

BRENDAN MCCARTHY

# One of our very own

The days when having a priest in the family was a common experience are fast disappearing in Ireland. Here, the nephew of a cleric says a fond farewell to his uncle – and to a way of life

**A**mid the clutter on the desk in my study at home – the stapler, the notebooks, the bills – is a priest's stole. A few weeks ago in Ireland, my priest uncle Paddy O'Brien died. After the funeral, my brother Ciaran asked me if there was something of Paddy's that I would like to bring back to London with me. I chose the stole. I wanted a memory of a time when our family had a priest of its own.

In Ireland of the 1940s and 1950s the priesthood claimed many of its brightest young men. Richie, my Jesuit uncle, a Celtic Studies graduate, went – improbably – to convert China. After the 1949 revolution, he was evacuated to Hong Kong, and spent a lifetime teaching the sons of the colony's middle-classes. Another uncle, Brendan, worked in Kenyan parishes and schools, negotiating grants from the government to expand teacher training college places in the newly independent state. In another life he might have been a banker or an entrepreneur.

But Paddy stayed at home and was ordained for an Irish diocese. The Mass leaflet for his funeral briefly summarised his life: Maynooth ... teaching staff of the diocesan boarding school ... director of church music ... parish priest ... canon of the diocese.

This was the formal story. He was a gifted organist and choirmaster and a more than passable cocktail-bar pianist (he had a choir of friends, who called themselves "The Non-Commitments"). Because our other clerical relatives were so far away, Paddy was the priest – and music-maker – that we knew as children and later as adults. He had an enormous lumbering Grundig tape recorder on which he recorded our childhood voices, along with family message-tapes to our priest-relatives abroad. This was at a time when inter-continental calls were rare; these tapes are now a family sound archive which we prize.

There is a "micro-climate" of the priesthood, that aspect of the priest's life that faces inwardly to his own family. Paddy was the priest who christened us, married us and heard our sad stories. He must have had the most complete sense of our family's complexities. He negotiated with great tact the order of service for an interfaith marriage with my wife, Suzie (who's Jewish), and me, before spiriting us off to a remote spot on the West Clare coast. We still remember the happiness of that day and the name of the beach: Poll na Sagart (literally



Fr Paddy O'Brien (back), with the author (right) and his wife on their wedding day

"The bathing place of the priests").

I remember making my confession to him at the breakfast table on my wedding day. Then there was a family Mass at home to give me a send-off. These Masses were part and parcel of our big family days (in this case, it was because there would not be a Mass at our wedding later in the day in church). And it wasn't just on such days. Several months ago, I sat across the dining-room table from Paddy in our old family home in Clare. There were just two of us for Mass: I answered the responses and read the lessons. We remembered our dead and prayed for our living. The

canon was the Old Eucharistic Prayer II. (Paddy did not appreciate the new translations and I felt a charge of emotion when the old translation with its spare elegance was used at Mass on the evening his body was brought to the church.)

All my life I had taken this kitchen-closeness to the Eucharist for granted. I knew then that there would not be

many more days like that one. What surprises me now is my intense sense of loss. I had not expected it. No more will this particular sacramental intimacy weave itself through our family rituals. No more will I pick up the phone to Paddy in the mid-evening to gossip, lament, confess, discharge.

I cannot be alone in my loss. It was a commonplace for Irish families like ours to have priest members (and, I imagine, for similar families throughout old Catholic Europe). But it was a particular world that made this possible. My grandparents were teachers (as

*(Continued on page 18.)*

THE  
**TABLET**

## Online archive

The Tablet has launched its new online archive, containing every article from the journal's 175 year history.

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(Continued from page 17.)

were many priests' parents in mid-twentieth-century Ireland) and they encouraged their boys to value the priesthood. A "vocation" was prized. In an inward-looking society, the priesthood was an outward-looking – even exciting – possibility.

That world is gone and we will not have priests. Or, in as far as we do, they will be distantly glimpsed figures met, if at all, for a fleeting moment after Sunday Mass.

The loss of that intimate connection with the Mass and the priesthood is my family's loss, certainly. But it may also be a significant loss for the broader Church. If people do not meet priests, know them socially, know them in their down-time, it is perhaps less likely that they will consider priesthood as an option for themselves. More likely, perhaps, family events that used to be marked sacramentally now may not be. The Irish poet Dennis O'Driscoll, who died at the beginning of this year, lamented the loss of the old rich symbols:

His grace is no longer called for  
before meals: farmed fish multiply  
without His intercession.

When we do mark events sacramentally, will we do it (when we do it) with formality – and a loss of domesticity? Catholicism is a religion of the hearth and for me it is its domesticity that makes it possible – and lovable. While I can appreciate high liturgy, I have been spoilt; no solemn Mass can ever come close to a charged moment across a kitchen table.

We said goodbye to Paddy on a late autumn day. We made our way through the country churchyard where he would be buried beside his predecessors in the parish. His fellow priests sang the "Salve Regina". After the final blessing, his coffin was lowered into the ground. In this part of Ireland, it is still the custom to fill the grave before the mourners leave. My brothers and I each took a spade and emptied several shovelfuls of clay over the coffin.

