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# FURROW

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Paul Clayton-Lea

In Memoriam –  
Ronan Drury

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# In Memoriam – Ronan Drury

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In the year since his passing at a youthful 93, Fr. Ronan Drury has left a genuine and indelible void in the lives of his family, many friends and colleagues. His warm welcome from *The Furrow* office ‘den’ for visitors high and low, his intense interest in matters great and small throughout the dioceses of Ireland and above all his kind and hospitable nature to those who spent time in his company or met him on a daily basis, have left a notable vacuum in the corridors and cloisters of his beloved Maynooth as well as the hearts of his friends.

Shortly after his passing I was fortunate to come across a neat and meticulously handwritten notebook that he had kept for many years. It was obviously regularly perused. On the first and last pages he signs it ‘Thomas R. Drury.’ Within are found numerous and diverse excerpts from selected authors, saints, scholars and poets. Some like Hilaire Belloc – a firm favourite – were quoted frequently alongside Rupert Brooke, Shakespeare and O’Casey, Kavanagh, Wordsworth and Dickens, Helen Waddell, Ledwidge and Browning. There are also a host of lesser known or more obscure contributions along with a very few of his own thoughts and reflections. Some passages had been copied onto separate pieces of paper and then carefully glued onto the pages of the notebook. The entries all appear to date from the early to late 1940s when he was in his twenties and end at his ordination to the priesthood in 1949. What is particularly striking about this personal miscellany are their range and profundity and how apparent it becomes upon reading them of their influence upon him. It would not be a great exaggeration to claim that he came to embody their spirit. As we mark his first anniversary it seems therefore a suitable occasion to share some of those words which the master wordsmith clearly thought worthy of recording, for like the scribe himself there is a wisdom and a timelessness about them.

In a Maynooth classroom during the autumn of 1982 Fr. Ronan firmly and memorably instructed our first year homiletics group

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## THE FURROW

that we were not to “bore the pants off another generation of long suffering Irish Catholics.” He had a genuine, consistent and heartfelt empathy for the person in the pew and certainly could never have been accused of boring his classroom, audience or congregation and so it was unsurprising to discover this early, unattributed advice to the preacher among his notes; *‘One way to make a sermon short is to stop. Live things ought to stop when they have reached their term and they ought not to stop before that. However, if your sermon cannot be stopped any other way you must stunt it. Strike it by lightning; put a worm at the root of it. Anyway, get it stopped.’*

In similar vein he recorded G.K.Chesterton:

*‘Merely having an open mind is nothing. The object of opening the mind as of opening the mouth is to shut it again on something solid.’*

Most telling of all is his barbed quotation from the French philosopher Voltaire which underpinned his own ‘postage stamp’ philosophy of sermon writing:

*“The necessity of saying something, the perplexity of having nothing to say and a desire of being witty are thrice circumstances which alone are capable of making even the greatest writer ridiculous.”*

In his role as editor of *The Furrow* he employed a similar rule of thumb that less was more when it came to the written word or communicating the most elevated thoughts or complex topic. It was not a process of ‘dumbing down’ as it’s known but rather of economy of words and challenging the author or communicator to focus relentlessly on their main message, content or point. Over several pages in his notebook he reiterates the need for this clarity of thought and conciseness of expression. He summed it up in this excerpt from Rev. Neil Kevin (Professor of English at Maynooth College 1932-53):

*‘Two causes of imperfection in the expression of religious sentiment stand out. One is the overstraining of language, mistaking wordage for impressiveness; the other is remaining fossilized in expression.*

*To catch the mode of the day in speaking, to be neither quaint nor novel, to be familiar with current expressions but not addicted to them, to be not too ‘advanced’ in diction and not too stale....and then when we come to write, to reflect this*

*contemporary manner of speaking to just the right extent in our writing... that is the only way to excellence in the sphere of religious no less than of secular expression’.*

Much as he revelled in the world of ideas, books and the creative use of words he also intuitively understood their limitations and the dangers that they might pose for a priest who became, in the words of C.S. Lewis, so heavenly minded that they were no earthly use. He kept a very telling quotation in that regard from the pen of Robert Louis Stevenson:

*‘Books are good enough in their own way but they are a mighty bloodless substitute for life. It seems a pity to sit like the Lady of Shalott peering into a mirror with your back turned on all the glamour and bustle of reality. And if a man reads very hard, as the old anecdote reminds us, he will have little time for thought’.*

Hand in hand with his love of words was a lifelong attachment to Maynooth, its inhabitants and history, where he spent most of his long life and achieved such personal and professional fulfilment.

