

Piece for “We Remember Maynooth”
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An Chéad Ollamh Tuata

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Some time ago I was invited by a former M.Sc. student to attend his ordination to the priesthood. At one point in the ceremony, my man knelt before his seated bishop, and extended his arms with his palms pressed together, as you do when you pray. His lordship took the extended hands, and pressed his own palms around them, and then, looking into the young man's eyes he said: “Do *you* promise to obey *me*?”. My man responded as he was expected to, and the ceremony continued. I assume that this remarkable passage was not just a whim of this particular prelate, but a standard and ancient component of the ritual, mirroring the fealty to his lord required of every vassal in feudal times. Perhaps the promise has even more ancient provenance, dating back like other elements of the Church's administration to the practices of imperial Rome. A consequence is that a diocesan priest is as firmly bound to obey the instructions of his bishop as is a member of a religious order to obey his abbot. Therefore, if a senior cleric wants some priest to take up some job, then he *may* ask the priest, but he *must* ask his bishop or abbot. This creates a certain mind-set in the hierarchy, a mind-set having much in common with that of senior military officers.

I did not understand this in the Spring of 1975, and so I met with some surprises as I acclimatised to Maynooth.

I was the first layman ever appointed to a chair at Maynooth. My appointment as Professor of Mathematics was approved at the June 1975 meeting of the Trustees of St Patrick's College. The tradition in Mathematics at Maynooth goes back to the very beginning, because at that time formation in Mathematics and Natural Philosophy, as well as Mental and Moral Philosophy, was regarded as essential in the preparation of candidates for the priesthood. Would that it were so today! The development of the “two cultures”, lamented by C.P. Snow, has brought us to the point where “cultured” people are no longer ashamed to admit an inability to understand elementary mathematics or an ignorance of modern science. The result has been that some people are deemed suitable for appointment to positions of influence who are poorly equipped to execute their duties. As someone who cares about the Church, I take comfort in the fact that the bench of bishops still includes a leavening of men with mathematical training, and I count my contribution to their formation among a few worthwhile achievements from my 37 years in post at Maynooth. As someone who cares about Mathematics, I take some satisfaction from the fact that at one point in my tenure over a quarter of the 5000 (mostly lay) students in College were taking Mathematics.

The historian Tomás Ó Fiaich was College President when I came to Maynooth, and had taken the trouble to examine the archives and tidy up the list of professors at the back of the annual *Kalendarium*. Perusing the list, I learned that just eight Professors of Mathematics spanned the 180 years from the foundation of the College until my appointment. This was encouraging. One could infer that the occupation was reasonably healthy. Mathematics is not the most important thing in life. I care more about love in all its forms, God, family, country, art, and life itself. However, given that my main professional aim in life was (as it still remains) to advance and promote Mathematics, it seemed likely that I had fallen on my feet.

I was in the USA for the six years before my appointment to Maynooth. My peers were people around the world who cared mainly about developments at the moving frontier of known Mathematics. Our science has enjoyed a golden age in my time, an age without precedent in the history of humanity. I wanted to come home and share my expertise and passion with my countrymen. I was coming, no matter what, and I refused all offers in America before coming for interview at Maynooth. (Decisions are made earlier in the academic year over there.) If all else failed, I was sure of a post-doctoral research position that would put food on the table until something better turned up.

I believe there was some reluctance to advertise the Chair of Mathematics. Maynooth had a couple of new Departments (Biology and Geography) headed by laymen at the rank of Senior Lecturer, but up to that point Professor meant Priest, except for the fact that the Professor of Education, Séamas Ó Súilleabháin, was a Christian Brother. Indeed, for years afterwards Maynooth's villagers used the two words as synonyms, so that priests holding the rank of Lecturer were addressed as Professor, and academics who did not own a clerical collar were described as lecturers. There were other chairs in play at the time, but they were likely to be filled by clerics, and the headship of another new Department (German) was advertised at Senior Lecturer level.

