

We passed on in the queue, and were presented with a white Rosary by an assistant standing near the Pope. Indeed everyone, who was present on that occasion, received a similar Rosary. Russian communists, Japanese Shintos or Buddists, Jordanian Muslims, Greek Orthodox, our Protestant and Anglican friends from the BBC and ITV, all went away from the Sala Clementina with a white Rosary. Every time we look on ours we recall with great pleasure what was for us a unique moment in our lives.