

Fr James Conway SDB

Funeral Homily

14/04/1921 – 9/7/2005

Finally brethren, whatever is true whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is lovely whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, let this be the argument of your thoughts. Whatever you learned and received, and heard and saw in me, do and the God of peace will be with you.

I'm delighted to have been asked by Fr Brian to say a few words by way of memorial for Fr Jim Conway, whom I first got to know at Thornleigh when I was a student there in 1969-70. James always was and always will be for me the perfect evocation of what it was to be a Christian gentleman. The passage from the Phillipians which we so often read in the liturgy of Don Bosco's Mass applies almost without modification to the James so many of us got to know and love over so many years.

Jim was born in Brewel Co Kildare in April 1921, in an Ireland going through one of the most turbulent periods in its modern history. After the Easter rising of 1916 and the heavy handed British attempts to put down what was regarded as a stab in the back for an Empire locked in a life and death struggle on the Western Front, Ireland finally emerged from the War of Independence with a disputed treaty that divided North and South and more significantly engaged the south in a fratricidal civil war between those who supported the Treaty with Britain and the consequent reluctant acceptance of the Free State and the rebels who rejected what it regarded as the false compromise over the province of Ulster.

In this turbulent and violent society, Jim was born. One of the few stories Jim told me of his childhood which relates to this background was the his father who had been a coachman for the local landlord, once spoke up against the hard men who wanted to burn out the big house. As a result, Jim's family were ostracised and isolated in a rural poverty that Jim's Mum seems to have found very difficult to bear. She had to become

effectively both Father and mother of the family and to cope with not just the loss of a secure job but also the social stigma of having supported the old Anglo-Irish ruling class.

If anything marked Jim's character by contrast it was his longing for peace and harmony and his abhorrence of division. Jim was a man who was made for peace and who suffered almost personally the pain of division.

James discovered his Salesian vocation as a result of the sterling promotion of Don Bosco and the Salesian life round Ireland undertaken by the famous Fr Ciantar who tirelessly travelled the length and breadth of Ireland showing the new Don Bosco film and enthusiastically promoting the new missionary college at Shrigley Park. Jim was a willing recruit and it was from Shrigley that he went to the novitiate at Beckford in August 1939, just before the outbreak of war, in the famous largest novitiate in the Province's history with 53 novices. Jim studied philosophy and theology and taught at Shrigley and finally at Blaisdon where he was ordained in 1950, the Holy Year.

His first appointment was to the staff of the Salesian College at Chertsey. James always said that he lost his heart to Chertsey and promised himself never to get attached to any place ever again. He lamented his leaving and took ages to settle to his new home at Thornleigh.

It's a bit like the famous incident of Don Bosco as a young boy when his pet blackbird died. He is supposed to have decided that he would never get attached to earthly things again – an impossible feat for a heart as loving as that of Don Bosco, so for James, always a sensitive and loving soul it was something he learned to live with and devote to so many youngsters who needed his love.

Jesus taught the disciples by putting a little child in the midst of them and saying "Unless you become like this little child you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven" and "Whoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name welcomes me." James both understood the call to spiritual childhood and even more realized the calling to welcome the little ones.

James spent thirty-two years of his priestly ministry at Thornleigh College Bolton. At times, it seemed, as if he had always been there. In his role as form teacher of 1 Beta, and later head of year one, he became an institution that welcomed, supported, encouraged and educated generations of youngsters who, tutored by James, grew up to read and love the poetry and literature he loved. James delighted in the well turned phrase, the poetic sparkle and the depth of feeling of poets and playwrights. He insisted on the highest standards of spelling, punctuation and expression. These

were for him the delicacy of a human sensitivity to approaching another person.

His other great love was his love for nature and his extraordinary knowledge of the birds, a hobby he always maintained that Fr Hall had initiated and encouraged, gave James and his pupils endless joy.

Esther tells the story of him encouraging her fearful self to come outside during the summer storms at home to look at the beauty of the lightening and thunder. With his wonderful cultured anglo-irish accent, he was irresistible. But of course he had a wicked and mischievous sense of humour.

When Esther's Mum once sent her to the Butchers to buy a piece of steak tender enough for a priest. Jim asked her what her instructions were and having heard them told her solemnly to ask the butcher for a piece of steak tender enough for a priest without teeth. His beautiful accent and mischievous sense of humour made him a popular preacher and a wonderful friend.