In 1945 on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the College’s foundation he reflected in words that might equally have been applied to himself in later times:

*‘After a century and half Maynooth is old but she is not showing her years. The stones of her buildings may betray the silent touches of time, but the spirit that inhabits the walls is always youthful. Perhaps it is fancy, but when the summer evening closes down and calls the glory from the grey stones, I like to think that the shadows of the past come back again to stroll around under the yew trees’.*

As it happened, one of our last walks together in 2017 was among those very yews in the college cemetery with its regiment of Celtic crosses and monuments, some dedicated to student seminarians whose graves were relatively new during his early times as a student. Perhaps it was one of those young men’s graves he had in mind when he quoted from a student in the 1940s whose words had clearly moved him and whom he described only as ‘a student friend on the death of a student’: *‘He came on loan from God, just for a few years, that we might profit by his example. And then when his time was up God called him back to Himself – and we are lonely’.*

Students loved his good-humoured readiness to engage with

## THE FURROW

them on their own level while at the same time always encouraging them to be their better selves. He eschewed the usually intense formality of Maynooth professor/student relationships yet never lost respectfulness from either side in the process. Unsurprisingly over the years he was invited to a legion of ordinations that brought him to every diocese if not every parish in the land. The excitement and fervour of such occasions are depicted in a poem by John D.Sheridan.

Entitled “The Priestin’ of Father John” it offers a hilarious and at times poignant account following an ordination. It is set in the new priest’s home parish where everyone claims ownership of the homecoming young Fr.John. Verse 3 reads:

*‘Oul Canon Dan, God bless him,  
Will be fussin’ fit to burst,  
And the women batin other  
To get his blessin’ first.  
But Canon or no Canon –  
And I’d say it to his face –  
For all his bits of purple  
He’ll take the second place.  
Sure even if the Bishop came  
Wi’ yon big mitre on  
He wouldn’t get the welcome  
That we’ll give to Fr.John’.*

The encouragement and support he offered newly ordained priests helps to explain the reluctance of so many former students to relegate Fr. Ronan to the past as they did almost all of their other tutors. No class reunion in Maynooth seemed complete without his presence and there were many aimable tussles about whose table he would grace during the Maynooth Union Dinner! His enjoyment of these friendly tugs of war was palpable.

A large part of his attraction for young people stemmed from his readiness to embrace change throughout his long life. He had no hankering after a ‘golden age’ of church or life itself but welcomed and usually encouraged the positive elements to be found in a changing church and world. This brief excerpt from a piece intriguingly entitled ‘Saints in a Hurry and Married’ by Rev. Neil Kevin was headed by Fr. Ronan with the words: *Putting back the Clock.*

*‘No doubt there is something wistful about this old metaphor,  
(putting back the clock), and chivalrous hearts beating in one  
cause or another have rallied from time to time in its defence;*

*but it remains a metaphor and a dream. The law of nature is forward for better or worse. No age will wear the clothes of a former age. However beautiful they be, they never seem to fit well’.*

A similar strain runs through another of his selected poems by Rudyard Kipling where we glimpse his appetite for life and openness to change.

*‘It’s like a book, I think, this bloomin’ world  
Which you can read and care for just so long,  
But presently you feel that you will die  
Unless you get the page you’re reading done,  
And turn another – likely not so good;  
But what you’re after is to turn them all’.*

All who knew him would agree that Fr. Drury was the epitome of courtesy in any company. His lifelong friend Dr. Enda McDonagh in ‘Performing the Word’ wrote: ‘Ronan is a natural or should I say gifted peacemaker. For those individuals, hurt and suffering, he can be a healing presence by word and silence’. He certainly had an almost unmatched record for his attendance at priest’s and other funerals.

