



THE QUALITY OF MERCY

As Governor of Mountjoy Prison John Loneran is one of Ireland's best known social commentators, and he has plenty to say about the power of forgiveness, hypocrisy in the church... and the thrills of Christmas

By John Scally

John Loneran joined the Irish prison service back in 1968 and has worked as the Governor of Dublin's Mountjoy Prison for 25 years now. But his heart still lies in Bansha, Co Tipperary, where he grew up, for it's there that his most nostalgic Christmas memories are founded.

"Like all children I loved Christmas and all its preparations," recalls John. "On Christmas morning we woke early, long before the first faint vestiges of light illuminated the frost on the hard ground. We rushed to see where Santa Claus had, hopefully, left our presents. Competition was intense as to who would be the first to make the discovery and shriek out, 'He came, he came!'"

"Santa's best present to me was a cap gun. I thought I was Roy Rogers. He always dropped his gifts in our Christmas sock, which of course was just an old sock. As we got older we started to wonder if a bigger sock would merit a bigger present, so we replaced the sock one year with a pillowcase. Sadly, the presents got no bigger.

"An exotic experience for us at Christmas was to receive an orange. I loved hearing the story of a young Mick O'Dwyer: oranges were scarce in wartime Waterville and one day when he was handed one, Mick assumed it was a football and gave it a kick down the road!"

"If we got a bottle of Cidona at Christmas we thought life didn't get any better. I believe happiness is linked to simplicity. The more complicated life gets the less happy people are because their expectations soar."

BRICK BY BRICK

There was one clerical figure who dominated the local landscape of John's childhood.

"Bansha, in Co Tipperary, was famous back in the 50s because Canon Hayes, who founded Muintir na Tire (a community self-help movement), lived there. He wasn't actually from Tipperary, he was from Limerick, but that wasn't his fault!"

"His philosophy was that you'd build a society brick by brick, from the bottom up. You'd put up with a lot if you had a balanced community, with young and old, rich and poor. It was taken for granted that the old were treated with respect and that the strong took care of the weak, regardless of age or social status. Those who marched to a different drum, and who to an outsider might be considered eccentric, were neither ridiculed nor feared but were accepted as just another face of the varied community. To be a member of that community was to be in touch with those in need, but, sadly, we're not in touch anymore."

Religion was part of the furniture of John Loneran's formative years. "I was an altar boy for seven years," he says. "The big perk was that you got two shillings for serving Mass for weddings and funerals. It was like winning the Lotto back then.

"Religion was a powerful influence for good and for bad. I often think of a saying attributed to Gandhi: he said he was impressed by your Christ but not by your Christians. I suppose for me, listening to and observing people, I think we're great at talking it but not great at living it."

SMASHED INTO SMITHEREENS

Loneragan remains a great believer in the philosophy of Christianity. So what has caused him to change his attitude towards the church? “When Pope John XXIII was cardinal in Venice, he was sitting down for supper one night when his secretary came in carrying the file of a priest who was in trouble. The assistant was very disdainful as he spoke about the priest who was having a bad time. Pope John pointed at his glass on the table and asked his secretary whom it belonged to. ‘You, your Eminence,’ replied the puzzled secretary. Then John picked up the glass and threw it on the ground where it smashed into smithereens. ‘Now, who owns it?’ he asked. ‘It’s still yours, your Eminence,’ replied the secretary. ‘No matter what the man did he’s still a priest,’ said John. It always struck me as a very forceful statement about his care for the broken person. Every day I meet priests and nuns – like Peter McVerry, to take one example – who show the same concern for broken people, but I fail to see that care in the church as an institution.”

Loneragan has specific examples to illustrate his argument. “If there’s any place in the world where you can practice your religion it’s in prison, because you’re dealing with people at the very bottom. I think of the woman who spent 26 days in a padded cell awaiting psychiatric care. I didn’t see any public reaction to that and the lack of response told me that the State, the church and the caring agencies, and all the rest, just didn’t care.

“Pope John Paul II, when addressing the Irish hierarchy in Dublin in 1979, said, ‘Among those most needing pastoral care from bishops are prisoners. My dear brothers, do not neglect to provide for their material conditions and their families. Have a special care for young offenders. So often their wayward lives are due more to society’s neglect than to their sinfulness. Detention should be a school of rehabilitation.’

“Thirty years on, the challenge has not changed. How are we going to care for those who are thought of as the least, the last and the lost?”

LACK OF COMPASSION

Loneragan uses the Bible to justify his position. “In the Old Testament people looked forward to a God ‘who would not cherish anger but would delight in showing mercy.’ We too must show mercy, especially as many of our women prisoners in particular are more sinned against than sinful. We’re a society that calls itself Christian but bays self-righteously for unending revenge on a member who steps out of line. The conflict, as I see it, is between a Christian community and the revenge culture. This is about people who, for whatever reason, have offended and the lack of compassion, understanding, support and forgiveness we show them.

“If we’re a Christian community and we believe in Christianity, we must believe in forgiveness. There’s no room in Christianity for revenge. I’ve been affronted by those

church leaders who’ve criticised what they see as lenient sentences for particular crimes because this sends a message of condemnation and ostracisation of ‘the sinner.’ Since the church has been on the receiving end of much criticism and condemnation over a variety of abuse cases a more tolerant attitude may prevail in the future.”

CONVICTED OF MURDER

He believes there are signs for hope as well as disappointment. “A few years ago a man was accused of murder. I personally thought the case was very cruel because he didn’t mean to kill his victim. They were good friends and they had a row going home and the man died. Although everyone thought he’d get away with manslaughter, he was convicted of murder.

“About three or four months into his life sentence he asked the chaplain if he’d deliver a letter to the victim’s family. The priest took the letter and knocked on the door of the family. Two elderly people answered and the priest explained his purpose and said that if they didn’t accept the letter the prisoner would understand. The parents took the letter and read it and saw he was looking for forgiveness. They told the priest to go back and tell the prisoner that they’d forgiven him a long time ago.

“When the priest reported back to the prisoner, the convict replied, ‘I don’t care now if I die in Mountjoy, but I’ll die happy knowing that I’m forgiven.’ To me those parents were the ultimate example of Christianity. It’s tough to have to do that. It’s difficult to live that life: to be kind, forgiving, sharing and caring, because you need to be an almost perfect human being.”

CONTRADICTION IN FAITH

“I contrast that experience with that of a parish close to where I live in Dublin. A family of travellers arrived in a caravan one night and parked in the church grounds. When the respectable members of the congregation saw this they were horrified. Every morning after 10 o’clock Mass they spoke to the priest, demanding that these travellers be removed.

“A week later the priest was saying Sunday Mass when he announced that he had ‘good news’ and that he’d succeeded in having the travellers ejected. What struck me was that the congregation didn’t see the contradiction in the faith they were professing and their actions. There’s no need to preach your virtues if you live by them.

“There’s an old saying: ‘I would be better off in Mountjoy.’ The sad reality is that for some this is still true today. What a shocking indictment of our Christian society! How quick we are to distance ourselves from the many social and human tragedies created by the way we live.” ■