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The FURROW

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Michael G. Olden

Celebrating
Ronan Drury

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We have to face the fact that there is sincere sadness in this beautiful chapel today. Of course, as always, the Liturgy will be very powerful and very beautiful. But still, each of us, who make up this large congregation, cannot shaft our personal sadness at the departure of a very special person, special I suppose, in different ways to different people. The silence at the centre, the lone coffin in our midst, creates a mood of memory which will remain with us when this day is well passed.

For Maynooth, it must have been sadly moving to witness on Saturday the entry for the last time of the body of Ronan Drury through the college gates and, yesterday evening, the entry into this great chapel which he loved and admired and in which he faithfully attended liturgy and services for so many years of his long life. It is a farewell visit on his way to join his parents and his sister Maureen in Mullagh, Co. Cavan. With heavy hearts, we wish him God speed.

At this Mass, we say thanks and goodbye on behalf of the many thousands of people, lay and cleric, whom over the years, he welcomed with that lovely open smile and expansive wave, as they entered St. Josephs Square or tapped on his door in long corridor. For so many of us Ronan and his welcome represented the Maynooth in which we had spent time, some of it happy, some of it perhaps unhappy, but his was the hand we wished to shake, his the voice and words we wished to hear when we returned for a brief visit. There was gladness in his welcome. Ronan was by no means narrowly or morbidly clerical, but he always did have a special welcome for the visiting priest who may have needed to tell his story to a listening ear and to spend time with a person who was happy to be a priest.

This well-known Chapel where a Pope has prayed, where

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bishops and priests have been ordained, where magnificent music and singing by renowned artists has taken place, creates memories in us all. The memories are not always as spiritual as we would wish. I share two personal memories this morning because Ronan is involved in both.

The first brings me back to early times when all Ordinations to Priesthood were conducted here. They took place every year in the month of June and the number of Ordinands was very large, sometimes reaching one hundred. The moving ceremony was nearly always conducted by the Archbishop of Dublin. In my early years on the staff, the Archbishop was always John Charles McQuaid. As a dean, it was my duty to assist him in the ceremony. The chapel was always packed to overflowing with members of families from all parts of Ireland. Each year, as the ceremony was about to begin, Ronan Drury kindly agreed to enter the great pulpit and conduct a quiet and gentle and welcome commentary on the great annual event. It was very helpful and by no means, intrusive. But clearly, the Archbishop did not approve. When Ronan began to speak the Archbishop would stop praying; he would almost glare at the pulpit and he would certainly glare at me. There would be a pause; Ronan would rattle on and the Archbishop would sigh and resume his prayers. After one such ceremony I met Ronan and I told him of the Archbishop's painful pause. I went further and shared with him a 'sinister ambition' I had of being dispatched to the pulpit and told to remove the commentator. Ronan was not the slightest bit troubled by my evil thought. 'I dare you' he laughingly said. 'I look forward to a dispute of words and blows and I will comment on them beautifully to the people of Ireland gathered in the chapel'. Thank God it never came to that. In subsequent years, the Archbishop and the commentator, like the great Mississippi river, 'kept rolling along'.

My second memory arises from a pleasant visit to the college by Julie Andrews, the actress (or Mary Poppins as she is still remembered). She was staying in Carton House, making a film. She expressed a wish to see the college buildings and grounds. Ronan agreed to show her around and he invited me to join him. She was absolutely thrilled with this chapel. As I was giving her a mini-lecture on the building, Ronan disappeared for a short while. When he returned he had a lovely little snuff box, very old and made of Irish silver. She was delighted to accept it as a present. When she was gone I asked Ronan what was the meaning of giving an old snuff box to such a lady. I shall always remember his interesting reply; 'Priests should always be giving and sharing. The giving and sharing should not simply be confined to Holy Communion or Holy Oil or a blessing. That little silver box may remind her of a

holy moment in her life and may be a great help to her'. He clearly meant what he said. It said a lot about him.