In 35 years I never heard him utter a profanity or a crude or rude comment or remark about anyone. He delighted in praising those who offered him some small service or kindness and could be almost comically effusive when coaxing articles or book reviews for *The Furrow*, playing at times on the author’s vanity or throwing down the gauntlet to others whom he felt would respond positively to his carefully choreographed challenge. Sharp wit and gentle banter was his stock in trade. No one was perhaps less suited to the present age of social media ‘trolls’ or the contemporary trend in cruel commentary. Maybe a raised eyebrow or a twinkling in the eye that betrayed an imminent waspish comment but never anything as clumsy or brutal as harsh criticism or unkind judgement. His most quoted source was the Anglo-French Catholic writer, humanitarian and historian Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) who had written:

*‘Of Courtesy, it is much less than courage of heart or holiness, yet in my walks it seems to me that the grace of God is in Courtesy.’*

Yet if he was in essence a peacemaker and rarely took sides, Fr. Ronan was also unwavering about the importance of truth, something frequently and courageously reflected in his publication

## THE FURROW

of provocative articles or contributors, occasionally irritating some of those who held authority in the church. He may have been guided in that regard by a quote from St. Jerome whose words he placed boldly at the head of one page:

*'If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed'.*

In an all too rare personal reflection that revealed his sensitivity to the two world wars whose human cost had formed the backdrop to his childhood and youth, he drew comparisons between the writings of his favourite poets Rupert Brooke and Francis Ledwidge. The first brief quote of Ledwidge from 'The Lost Ones' is filled with the grief and pain of war:

*'But where are all the loves of long ago?  
O little twilight ship blown up the tide  
Where are the faces laughing in the glow  
Of morning years? The lost ones scattered wide?  
Give me your hand, O brother; let us go  
Crying about the dark for those who died.'*

In a lengthy reflection on the topic he concluded: *'In several ways Brooke and Ledwidge were similar. Both were harnessing the fires that had been making a riot of their young souls when death intervened. Both marched to the war and the deeper they went into the mire and blood of battle the more the poet in them wandered back to the sad, gay times of their beginning; to the wonder and beauty they had so briefly known – and that the soldier in them was bent on destroying'.* This personal reflection was followed by verses from Siegfried Sassoon which were written after Armistice was signed in 1918. Given that the entry was made during the final year of the Second World War it seems to have had a special, hope-filled meaning for the young Ronan and the war weary world of his youth and was entitled: *'Everyone Sang'*

*'Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted  
And beauty came like the setting sun.  
My heart was shaken with tears,  
And horror drifted away  
O but everyone was a bird; and the song was wordless.  
The singing will never be done'.*

Until he reached his nineties, when his longevity and energy seemed to impress even him, Fr. Ronan was not very keen to be

reminded of his birthday. This lack of enthusiasm in celebrating the passing of years, even as a young man, is evident in his choice of verse from the pen of T. Moore:

*'My birthday!! What a different sound  
that word had in my youthful ears,  
And now each time the day comes round,  
less and less white its mark appears.  
When first our scanty years are told  
It seems like pastime to grow old,  
But as youth counts the shining links  
That time around him binds so fast  
Pleased with the task, he little thinks,  
How hard that chain will press at last'.*

But such melancholy thoughts rarely lingered. His default position always seemed to be one of cheerfulness, even joy, in his priestly ministry and roles as editor, teacher, mentor and friend. His regular sojourns abroad for work or pleasure in the company of friends enhanced his natural 'joie de vivre' and love of his faith, exemplified by another quote from Belloc which he penned in large letters:

*'Where'er a Catholic sun doth shine  
There's always laughter and good red wine,  
At least I have always found it so  
Benedicamus Domino'.*

His gift of enjoyment of each day and each person – mindful before 'mindfulness' flowered – is found in words that he ascribed to – Little Thérèse of Lisieux:

*'My life is an instant, an hour which passes by,  
My life is a moment which flies and is away,  
Thou knowest, O my God, that to love Thee on this earth  
I only have today'.*

This inner joy stemmed from a certainty about the God he served and believed in as infinitely merciful, compassionate. It also revealed, in a piece taken from G.K. Chesterton and which he entitled 'The Joy of Jesus', a God who smiled:

*'I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality  
a thread that must be called shyness. There was something*



## THE FURROW

*that He hid from all men when he went up a mountain to pray. There was something that he covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth'.*

While no slouch in terms of theological or moral conceptualization, especially in relation to discussion of his editorial choices for publication in *The Furrow*, he had a great gift for translating the thoughts and writings of his more erudite contributors into accessible language for his students and congregations. He was in that sense very much a 'man of the people' and never ensconced in an ivory tower. In treating weighty thoughts with a light hand perhaps he took his cue from W.Lyon Phelps, another regular choice for the notebook:

*'The difficulty with many men is that they imagine their world of thought is the thought of the world'.*

