

Features/ Enda McDonagh**Doing the Truth**

The President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, paid tribute to one of the great Irish theologians on his death in Dublin on 24 February. A former student who became a fellow professor of moral theology at Maynooth remembers a valued mentor and friend. By PATRICK HANNON

Covid brought added poignancy to the obsequies for Maynooth's Professor Enda McDonagh on the last weekend in February: so few to say farewell to one whose life touched the lives of so many, whose welcome to all was always generous and warm. And the chants seemed somehow more plaintive, fewer voices and from a distance, along the length of the great College Chapel. It was just over a year since he had left Maynooth, his home since he arrived there as a student in 1948, for the care of the staff of Holy Family Residence in Roebuck Road in Dublin.

Enda McDonagh was born in Began, Co. Mayo on 27 June 1930, second of three sons of teachers, educated locally and at St Jarlath's College, Tuam, whence to Maynooth, a student for the presbyterate of Tuam. His first degree was a BSc and in 1951 he began a study of theology which culminated in a Doctorate in Divinity in 1957. Though encouraged by Professor James McConnell to pursue science, he was directed by his archbishop to the Angelicum in Rome, and it was a time when you went where you were sent. A year later he was appointed to a chair in Moral Theology and Canon Law in Maynooth. This meant getting another doctorate, and after studies in Rome and Munich he began teaching in Maynooth in 1960. Apart from a couple of sabbaticals and a three-year stint at Notre Dame, Indiana, he taught in Maynooth till his retirement in 1995.

At a time when such causes had few champions, McDonagh spoke out for the rights of women, of Travellers, and of lesbians and gays; he was eloquent and courageous in his advocacy and activism in the time of AIDS, and not just in Ireland, as tributes from Cafod and Trócaire have testified. One of his many books, *The Demands of Simple Justice*, is the fruit of work done in what was then Rhodesia at the behest of the bishops there. He was made an honorary canon of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in recognition of his work for ecumenism, and Dublin's Church of Ireland Archbishop Michael Jackson was among the first to pay tribute on his death. He wrote and published continuously even after retirement from teaching. He was a member of the Higher Education Authority and sat in the Irish Senate for the National University of Ireland; chair of the Governing Body of University College, Cork; and two-term chairman of the Irish Federation of University Teachers.

He came to the staff at Maynooth at a time of hope: the Second Vatican Council was in the offing and he was joining a young staff with the energy of the young and, as the Sixties got underway, a growing optimism about Ireland's future and the future of their Church. He was also in touch with similarly hopeful and idealistic people in the world of politics. He had an influence on Fine Gael's Just Society thinking, to the bemusement of those who knew of the talks around the table in Began of a family staunchly Fianna Fáil. (A letter in the *Irish Times* – from one who'd know – recalls a further complication: Enda's heart was with what was happening then in the Labour Party.)

For a decade or so he taught the course concerned with foundational questions: what morality is, what conscience is, how moral judgments are made, and what light is shed on this by the Christian's faith. Not a lot, if you took your impressions from what was in the official textbooks, which were in Latin, as were the examinations, oral and written. The picture of the moral life they conveyed was negative, a matter of thou shalt not rather than what you were called to do or be, and there was little reference to the teaching of Jesus.

The young McDonagh had encountered the pioneering work of Bernard Häring CSSR and other German authors, notably Josef Fuchs and Franz Böckle, and his approach reflected their influence; he also made us aware of relevant strains in personalist and existentialist currents in philosophy, and he encouraged us to see links to our earlier studies in the humanities and sciences. But he quarried the tradition too, and two insights from Aquinas's *Prima Secundae* were central to his own take: the concept of charity as the "form" of all the virtues, and Question 106 which asks whether the New Law is a written law or a law impressed upon the heart.

Catholic Social Teaching became the background to the advocacy and activism of which so much is being remembered in the aftermath of his death. Already he'd made a methodological move which betokened a deeper change, signalled in the essays collected in *Invitation and Response* (1972), initiated in *Gift and Call* (1975), and elaborated in *Doing the Truth: The Quest for Moral Theology* (1979). He didn't contribute directly to two major theoretical debates of the seventies and eighties, that concerning universally binding norms, and that which asked what's specific about Christian morality. This wasn't for want of regard for their importance: just that he didn't see the point of duplicating work that others were engaged in – in the case of the specificity question, the work done so thoroughly by Vincent MacNamara, his friend and occasional collaborator.

"Liberal Catholic Theologian Dies at Ninety" was typical of the headlines that announced McDonagh's death. He disliked such labels, partly out of a general distaste for easy binaries, but partly also because the liberal tag carried the implication of maverick or bolshie, neither of which fitted the man or his work. He was open to new ideas, of course, courageous in breaking new ground, unafraid to take an unpopular stand in a cause he believed to be right. His reservations about *Humanae Vitae* displeased the archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid. But he wasn't by nature contrarian or adversarial, and he would far rather seek common ground. Perversely, it was these facets of his make-up that caused another kind of

critic to tax him with too ready a tendency to compromise; and he was humble enough to consider that that might sometimes have been true.

So why, given his background and experience, his obvious commitment to the values of a Christian vision of life, and his acceptability to a majority of staff – there used to be a consultative vote – was it that, twice apparently, the Trustees of Maynooth declined to appoint him College President? It's not that he didn't have the respect of bishops, the friendship of some, especially as their number came to include more and more who had been his students. And it's hard to believe that skirmishes with McQuaid and Michael Browne of Galway affected the judgment of the episcopal generation that came after them. Or maybe they did. And maybe, as some surmise, there is a deeply rooted tendency amongst Irish bishops not to risk ruffling feathers in Rome.

Of these things McDonagh rarely spoke, apart from an occasional rueful anecdote; and he never portrayed himself as a victim. He didn't in fact fall victim to the attentions of the CDF, but he was sometimes the target of self-appointed arbiters of orthodoxy nearer home. It was good to hear the expressions of respect and trust and warm regard that were voiced after his death by Archbishops Michael Neary of Tuam and Eamon Martin of Armagh, both former students, even as one couldn't help regretting that the confidence of his Church's leaders wasn't communicated while he toiled in the vineyard.

The flaws? Well, there was that tendency to compromise too easily sometimes. And Enda had a capacity for suffering fools that was disconcerting – unless of course you happened just then to be the fool. He was a man of vision, but with a habit of leaving the vision's implementation to lesser mortals, and not always in circumstances covered by the principle of subsidiarity. He was apt to mislay a plane ticket or his passport, lose a book or lecture notes under a heap of papers on desk or floor, and he freely conceded that but for his personal assistant Mary O'Malley and friend and driver Ronan Drury there were destinations that he might never have reached.

Yet it was Drury – not a man to canonise – who once remarked that McDonagh was “a kind of saint”. To me he was a *mensch*, a New Yorker's compliment, borrowed from the Yiddish: someone you could rely on to act with honour and integrity, but always with kindness and attention to the person before him. When I hear and think about his virtues these days – kindness, courage, humility, patience, commitment to service of the gospel and God's people, a true concern for the margins, and how he coped with infirmity during the past few years – his *goodness* – I realise that there was something to what Ronan said. And I picture Enda in one of the Father's mansions, conversing with Vincent MacNamara, Kevin Kelly, Nicholas Lash, and *Furrow* Editor Drury looking for copy. A saintly mensch.

Leaba i measc na naomh go raibh aige.

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