

HOMILY AT NOEL'S FUNERAL

St Teresa of Avila told her sisters that if they wanted to make progress in their life dedicated to prayer then they would have to show 'very determined determination.' We might say they would have to go for it and not be discouraged by obstacles. I think of Noel as someone who showed, 'very determined determination.' I think we all know that what Teresa said is true of life of prayer and there is evidence that Noel showed it in the events of his life. If it does not have too English connotations, he showed a bulldog spirit.

He was born to Patrick and Bridgid on 23th May 1925 in Garrencasey, Co. Tipperary and named Richard. He started school at Newcastle National School then onto Clonmel High School and finally to the Franciscan College at Multyfarnham. Writing when he was 20 he said, "Ever since my boyhood I have wished to be a Franciscan." To his great joy this became a reality when he was received into the novitiate of the Irish Province in Killarney in the religious name, Frater Harold. However after three months he was sent away. In a letter to his mother, the novice master assures her that it was not for any fault on Noel's part but he had a certain nervous and natural disposition that made him unsuitable for Franciscan life. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were dealing with great disappointment, it had all gone wrong and get they tell the story of salvation not understanding its meaning. Noel was made of stern stuff; he would not let his dream die. In a letter to the Provincial of the English Province he says he cannot understand this nervous disposition, "I cannot satisfy myself that I am unsuited for Franciscan life....it has been the ambition of my life for the last 6 or 7 years and never weakened." He had the grace to know what he wanted and that is a great grace as many struggle with doubts.

In his formation at Chilworth and East Bergholt he was an average (B) student but 'a splendid worker.' At East Bergholt the students lived in wreck of a building with a farm attached and so practical work was interrupted by studies. He was an average student but a determined one and he carried on study during his priestly work. What he concentrated on was fitting himself to be a minster of the Word. St Francis once sold a copy of the New Testament to help a poor woman. He said in justification that he knew that book. Noel showed his respect for scripture in a different way. His Jerusalem Bible was something to behold. It was a least twice the size of the usual edition because he had interleaved papers with his notes on to go with text; it was a working book. When the Church, as it were, reclaimed the scripture at the Vatican Council, giving us a wide selection of scripture in the Sunday and weekend readings, his study was in tune with what the Church wanted.

Noel showed his determination in his style of preaching. I am sure that a teacher of preaching would have suggested that he use more light and shade of tone, variation that would keep the listener's attention. Noel's style was a dogged monotone. However what gave his words life was the clarity of his thought, the ring of truth, humour and memorable images. He spoke of Christ as the man with the towel, ready and willing to do the most menial task for those that he loved. He was given the task of preaching missions and retreats from 1969 to 1975.

Noel's ministry in his early years of priesthood was in parishes in the inner city areas of Nottingham, Glasgow and Manchester; and the greatest of these three was Glasgow. He seemed to develop a sort of mutual love affair with the people of

Glasgow. I first caught up with Noel in Gorton, Manchester when I was on a summer placement. The Vatican Council had just happened and I remember going out with him to house groups that he had set up to do some teaching on the Council. He went out with his trusty charts and boards to explain *Lumen Gentium*, the Constitution on the Church. He explained with great enthusiasm how the Church wanted to place herself not as over and against the world but in the midst of the humanity as a light. The people seemed ready and open to his obvious belief in this way of being church.

Noel was a pleasant friar to have in community, getting conversation going with challenging remarks and getting real enjoyment out of the brothers even their foibles. He loved in a similar style to be among the people. I studied in the States for three years and he kindly visited my parents during that time. My mother wrote to me that 'that pugnacious priest' has been here again. When he was leaving she used to tell at the door to bless himself. On one occasion he found the holy water stoop dry. "This is as dry as the desert. It has not seen a drop of water for at least six months." She was mortified but recovered to drown him in Lourdes water. The Vatican Council spoke about the importance of devotions in the life of the people but somehow these were dropped in favour of an almost exclusive emphasis on the liturgy as 'the summit and source of the Church's prayer.' Well if you have a summit you also need foothills where people can express their sorrows, joys, their emotions in familiar words with gestures of faith and love. Noel promoted the Novena to St Anthony for this purpose and used it as an occasion to teach people their faith. He did it in style of popular preachers down through the church's history using jokes as light relief. "Has the bus to Athlone gone? Yes the bus for Athlone has gone. Has the bus to Galway gone? Yes the bus to Galway has gone." We don't have time to do a tour of Ireland but if you don't know what I am talking about then ask any of the clients of St Anthony. Music is used in the novena but Noel did not know much about that. One of the brethren said that he knew two tunes. One was "The Old Bog Road" and the other wasn't.

Noel served the Province and the Order as Provincial from 1975 -1984. He carried out General Visitations to Malta and South Africa. This gave him experience of the world wide Order at the time when in accord with the teaching of the Vatican Council, we were looking back to our origins. He attended an Extraordinary Chapter of the Order in Medellin in Columbia. This really fired him with enthusiasm and he went around the Province teaching how the poor evangelise us. They show us how we should be if we are to carry out our Christian vocation. As Provincial he said that he never lost a night's sleep over the many problems with friars and situations that he faced. Sometimes his determination and conviction about his vocation caused him to be insensitive to others who were struggling in this matter. This caused upset. Sometimes 'tough love' was what was needed and sometimes he got it wrong. What can you do?

He spent his last years in his beloved Glasgow. There is an interesting correspondence between Noel and Quentin the then Provincial. Noel had had a short sabbatical after which he expected a move. Quentin confirmed that he was to remain in Glasgow but Noel was not sure of his role. Was he to be full time on the parish or full time FMU director? If it was to be the latter, he would want to concentrate on the Novena with the clients of St Anthony who came from all over the Glasgow area. He would want to visit them and the people they were praying for

and also go the families of our missionaries working in South Africa. The FMU job carried with it the role of Secretary for Evangelisation. He would like to foster good relations between the Christian churches and make contact with the mosque that is in this parish. He showed that missionary spirit that should be the mark of our fraternities. Quentin in reply said he wanted the fraternity to sort out Noel's question. In the canonical visitation I conducted last year, Noel had prepared three points for my attention. In the event he forgot third. The first was to say that the Province had never cracked the matter of community chapters. He agreed with what Quentin had said. As a fraternity we should be able to get an understanding of the place where we are and minister according to the needs of the people and our ability to meet those needs. He thought that this would cut out any underemployment among the friars. Secondly as a Province we should help the friars to use retirement and old age positively. He was determined not to give up on the mission that went with his vocation.

An unwelcome phase of our Christian vocation is illness and old age. We as a Province owe a debt of gratitude to the Franciscan Minoresses and the nurses and carers at St Francis Home, in Govan. He got better after he went there and loved to visit the friary on a Tuesday to see the clients of St Anthony and to stir them up in the Mission Office. Alec and John were his faithful helpers in these visits and on coming into the Friary he was announced, "Make way for the Duke of Govan."

Last Monday just as Eddie was about to start Mass in his room at St Francis, his mouth dropped open and he was gone. He did not need to be determined anymore. He met an even more determined Saviour. May he rest in peace.