

the story of this College. They tell us a story of what a well lived priesthood can do to a man. I think we owe them a lot. May they and other similar priests we have encountered be in our minds in these dark times. The dawn will come, the new day in the Irish Church will be different. I think it will be less stressful because it will be more humble. May the gentle priests we have known be our companions as we make our way to new uplands which have yet to be reached. May Maynooth always have gentle priests at its heart.

Perils of Celebration

Thomas O'Connor

The warmth of your welcome here this afternoon assures this speaker that he has nothing to fear but his own inadequacies. Despite their undoubted psychological interest, it is not his intention to dwell on these but, in fact, to eschew the narcissism of which the class of 1984 has been so often accused. In their defence I think I can honestly say that the charge has been largely undeserved for, while we were frequently self-absorbed, I don't think we ever, as a group, attained clinical narcissism, though to the un-informed the pathologies might have appeared similar. I suppose that if we suffered from any particular affliction it was pretension. Not, needless to say, the vulgar pretension of self-important posturing, of which there was such an abundance at the time, even in other, more challenged classes. Rather I think we suffered the peculiar pretension that entertained high expectations regarding what we were going to do with the rest of our lives.

Basically, I suppose, we thought we were going to make a difference. Looking back I can honestly say that this was not based on a coherent plan, nor shaped by a clear vision nor supported by a specific strategy. All we could agree on, for those were fractious times, was that making a difference was largely a question of

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avoiding the mistakes of our predecessors. Examples of which, Maynooth in the late seventies and early eighties, provided, in our perception anyway, numerous impressive and motivating examples.

In that context, we proposed to be different. To be new, challenging, innovative, daring, a little iconoclastic, funnier, better groomed, more fluent, more scriptural, more with it, on the ball, at the coal-face, up to the elbows, engaged in a non-matrimonial way, and so on. I can't say we self-consciously set out to be holy, though there were many admirably pious priests among us. However, there was a general consensus that piousness, of the hand-joining, tongue-extending, eye-batting, knee-jerking variety, was, by and large, *passé*. Most importantly we were going to be real, genuine and authentic. Yes, especially au-then-tic.

You will be unsurprised to learn that we failed; we failed to realise our founding pretension. Not immediately, not spectacularly, not completely, no generation gets off that lightly. But fail we did. Not because we were more *naïf* or feckless. Nor because the last twenty-five years, despite the strong temptation to believe so, were especially difficult or challenging. Not even because our pretension was more exposed to failure than any other.

No, we failed simply because we were fated to fail. Like so many great enterprises. Sabena, Swiss Air, Enron, Leeman Brothers, Woolworth's, General Motors, the weekly confession of devotion, New Labour, Anglo Irish Bank, the May altar and Fianna Fáil (?) Ours was a lesson in the humility that only reality can teach, learned ever so slowly over the past quarter century. That adolescent pretension of 1984, which preens ever so slightly for the carefully-crafted class-piece of the same year, now appears innocent, if not a little ridiculous. It's belied today, isn't it, by the incontrovertible evidence of your eyes and of our own. Here we are, the class of 1984, that Orwellian year, exposed recumbently among you today. Behold the ravages of time! The aging, complacent, inhibited, cowed, dishevelled, browbeaten, tongue-tied, uninspiring, otiose, un-engaging, mildly manic, sporadically paranoid class of 1984 salutes you. We no longer ask for whom the bell tolls: we merely wonder if it is the past quarter century that has made us thus or if our youthful delusion merely camouflaged an innate, pre-existing middle-age?

Tragically we've turned out much the same as any other class, give or take a few musical mega-stars and a rather good Old Fourths concert. How predictable! How cruel! How especially cruel because predictable! Those alterations wrought by those twenty-five years are as cruelly obvious on the body, poor forked creature as on the spirit, *animula vagula blandula*. The eternal

present of our youth and undefined prospects of our early adulthood have ceded to the middle-aged certainty of the future, a place currently home to our surviving aged parents.