His sense of humour livened even his class discipline. Arriving a little late for a lesson he heard one of the class loudmouth.s calling someone else 'a septic toe-rag'. James entered and without raising his voice quelled the turbulent crowd by asking the culprit to bring in a fully illustrated septic toe-rag to the next day's class.

At Bolton at weekends he served as an assistant priest in the parish at Godlborne and in his testament specially asked to be remembered there. James' vocation as a priest and particularly as a confessor was a fundamental aspect of his Christian life. He always welcomed his penitents warmly and always managed to make them feel as if he appreciated and understood their difficulties and problems. James' understanding of the human condition and his unfailing gentleness made the superiors think that this was a man as Chaucer said 'to been an abbot able'.

In his last five years at Bolton, James was asked to take on the unenviable task of being the Rector of Thorleigh at a time of turbulence and change. He found this a veritable crucifixion and the deaths of several of the confreres and especially of Fr Joe Fairclough on Christmas day left James feeling very low and burdened with guilt.

With his release from Rectorship after 5 years, James began a totally different stage of life. Having been almost Benedictine in his stability at Thornleigh for 32 years, he suddenly took up his 20 years of itinerant ministry. He ranged from Ushaw to Dublin, Glasgow, to Battersea helping with the student community but for Jim the highlight was to become the assistant

priest in a tiny country parish in Byermoor, Co Durham. Of all these Jim loved Byermoor best of all. The shepherd's crook which lies on his coffin was a precious token of his ministry there. While Fr Andrew Failey the parish priest was working for the bishops' conference in London, James shared the presbytery with Hild and Bede, Fr Andrew's two cats. In this ex-mining village Jim loved to spend each morning in the Primary school playground and his little parishioners returned his interest and his love. Even the other local children who didn't go to the Catholic school soon sought out this gentle priest who listened to them and showed them the wonders of nature.

James' last sustained period of ministry took place in Chertsey his first love where he spent from 1996 – 2003. Here once again his gentle humour and identification with the poor came to the fore.

One of the greatest of his devotees, of whom there were many among the women of the parish, was Mr Quigley the local tramp. Mr Quigley had been coming to the door looking of help for at least 25 years to my certain knowledge and he had an unfailing knack of annoying all and sundry. He would often arrive drunk and disorderly, and usually contrived to hold on to the bell on a Sunday afternoon just after lunch which was the only occasion when the confreres got a moment's peace and quiet. All of us suffered him and by turns fed him or turned him away. One confrere in a misguided attempt to put off Mr Quigley, once suggested that only Catholics should be coming for help to the priest's house door. I happened to be returning from a run when I witnessed with my own eyes and ears, Mr Quigley's reaction to this un-ecumenical approach to charity. While he threw his sandwiches against St Joseph's Hall he was heard to shout "Keep your 'effing' papist sandwiches".

James took a rather more constructive line. He asked Quigley one day why he didn't get social security and apparently Mr Quigley in his various troubles had no documents at all, not even a birth certificate, and hence he couldn't even begin to get any social security. James, bright to the last, suddenly decided to intervene and discovered that Quigley was born in Northern Ireland and James wrote a delightful missive to a couple of parish priests one of whom eventually replied with a baptismal certificate... ergo Mr Quigley is now often seen at Chertsey station, a proud owner of mobile home courtesy of gentleman Jim.

For James the triumphant moment for his latter years was the wonderful celebration the family held at the Church where he said his first mass in 1950 when he returned to Ireland after his ordination. His Jubilee mass

was a veritable triumph and accompanied by a piper, Fr James greeted all his family neighbours and friends. In a Ireland mercifully peaceful and prosperous and very different to the land of his birth James was fêted and welcomed back. He loved it and genuinely appreciated the time and trouble and all the love of his family that that celebration represented.

James suffered from progressive ill health over these last years and I've been with him at several death bed scenes.

It was my privilege a week last Saturday to join Fr Brian and Fr Gerry after James had been admitted to the local hospital here at Frimley. He had collapsed in the gardens of the college and been rescued by the caretaker and Fr Laurence Martin who prayed with him while he waited for the ambulance. He had a massive brain haemorrhage and I was praying at his bedside when he breathed his last at about Midnight on Saturday last. May he rest in peace.

Fr John Dickson SDB