



CNI

Comment - A Saint from Portora

The report of a service at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, honouring the life of Old Portoran and Jesuit, Fr John Sullivan, both inspired me and rattled my memory banks*. Clongowes and Portora schools participated in this service honouring a man who had been elevated to 'Venerable' - a saint in the making - by Pope Francis. As Archbishop Michael Jackson stated, Fr Sullivan spent half of his life as an Anglican and a layperson, and half as a Roman Catholic and a Jesuit priest.

I confess that it was not the religious aspect which first provoked the memories. There is something about the species which emerges from most all-male schools which retains the memories of encounters with other tribes on

sporting occasions. My own particular tribe from Inst played Clongowes with the oval ball and the matches were always toughly contested even in those less crunching times. I was not a rower and therefore avoided periodic defeats on the water by the crews from Enniskillen who had the Erne almost on their front door step.

Rather, Portora was one of the few schools against whom we played one day cricket with two innings as opposed to one. Perhaps when the opposition had to travel through Fivemiletown, Clogher and Augher to get to Dungannon to take the train to Belfast, they wanted to make the most of a day out to Osborne Park. One of their foremost alumnus, Samuel Beckett, after all, had a reputation at Portora as a cricketer long before well-warranted literary fame came his way.

My dreaming of pleasant summer days of school cricket evoked an insight obtained from some research I have been pursuing over the past three years, namely collating two rolls of

honour of men from Northern Ireland who served in the Royal Navy in the world wars. The rolls of honour of the grammar schools were an obvious primary source. Reading and researching the names of boarding schools like Portora, Dungannon and Armagh Royal Schoos and Campbell College, brought home to me in a most forceful way how these schools had drawn their pupils from an All-Ireland catchment area. A rector's son from Kilkenny at Campbell. Another Campbellian after naval service in WW2, was made deacon and returned to Cork. I think I had met his daughter at TCD.

I could readily recall more recent C of I bishops who came off Portora's episcopal conveyor belt. Yes there are the local lads like Michael, currently of Dublin, and one of his predecessors, Alan Buchanan. Then come the sons of southern rectors - Samuel Poyntz, Walton Empey and James Moore. And that is apart from a former staff member Donald Caird, an unmmmeasureable line of priests and the

current Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, David Chillingworth, born in Dublin and educated at Portora and Inst.

Somehow I feel that Ireland - both jurisdictions - is the poorer from this loss of mobility which promoted awareness of a wider scene and identity. Perhaps more importantly was the formation of friendships which were maintained into adult life and enabled communication across the border, sharing personal insights on the issues of the day. Such trust is not readily available in modern Ireland and the island's civic as well as ecclesiastical leadership is the poorer for it.

Fr John Sullivan as the son of an inter-church marriage brings his own message about Christian identity. Time was when the celebration of such a person by two denominations, never mind the two schools, would have been unthinkable; a total non-runner in more-divisive times. In a country where few families do not

have experience of an inter-church marriage, we might wish to ask why any church could have been permitted to formulate and attempt to impose such a patently unjust system. (Perhaps that perspective, or at least 'a hermeneutic of suspicion' could be employed to present current issues.)

At the very time when there are voices in the states in these islands which articulate their siren call for a diminution of spiritual values in schools, the ethos of both Clongowes and Portora represented and made manifest at this service should not be lightly evaluated or disregarded.

Apart from the memories of sports events long past, and the mutual badinage with my Old Portoran friends, my appraisal of that place is dominated by an experience when I was the raw curate-assistant in Dunmurry.

Jimmy, a naval architect and Old Portoran, who was a stalwart of the parish, died. I don't

know whether the order of service at Christ Church included the Portora hymn 'Abide with me'. There were quite an impressive number of Old Portorans present in the church at Jimmy's funeral service. They were readily identifiable by that gold and black tie with its distinctive Royal School crown and I have never, ever, heard again in a church, cathedral or wherever, their school hymn sung in the moving way I did that day. It was tangible.

And if perchance you don't know the link between the hymn and Portora, I simply advise you in the basic but profound words of my school motto - Quaerere verum!

Somehow I think it may be a while before Instonians will be able to present a candidate for recognition to the Pope.

Houston McKelvey

* See CNI News - yesterday, June 16

