



A EUROPEAN PIONEER

FR TONY MULVEY CSSR

HAVING THE DISTINCTION OF BEING THE OLDEST REDEMPTORIST IN IRELAND, FR ANTHONY MULVEY WAS BORN THE SAME YEAR AS THE IRISH STATE. A NATIVE OF CO LEITRIM, HE HAS SPENT HIS LIFE AND PRIESTLY SERVICE IN SEVERAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES.

BY TRÍONA DOHERTY

Not far off his centenary, Fr Tony Mulvey CSSR has the distinction of being the oldest member of the Irish Redemptorists. A native of Ballinaglera, Co Leitrim, which means 'the town of the clerics', Fr Mulvey is currently a member of the Esker community. He took his first vows as a Redemptorist in September 1943. Since then, he has lived a fascinating life, with his ministry taking him all over Europe.

BEGINNINGS

Fr Tony's journey with the Redemptorists started some 84 years ago, when as a teenager he was impressed by a visiting mission to his home parish.

"I joined the Redemptorists in 1937, in the sense that I went to the college in Limerick, which was the juvenate, or preparatory college for boys wanting to join the congregation," he recalls.

"I was originally going to join the diocesan seminary; I was from the Diocese of Kilmore so it would have been St Patrick's in Cavan. But there was a Redemptorist mission in my parish and I was on the altar, and to make a long story short, they put before me the possibility of becoming a Redemptorist. So, I made the decision not to go to Cavan but to go to Limerick and thank God I never regretted that decision.

"I got a great education in Limerick in art and music. I went twice to the Prado, a famous art gallery of Madrid, and that's something I wouldn't have dreamt of doing

were it not for the training I got in Limerick. And I can spend hours now listening to good music; we had Beethoven's 5th Symphony nearly off by heart from hearing it."

EXPLORING EUROPE

Having completed his secondary education in the Redemptorist College in Limerick (now St Clement's), Tony entered the novitiate in



Fr Tony's ordination at Cluain Mhuire, Galway, August 26, 1951

Dundalk in 1942. He then moved on to study in Cluain Mhuire in Galway and was delighted to be given the opportunity to travel to Belgium as part of his studies. It was shortly after the war, and conditions were tough.

"There was a very old tradition between our two provinces, Belgium and Ireland, they used to come here to learn English. It had fallen through for some years, but we had a provincial, Fr Tracey, who thought we should keep our contact with the Continent," says Fr Tony.

"So, three of us students were appointed and we went to place called Beauplateau. It



The newly ordained Fr Mulvey

that is a very pleasant memory," he says.

Fr Tony returned to Galway to complete his studies and he was ordained a priest in August 1951. He recalls that the effects of the Second

World War were felt in Ireland during his student years: "It was tough, we were often hungry as students. We hadn't money to buy food. But we had a farm, with some cows, so we had our own milk, and potatoes and vegetables as well."

Later, in the 1960s, he had the opportunity to cross Berlin's 'Checkpoint Charlie' and visit East Germany: "It was very rare at that time. To get across Checkpoint Charlie you had to hand in your passport and then

there was a bus provided to do a tour of East Berlin. It was very austere, but I remember I thought it was more Christian than West Berlin."

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TEACHING AND LEARNING

After ordination, Fr Tony returned to Limerick to teach in the Redemptorist College. "In the beginning I found it difficult," he recalls, "but

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was way out in the wilds; you could say Esker here is metropolitan compared to what Beauplateau was like! We used to call it *Boue-plateau* – *boue* is the French for mud – you couldn't walk around the garden without getting mud everywhere."

Fr Tony spent a year in Belgium studying theology and traveling to some of the congregation's other houses of study throughout Europe.

"It was the best decision I ever made. It was good for me because I learned how different Europe is. I had a foothold in the Continent and as a result I visited many places all around Europe that I would never have seen if I was a secular priest. And



In August M. Rev. J. Rodgers, D.D., Coadjutor Bishop, Killaloe, raised six young Redemptorists to the Priesthood—(L.-R., seated): Rev. E. Cleary (Cloughjordan), A. Mulvey (Dowra), B. O'Boyle (Cootehill); (standing): Rev. S. Mahoney (Aughrim), S. Connolly (Ahascragh), J. Frizell (O'Brien's Bridge).



The beautiful city of Luxembourg



Église Saint-Alphonse, Rue des Capucins, Luxembourg

in the end I found it very pleasant, because I was learning myself. Any good teacher learns from their students. I was teaching French particularly and I had some very brilliant students.

"I was also very keen on Irish and we used to go to places where Irish was spoken. I went down to Kerry, near Dunquin, and to the Aran Islands and out towards Spiddal. Two of us took charge of a parish out in Carraroe, all in Irish. I am still very keen on the Irish language and I love to get a chance to speak it."