Right from its beginning, the Maynooth staff was always complex and sometimes difficult. When the college was small in 1796, just the size of Stoyte house, the language of the staff dining room was largely French. A small group spoke English and one member, Fr. Paul O'Brien, a native of Meath, but of the Diocese of Armagh, tried to encourage the speaking of Irish. Ronan always was intrigued by O'Brien, who tried to change people. He was also very admiring of Fr. Pádraig de Brún, a brilliant professor, scientist and literary figure who was here from 1913 to 1945. At dinner table, and at awkward meetings, de Brún (who had a brother a Cardinal), used to diffuse tension by rattling off witty poetry and especially sudden limericks. Ronan could identify easily with de Brún and his light heart.

To staff and students, Ronan was a happy priest who had the enviable gift of being able to laugh at himself. He was unsparing with his time and his talent. I met him one day as he was getting into his car with a heap of papers and notebooks. I asked him where he was going and what were all the papers about. 'I'm off to Mullingar, he said, to preach at Johnny McCormac's episcopal Ordination. The papers contain all I have ever written. I must sort them out on my way down'. I am sure he did, and I am sure it was effective.

An American priest was at lunch one day and happened to sit beside Ronan. The visitor seemed to think we were members of a religious order and he asked Ronan if we held a chapter of faults regularly? Ronan assured him that we have no such chapter but we have well organised personal methods of discerning and discovering faults, and of imposing well thought out penances on the culpable persons.

For Ronan, life was a kind of Chaucerian pilgrimage and there were plenty of stopping places for clever storytelling and the banter which flexed the spiritual and physical muscles of us all. He was indeed a welcome jewel at the heart of Maynooth. He will be sadly missed; he will be fondly remembered.

The Furrow, one of Maynooth's great assets, will miss him. I am confident, however, that its next editor will keep it alive and vibrant and helpful to laity and religious in the future. In his introduction to the Festschrift presented to Ronan Drury in 2014, his close and very good friend, Enda McDonagh, reminds us that 'for sixty four years, Ronan has been part of *The Furrow*'. Enda goes on 'an editor of a journal such as *The Furrow* is to some extent like the conductor of a symphony orchestra. He must have a sense of the whole symphony, of the individual instruments and their playing,

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and the capacity to integrate all this into a unified music experience. One significant difference for an editor of such journals is that their symphony is always unfinished and the editor is forced with the continuing task of combining integration with innovation'. This Ronan has done superbly and he has never missed a single issue since he became editor in 1977. We thank him, bless him, and we sincerely plead for his help in the future.

Someone has said: 'Old men go to meet death; death comes to young men'. Ronan Drury may have lived many years but one hesitates to call him old. The acute mind, the accurate observation, the quick sensitivity, the frequent pause for 'word play', all do not permit the use of the term old. But he went to meet death, armed with faith and grace, faith and grace that has built up in him over a lifetime of Christian living.

Death has been beckoning for some time, certainly for the past year, but Ronan put up a gentle but firm fight. 'Fight' is too strong a word because Ronan was not a fighting man. 'Gentle resistance' was more his style. However, death, as always, had to win and the great contest ended with dignity on Thursday last. We salute his many helpers, especially Maria Flood, who was so good and helpful in every way.

In chapter 34 of the Book of Deuteronomy, we read of Moses ascending Mount Nebo, across from Jericho. From the Mountain he looked into the promised land which was about to become the land of the chosen people whom he had led for many years. Moses was about to die but the writer tells us that 'his eye was not dim' - the latin translation has a beautiful ring to it, a ring which the late professor Tom Finan, supreme Latinist in this college, was alive to when he had it chiselled into the tombstone of Edward Kissane here in the college cemetery: '*Non Caligavit Oculus Eius*' - '*His eye was not dim*'.

Like Kissane, the fine scripture scholar, the Kerryman and charming person, Ronan Drury was a priest of deep Christian faith. He was more than that. He had what I like to call 'the surrounds of Christianity' to an evident and impressive degree. His faith was packaged, as all true religious faith should be, in civilised, cultured interests and behaviour. His courteous manner, his refined and gentle disposition, his interest in the arts and music, his careful choice of careful words, all formed the Christian surrounds of a very Christian man. He will be seriously missed in Maynooth and in Mullagh, by his family and friends, by *The Furrow* writers and readers. We are all bereaved. But we should thank God for the memories. Amen.