More disconcerting, in my view, than either the physical decay or the spiritual erosion is the apprehension that there is actually nothing special about any of this. Turning out like everyone else isn't really such a big deal. It's a tragedy, of course. Growing old, becoming wise always are, but age and prudence enslave us all, so what can be so special about that? What has happened just is and, I suppose, all we can do is take stock and get on to the next thing, whatever that will be. So you have a demented parent or a prematurely departed sibling or a challenged niece or estranged friends? Par for the course. And didn't we all learn in St Finian's, long before our Maynooth apprenticeship, that the worst is not so long as we can say this is the worst. For God's sake let's spare ourselves the self-pity! There isn't enough angst to go around, to justify all the personal emergencies, precipitate all the spiritual crises, or indulge all the depressions. The only thing that's truly overwhelming about it all is its staggering banality. How time, that most just of judges, has levelled both the summits of achievement and the dunghills of failure, wearing them down to their essential fragility and insignificance. Which, because we live in unbelieving times, some will insist on confusing with futility and absurdity.

Fragility and insignificance, absurdity and futility: inappropriate preoccupations, you may object, for a day dedicated to august anniversaries. For events, you might continue, more fittingly celebrated with the pious platitudes, stained glass attitudes and consoling caresses of congratulation. Words of encouragement. Words to make us feel good about ourselves. Words to take home. To keep the ball pucked out, the show on the road, the truth at bay. But it, the truth I mean, continues to break through, perhaps because genuine commemoration, real remembering and authentic anniversary are finally about the true and the real, not only concerning who we were back then but also who we have become now and even who we may yet turn out to be. Shouldering rather than shunning the shadow side of our anniversary, we recognise in this occasion another opportunity to know ourselves.

Who were we really back then in the early 1980s? In the greater scheme of things it's not that long ago and yet getting back there is not as easy as we might assume. The past, you know, is not just another country where things are done differently; it is also an extremely difficult place to locate because, quite unlike the future, it never turns out the way you expect. The past is feral, perilous and unpredictable. Recalling it is an incredibly risky procedure.

No wonder we sift it and strain it through the mesh of memory. Indeed, as we attempt to recall our student years today we'll find that we've doctored them by excision and addition, by the introduction of new stresses or the suppression of original cadences. Strange isn't, when we remember, there isn't any standard, real, agreed past to go back to. Recalling takes us back to the remembered past, that's always erratic, protean and unstable. There seems to be no free-standing body of events existing on its own, outside the selective memories of the living and the equally selective records of the dead.

But what a powerful thing it is, the remembered past. For weal and for woe. Think on it! How on days like today our minds are invaded by certain iconic incidents. Moments that sum up, in an extraordinarily evocative way who we were, who we thought we were and even who we like to think now we were then. That constructed past of emblematic incidents is to a very great extent the past we celebrate on occasions like today. In company, after the meal, amidst the debris of broken bread and spilled wine, we replay scenes, rehearse dialogues, repeat stories worn smooth from retelling. Some of them, like a secular Benediction, so exquisitely precious that we refrain from repeating them too often for fear of trivialisation. Incidents that capture a classmate's very pith, perhaps, or the deserved come-uppance of a foe. An incident whose sheer physical comedy telescopes the years and, like a temporal eucharist, makes it happen for us, again. The present, momentarily overthrown by the past, the undercoat colours of our current preoccupations enlivened, upset even, questioned perhaps, by a vivid tide of memory. And they're only the yarns we're prepared to tell in company. There is the other store of stories that are less publicly rehearsed but no less personally iconic. Disappointments. Wounds. Failures. Humiliations. Still too desperate for words; too painful for partaking; too raw for resolution.

All carefully stored there, in behind the other incidents, in the cabinet of memory. All together constituting my past, your past, our past. Despite our differences, our individualities, creating something bigger than any one of us, a mood, a time, an era. The early 1980s. The more distant late 1950s. The positively paleolithic 1940s! The remembered past. We may choose, with moronic hubris, to dismiss it; or with manipulative condescension to patronize it; or with culpable gullibility to romanticize it. Still that remembered past haunts us, inhabits us, moves us. Sooner or later, no matter how good we get at forgetting, or rearranging or rose-tinting, it catches up with us. Not only as a sanction for what we did or failed to do. More significantly it catches up with us as an inquest into why we decided to do with our lives what we did.

And even more importantly as an enquiry into the reason why we continue to choose that life today. They always catch up with us, those reasons do. They are quite rightly the stuff of celebrations like this, because with the reflex of congratulation there is also the imperative of truth. Which we owe to ourselves for the sake of integrity, to others for the sake of honesty and ultimately and primarily to God, for the sake of fidelity.

All this can sound like hard work, particularly after a large meal. But real congratulation on its own is a hollow enough honour. Congratulations for what? Surviving twenty-five years? There was something to that when TB, bullying bishops, and sheer hardship sent many a clerical foot-soldier to an early grave. But TB, like deference, obedience and self deprecation, is not the killer it used to be. We might feel we deserve congratulation for achievement but only the pathologically needy can comfortably accept unearned well-wishing. Most of us suspect that there must be more to jubilees than that.