He went on to spend a year in the National Catechetical Centre at Mount Oliver near Dundalk. He regards it as a pivotal time in his spiritual journey.

"The Vatican Council took place 1962-5. Since we were busy teachers, we really had no chance of studying the documents. I felt I needed to do a revised course of theology. It was the best year of my life. I was turned inside out in Mount Oliver, and I regard that year as one of the most important in my spiritual and theological life," he says.

'A MARVELLOUS EXPERIENCE'

In 1973, Fr Tony was sent to Luxembourg to look after the Mass for the growing number

English-speakers who came to the city to work in the European Institutions of which Britain and Ireland were now part. Many others worked in the banks as the city was fast becoming one of the great European banking centres. He spent 12 years there. "I had... visited Luxembourg when in my student days in Belgium and I was very glad to get back to it. I had 25 nationalities in my section of the parish. A lot of people came to the English Mass in order to learn English." He also taught religion in the European school for children whose parents were working in the institutions.

Fr Tony has many a tale of the people he met there, including some key political figures: "I met Queen Elizabeth of England. She paid a State visit to Luxembourg when I was there. I remember another day taking a short cut under an archway, and who was coming through, in the back of a car, but the King and Queen of Spain – they were going to an official reception and taking a short cut too, with nobody to protect them. Luxembourg was regarded as a very safe place.

"I met a lot of politicians. The man who became president of Ireland, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, was my parishioner, and in fact the night before he left for Ireland, we prepared

his presidential speech together. He was very keen on Irish, and so I was often at his house and we were personal friends."

I would love to go back to [Rome], but as I grew older the heat was too much for me!

Fr Tony also got to know former Taoiseach Garrett Fitzgerald, whose brother Fergus worked in Luxembourg, and the Irish Ambassador Valentin Iremonger who was a recognised poet and writer.

AND THEN TO ROME

In 1987, having spent a year in St Gerard's Parish in Belfast on his return to Ireland, he was summoned to Rome to work as a translator in the Redemptorist general house. He would remain there for 24 years. He describes that time as "a marvellous experience". "I would love to go back to it, but as I grew older the heat was too much for me!" he laughs.

He quickly became used to living in the Eternal City: "You'd go on business, maybe to buy books at a bookshop near the Vatican,

and you wouldn't even bother your head to go into St Peter's. You were so used to it. It was like going from Marianella, the Redemptorist house in Dublin, to O'Connell Street.

"I used to walk as a rule, but there was a famous bus known as the 'robbers' bus', because if you were standing on it there were professional thieves would rob you. The only hope was to get a seat, you had some chance then. That's one of my memories, of the famous 16 bus to the Vatican."

He recalls meeting Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Ratzinger, and also got to know Cardinal Joseph Tobin CSsR when he was General Consultor in Rome in the 1990s.

After he returned from Rome, Fr Tony was stationed in Dundalk for a number of years, before moving to Esker in 2016, where he currently resides – though he's at pains to stress that he is not 'retired'. "There's no retirement for Redemptorists. The only place you retire is into the box when you're carried down to the cemetery!" he says.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Asked whether he is hopeful for the future of the Redemptorists, he admits the congregation is facing into tough times.

"For instance, when I was a young student the total numbers in one of our American provinces was 830. There's only about 125 now, and the number of these over 70 would frighten you. So, unless there's some change, we're facing a rough period in the congregation," he says.

However, he says he wouldn't change anything about his own decision to become a Redemptorist and argues there are signs of hope when we look at the global situation.

"I certainly would do it all again. Our vocation was particularly to be near to people, and to form friendships with the poor and work for the poor. The first advice I would give to any man joining today is the spiritual dimension: he has to pray about it. I had a great devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour before ever I knew the congregation.

"The Italians have a mission in Madagascar

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and there are a lot of students from Madagascar coming to Italy. We have tremendous vocations in Vietnam and Indonesia, and I think even our house in Paris is now staffed by Vietnamese Redemptorists."

Very much a 'European Redemptorist', Fr Tony is extremely well-travelled, having lived for long periods in several different communities. He also took advantage of the opportunities of travel on the continent. "Luxembourg was the most beautiful country and city, and I thought nothing of taking the train to Paris to our house there. I flew with Russian Airlines into Madrid and spent a while there. I visited Avila; St Alphonsus had

a tremendous devotion to St Teresa of Avila."

His only regret, he says, was having to return from Rome.

"I regret that I had to leave Rome due to the heat! I would have loved to stay there. I have always loved mixing with other nationalities and getting the history of their country. What's written on paper is hardly ever the truth, but when you get speaking to somebody from the country, they'll give you the real story." [®]

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