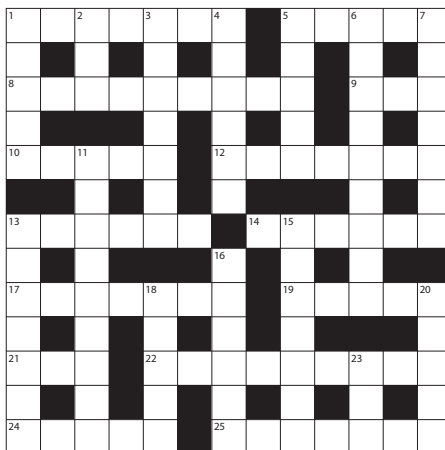
Afterwards I talked to the bishop. I told him (he would not have known) that I had once been a seminarian for that very Diocese of Killaloe. I had left Maynooth, because I felt the priesthood was – precisely – wrong for me. Nonetheless, at various points since, the instinct for priesthood has tugged at me – and it tugged at me at that very moment. My response then was emotional, not rational. I would still be wrong in the part.

But I felt – and still feel – a great sadness, and not just for my uncle and for my own "what ifs". Of the 50 or so priests there that day, few can have been under 60 – and many were much older. They remain for now the good beating heart of Irish Catholicism. But they are a vanishing breed.

I cannot step into the line to replace them. But I fervently hoped in the fading light of that October evening that others would, who in their way would renew the informal kitchen Catholicism that nurtured me and to which I owe so much.

## PUZZLES

### Prize Crossword No. 385 | Enigma



#### Across

- 1 ----- print; photographic print made by placing a negative directly on sensitised paper and illuminating it (7)  
5 Christian name of the philosopher Kierkegaard (5)  
8 Heraldic memorial to a deceased person (9)  
9 Circulating life force in Chinese philosophy and medicine (3)  
10 First of Marilyn Monroe's real Christian names (5)  
12 Plaited white loaf baked for the Jewish Sabbath (7)  
13 Surname of Nicaragua's president 1932-36 (6)  
14 Archaic (seventeenth-century) verb: "To cheer up" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition 1989, vol. 1 p. 101) (6)  
17 Unit of weight equal to 100kg (7)  
19 ----- oven; covered earthenware or cast iron container for cooking casseroles (5)  
21 A Japanese sash (3)

#### Please send your answers to: Crossword Competition

9 November, The Tablet, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY. Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. A copy of York Courses' "Expecting Christ", new for Advent 2013, will go to the sender of the first correct entry drawn at random on Friday 22 November.

● The answers to this week's puzzles and the crossword winner's name will appear in the 30 November issue.

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- 22 Star of silent films whose untimely death in 1926 caused worldwide hysteria (9)  
24 "I will apparel them all in one livery that they may ----- like brothers" (Cade) in *Henry VI, Part 2*, IV. ii. (5)  
25 (Old Testament) King David's grandmother Ruth was one (7)

#### Down

- 1 Hermann ----- (1842-1918) founded the Marburg School of neo-Kantian philosophy (5)  
2 Egyptian sky goddess who swallowed the sun in the evening and gave birth to it in the morning (3)  
3 Hindu religious retreats or communities (7)  
4 Long, narrow, deep depression in the ocean bed (6)  
5 A Buddhist or Jainist scripture (5)  
6 What, according to the poet, one must do with emotion when later in a tranquil mood and writing (9)  
7 Title of 50-minute "hi-tech anti-opera" presented at the Skatehallen during the Bergen International Festival in 2013 (7)  
11 Electrical device for converting an alternating current into a direct one (9)  
13 A Californian redwood tree (7)  
15 Difficult solo passage in a musical work; often near the end (7)  
16 A skiing, canoeing or sailing race winding between posts (6)  
18 First name of hero of *Fiddler on the Roof* (5)  
20 Critic and sworn enemy of Isaac Newton (5)  
23 First name of dictator who expelled all Asians from Uganda in 1982 (3)

#### Solution to the 19 October crossword No. 382

**Across:** 7 Mango; 8 Garbage; 10 Hard Hat; 11 Nuala; 12 Autodidact; 16 Impossible; 20 Colic; 21 Mission; 23 Taggart; 24 Amuse.

**Down:** 1 Omaha; 2 Snare; 3 Noah; 4 Agatho; 5 Prandial; 6 Bahamas; 9 Enacts; 13 Unsocial; 14 Big Cat; 15 Apology; 17 Inmate; 18 Pique; 19 Inset; 22 Snag.

**Winner:** The Revd Steve Wood, Upper Sundon, Bedfordshire.

#### Sudoku | Challenging

	5			6		1	7	
			1					
4	2				1			3
					8	2	9	
	7			6	1	4		5
	8	3	9					
7				1			4	6
						5		
	4	5		3			1	

▲ Each 3 x 3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

▼ Solution to the 19 October puzzle

9	6	2	7	1	5	8	4	3
1	8	3	6	2	4	5	7	9
4	5	7	3	8	9	6	1	2
2	9	1	4	3	6	7	8	5
5	3	4	8	9	7	1	2	6
6	7	8	1	5	2	3	9	4
3	4	6	9	7	8	2	5	1
7	2	9	5	6	1	4	3	8
8	1	5	2	4	3	9	6	7