What is the more? To put the past right? To rejig the story? To achieve greater apparent coherence between who we were then and who we're supposed to be now? To supply missing authenticity? No. Memory doesn't work like that. It refuses to stay still long enough to permit even benevolent, well-intentioned tinkering. And it seems that the more unbearable the memory the more volatile, the more disruptive, the more undeniable the recall. The Famine. The Holocaust. The Gulag. Our industrial schools. They're beyond denial, manipulation, rose-tinting. No parliamentary enquiry, no Nuremberg trials, no Solzhenitsyn, no Ryan Report can make them not to have occurred, can prevent their continuing to happen in the terrible, exposed solitude of memory. They will help, of course, but they will never undo and they can never make up. Justice, like vengeance and therapy, has its limits.

And they will help, Ferns, Ryan, Dublin, Cloyne and all the others will, only if they are deployed with the humane vigilance born of the humble admission that this can happen still and, God forbid, can happen again. *Pace* Dr Fukuyama, there is no end to history. *Pace* Mr Ford, it is not bunk. If only! And *pace* our own reflexes of religious self-righteousness, neither the incarnation nor the descent of the Holy Spirit has suspended the laws of creation or cancelled the effects of the Fall. Presumption, pride and hubris will always be killers in our Church as elsewhere. This Church of ours is very much a work in progress. An ongoing, unfinished pilgrimage and all the more believable for being so. The Spirit has come, yes. But not to relieve us of our responsibilities: rather to responsibilize us for ourselves and our world.

Rather depressingly, closure is something of a delusion. Every

age, our own included, will have its own specific atrocities, its own ignored injustices, its own crimes crying to heaven for vengeance and for mercy. Our own small stores of experience have already taught us this. The wounds and the disappointments, like the joys and the laughter of our quarter or half centuries or more are beyond reach, in a different country, within us, but unattainably distant.

What are we left with? Well we're left with our humility, our smallness, with the broken shells of our pretensions. We sit on the ash heap with Job and we scratch. And that's not a bad legacy at all. Our awareness of the distance between the adolescent pretension and the current ambiguous reality is a precious thing. The acceptance that the tension between who we really are and what we appear to be, between what we say and what we actually do, is as old as ourselves, as our species, and will remain with us for the rest of our lives. No, that won't ever go away. It's the human stain. And yes, that overwhelming impression of unbridgeable distance seems to be permanent. The gulf between the adolescent pretension and the middle aged results, between our outer appearance and our inner reality, between the form of our ministry and its real substance, between its aspirational spirit and its experienced letter.

At this stage we are too experienced to expect that this tension will ever be successfully resolved; we are too wise to fear that this is culpably inconsistent; and we are too self-aware to see it as a flaw in others or in ourselves. All our life seems to be a play of epiphany and concealment, exposure and screening, masking and revelation. And it keeps us humble, doesn't it, this complex inner cabaret? It keeps us from ignoring our human stain and donning precociously the brilliant garments of moral adequacy and cultic superiority. Peeling off our masks to reveal the real masks underneath, we learn that the journey we thought ended on ordination day has, in fact, barely begun. And perhaps the only youthful quality we ought still to cling to is the childlike yearning to grow up. For the day when we will be who we long to be and what we seem to be will actually be who we really are. When pretension is no longer a default strategy and we finally own our brokenness because, thank God, it has already been so expensively owned by Christ.

On days like today it is appropriate to call all this to mind and to live with it. In honest acknowledgement of the fraud, the phoney and the hypocrite within us and in the modest, grateful hope of still incomplete redemption when others and ourselves will see us as we really are and not gag in revulsion. In the meantime we wait, that active, engaged, advent waiting. With self-

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mocking honesty, with un-heroic, light-hearted patience and with reality-anchored, scripture-screened hope. I suppose that authentic anniversaries remind us that taking the journey inward is not an occasional indulgence brought on by a retreat or a visit to the doctor but a frame of mind. One that keeps our feet on the ground without becoming too ponderous and preserves the yearning of youthful aspiration without its luxuriating into delusion. Like our first parents we acknowledge ourselves as fallen creatures in a fallen world, still as reluctant as they to shoulder the responsibilities of maturity yet drawn to do so by some deep, unfathomable prompting:

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They, hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

– Milton, 'Paradise Lost'