He enjoyed engaging in whimsical and trivial conversation and in many ways perfected it so that the mild gossip which sometimes ensued became pure amusement with no hint of malice. He happily quoted Cardinal Manning on the topic:

*'Harmless gossips buzz on amiably, 'sicut chimariae bombitantes in vacua'; amiable buzzing creatures, the bluebottles of social life'.*

He was also adept at entertaining his friends with short, humorous verses and limericks to make a point or divert a heated discussion. One he recorded:

*'An Englishman thinks seated;  
A Frenchman standing;  
An American pacing;  
And an Irishman – afterwards!'*

Another he entitled 'Argument' by Mildred Weston:

*'Two stubborn beaks of equal strength  
Can stretch a worm to any length'.*

Yet another by Sydney Smith he used to tease his friends from the west of Ireland:

*'I think it was Jekyll who used to say that the farther he went West the more convinced he felt that the Wise men came from the East'.*

A personal favourite, based on my own and others experience of never being permitted to leave *The Furrow* office without a book for review, is an unattributed verse entitled 'Sez Me'

*'Far duller than people who don't read books  
And viler than those who burn them,  
Are the barefaced, smiling gentleman crooks  
Who borrow and don't return them'.*

Several saints are significantly referenced and one of the longest passages in his notebook dated 7/3/45 is St. Bernard of Clairvaux's exhortation on the Virgin Mary from which the following is taken:

*'In perils, in crises, in perplexities, think of Mary, call upon Mary. Let neither your mouth nor your heart cease to plead for her prayers, to ponder the example of her life. In her steps you cannot stray; invoking her you cannot despair; thinking of her you cannot err; clinging to her you cannot fall; under her protection you have no fear; with her guidance you never weary; with her assistance you reach your goal'.*

Of the places his absence is most keenly felt, his home parish of Mullagh is high on the list. His sixty-eight consecutive celebrations of Midnight Mass there at Christmas were a highpoint for him and for generations of parishioners. While his native diocese was Kilmore he explained his place in Meath through receiving his education in St. Finian's College, Mullingar where the scholarships were reputedly more generous than Kilmore. In an Irish Times obituary he was quoted as having teasingly told a former bishop of Kilmore 'You could have had me for a fiver'! During an interview for Northern Sound local radio three years ago he admitted: 'the whole midnight Mass has a strong emotional element for me. I can see their grandfathers look in the child's eye as they are coming up for communion. It is a very rich experience'.

As a young man perhaps it was Mullagh and his own early call to priesthood that he was thinking of when he entered this quote from George (A.E.) Russell:

*'A parish where you would find the people ready to cooperate and the young men walking poetry – it is a place perhaps where some very holy priest lived and worked and*

## THE FURROW

*died perhaps a hundred years ago; and though he is not remembered by name and he is gone into the silence of the past, his work endures and fructifies. We reap today what he sowed long ago'.*

The splendidly organised funeral liturgies in Maynooth and Mullagh with eulogies and tributes distinguished by their deep sincerity and appreciation of his vocation and his friendship will long linger in the memories of those present. Of all his notebook reflections on the topic of death perhaps the following, by W.E.Henley, says best what he himself would want to say about his leaving:

*'So be my passing;  
My task accomplished and the long day done  
My wages taken, and in my heart  
Some late lark singing –  
Let me be gathered to the quiet West,  
The sundown, splendid and serene – Death'.*

And while the following quote from one of his favourite sources did not figure among his notebook selections it seems nevertheless an apt conclusion for this brief essay written in very fond remembrance:

*'He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again'.*

(Hamlet -Act I, scene 2, line 186)

**A Rich Legacy.** Communicating the Second Vatican Council later became, in a sense, a postconciliar apostolate in which clergy and laity could all, at least theoretically, participate to some degree, even though it quickly became evident that the religious orders were, in this respect, much more adventurous than their colleagues in diocesan ministries. The work of people like Br. Paul SVD of Donamon with *The Word* comes to mind, together with that of the Columbans. And of course there was *The Furrow*, whose *lares et penates*, J.G. McGarry and Ronan Drury, probably did more to re-invigorate Irish public discourse about the challenges facing the Church in the world than many of those who had a more formal responsibility in that area.

- JOHN HORGAN, 'Communication and the Church: A Memory and a Meditation', *Performing the Word*, ed. Enda McDonagh (Dublin: Columba Press) p.47.