The appointment process looked quite normal to me, similar to the kind of thing I had experienced before. I was in California, working at UCLA. Kindly supporters (Trevor West, Dick Timoney, family) let me know about the public advertisement of the post, and encouraged me to apply. In Timoney's case, he made it clear that I had no chance of appointment, but he said that if I were short-listed it would put me in a good position for the next NUI Statutory Lectureship that came up. I sent in an application and was called to interview around Easter, 1975. I put on a suit and tie - the tie was yellow, definitely non-clerical - and I took the number 66 bus out to Maynooth. I was welcomed at the gate by Tom Finan, Professor of Latin and for that year Secretary of the Academic Council, and he took me for tea in St Patrick's and then around for my first look at the place. I was an outsider to this clerical world. I considered joining a contemplative order before I fell in love with Lise Pothin, but was never attracted to the diocesan priesthood. Like any Irish person of my generation I had some ideas about the importance and influence of Maynooth, and I was aware of some current staff who had national reputations, such as Msgr Ó Fiaich in History, Enda McDonagh in Theology, Pádraig Ó Fiannachta in Irish, and Gerard Watson

in Ancient Classics, not to mention some greats of the past. But I had not been to the College, and its splendid Pugin-designed buildings and delightful setting made a favourable impression. I decided it would do, in the unlikely event that they chose me. (I should explain that the smart money was on other, more senior, candidates, and that as far as I was concerned I was already very happy to have won a free trip home.)

The College had wrestled a bit about the best way to compose assessment boards for chairs, which would make a recommendation to Faculties, Councils, and eventually Trustees. They decided to have the President, the Professors of Mathematical Physics and Experimental Physics, and two external assessors, John Lewis and David Simms. They also had a *non-voting chairman*, a truly silly idea that was abandoned not long afterwards. This was A.J. McConnell, then Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, a very distinguished expert on Relativity. I have to say that Dr McConnell's genial conduct of the business made it thoroughly enjoyable. He was impressed by the fact that I had burned my boats. The President made sure I spoke Irish. For the rest I took Trevor West's advice - he was a great all-round coach - to relax and have a conversation about my chosen profession.

I gave a colloquium in University College, Dublin, the following day. David Simms took me aside and let me know (absolutely off the record) that they had recommended me for the job. I was beyond astonishment, but decided not to count my chickens as yet. I went back to work at UCLA, and waited for the letter from Maynooth, good or bad. What's on paper is what counts.

The official word came in the most extraordinary way. In the second week of June, still in Los Angeles, I got a telegram from my mother that said:

CONGRATULATIONS, PROFESSOR!

I telephoned her, and she told me that my appointment to the chair had been reported in the Irish Independent. She read me the article. The headline was:

Bishops Act on Unmarried Mothers

There followed an article reporting on the outcome of the Bishops' June meeting at Maynooth, mainly concerned with the setting up of what is now known as CURA, an agency that helps women who are in so-called crisis pregnancies. Then, in the last paragraph, it said that "Anthony O'Farrell, a Dublin man, has been appointed to the chair of Mathematics".

I rang the President, and Msgr Ó Fiaich (who understood perfectly well that this way of announcing the appointment was out of line with current academic norms) apologised, told me his own telegram was on its way, and explained that the Bishops' spokesman had briefed the press as he saw fit, making a selection of matters to mention without regard to whether they arose in the meeting of the Conference of the Hierarchy (all the bishops, dealing with

Church affairs) or the meeting of the Trustees of St Patrick's College (seventeen of the bishops voting, with the rest possibly looking on). I assume that this spokesman assumed that since I was “a Dublin man”, and the Archbishop of Dublin had approved my appointment, my acceptance of it was not in question.

This little comedy was not the first hiccup in the evolution of the College from its traditional pre-conciliar state as the National Seminary to its modern state as a pair of sister universities, nor was it the last. It has, for the most part, been enjoyable, amusing and rewarding to observe (and occasionally influence) this evolution over the past forty-four years. I have seen eight presidents of SPCM and three of NUIM come and go. All the other Professors who sat round the table in Front Stoyte at my first Academic Council meeting, and all the members of my assessment board have gone to join the majority, may they rest in peace. Maynooth endures.