

## The Funeral

“Could you tell Fr. Morgan that his brother Joe died during the night?” This was the first time I have ever been asked to tell someone that a death has occurred in the family. What made it even harder was telling a man of 86 who is frail and feeble in his old age. During the day Fr. Morgan stayed in his room trying to take in this sad news. That night he expressed the desire to go to his brother’s funeral in Dingle, Co. Kerry, which is 150 miles by car. We were to depart after lunch on Sunday afternoon. To make the journey more interesting Fr. Richard Scriven arrived to join us on our travels. Fr. Richard is another of those octogenarians but a different type of animal to Fr. Morgan. While Morgan is frail and old, shy and retiring, Fr. Richard is all go, full of intent, bossy and forward. I guess it was these endearing qualities, which qualified him to become a formidable Provincial Superior during his prime. In his retirement he bears the demeanour of a Provincial still.

The journey began with a drive through Cork City. Then we headed west into the setting sunshine for the mountains and Kerry. Morgan sat rigid and upright in the front seat and Richard embedded himself into the back seat. The first problem as we journeyed was to calculate the correct temperature within the car. Fr. Morgan liked it to be cool and so he frequently opened the window for air even though temperatures were dropping all the time. This was the middle of January. Fr. Richard, sitting in the back, wanted to be warm and cosy so he wrapped himself with the coats, which lay down beside him. About an hour into the country Fr. Richard started to identify various houses of interest to him. “See that house there, that is where so and so’s cousins live. See those hills over there. That is where my people came from. See that pub over there, that is where Fr. So and so goes on his holidays.” With each comment Morgan would say, “What did he say?” I would translate for Morgan. Then Richard would say, “What did Morgan say?” Morgan would ask, “Did Richard say something?” I thought. “O God, 100 more miles of this!”

Killarney, scenic and beautiful all the year round became our first marker. This was to be our toilet stop. Fr. Richard bounded out of the car and headed for the toilets at the back of the burger bar. I stood outside waiting. I began to get a bit desperate. Eventually, necessity the mother of invention suggested that I go into the ladies cubicle next door. Picture my surprise when I greeted a young lady as I exited. I suggested that this was an even bigger surprise for her. “Let this be our little secret”, I begged. Fr. Richard mentioned in the car as we drove away that when he went to do his business that he had a little accident.

After about another hour driving by beautiful vistas of sunsets and mountains we entered the parish of Dingle. I wondered how Morgan was as we drove into his little seaside town. This was going to be hard for him. Before I talk about Morgan it is important to try to describe Dingle. This is a small town,

noted for its fishing fleet in the harbour and its thousands of tourists who come flocking every year to see the beauty of the district. Dingle is situated on the south coast of a long peninsula jutting out to sea. This, like many other towns in Ireland was the market town for the rural hinterland. For generations farmers and wives would come to town to do their shopping. The men would wander to the pubs while the women gathered in the grocery shops and clothiers. The shops in this town still bore ancient names like Victuallers and Outfitters. People might not come to town often so whilst there everyone made the most of their visit. Dingle retains a lot of its old market town character. Many sons and daughters would have emigrated from this place. However rejuvenation has taken place here and the town is bustling with returned immigrants full of lots of ideas to spruce up the place and bring Dingle into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What was once an old fisherman's house on the quays has now been transformed. It was once Paddy the sailor's house. Now it is "The Spaniard" decked out with fishing memorabilia, atmosphere, regulation rough interior and wonderful soup and bread. Next to "The Spaniard" is "Celtic Craft" which is dripping with all kinds of rugs and jumpers and pottery. The town is sprinkled now with cafes, bistros, specialist restaurants and shops selling pretty things. This is the Dingle of the tourist and it belongs to an Ireland that does not actually exist. This is the international face of Ireland peopled by entrepreneurs and arty types. The world of Morgan Curran belongs to a different age. Morgan was the son of traders in the town. He was used to being well known in the town. His family was someone here. When everyone else was poor and struggling, Morgan's family could afford to send him away to the seminary and to have an education. This cost money. The family has owned their shop for over a hundred years and more. It is situated bang in the middle of Main Street Dingle. It stands out on the street because the building is white with a strong red border for contrast. As we approached the shop I could see that it was oldie worldly and old fashioned. To the left of the two big windows of the shop there was an archway, which led us into the Yard. To my surprise the Yard retreated back behind the house for a hundred more yards. Behind the house and shop, which faced onto the street there was a selection of old out houses all painted in white with red trim. I was entering another world. I could just see it as it was in its prime. Seemingly the houses were filled with grains and farm implements. Men would have worked in this yard. Chickens would have walked across it doing their best to avoid the horses. Now all that remains is a memory of better days. This house has a unique distinction peculiar to Dingle. In the world of the Irish language and literature a great writer was born and reared in the district. Her name was Peg Sayers and in her autobiography she gives an account of her sad life and the tragic deaths of her children. When she was a young girl she was sent away from the struggling farm to take up a position in Currans shop in Dingle. Having waded through Peg Sayers' book as a teenager I was keen to see the inside of this place for myself. As we separated ourselves from our seats stiff and deadened we entered the house

to be greeted by the family. People were hugged and kissed and a few tears were shed for Joe. In conversation I mentioned that I knew a little about this house. Someone asked would I like to see the shop. It had not been changed since it was opened on the first day. I was about to enter "Heritage". What a sight. This was living history. To my left was the pub. There was the counter; over there were shelves full of glasses (some dirty). Most of the shelves had bottles of whiskey and beer. The roof was about 20 feet high and the shelves reached up to the brim. There was a stale smell of tobacco and beer. The tourists who come here are the ones who take pictures and tell everyone that Ireland is just like this, all quaint and dated. They do not appreciate that this family actually appreciates what they have and that they are endeavouring to save it from becoming the next bistro or pizza parlour. To my right was the clothing shop. Merely 7 feet divided two counters and two businesses. While the husband was sipping his pint his wife was a few feet away buying his long johns. The shelves here were full of boxes, stacks of them. Hanging on display were a selection of caps for farmers, aprons for farmer's wives, socks for farmer's feet, and wellingtons for whoever was going out in the rain for coal. You could soak the voices and people from the walls in this place. I could see Peg Sayers in the shop and Joe Curran pulling pints. What a wonderful privilege to be standing there. Back to our grieving and it was time to eat something.

By this stage the house was full of people. Many were drinking something and a gathering of women in the kitchen were preparing and washing up. The house was very rough and ready but full of atmosphere. The walls were painted until they died from suffocation. In the hallway the antique clock stood still. Alongside was the regulation statue of Our Lady. To Our Lady's right was a picture, which was mandatory for every Irish household of the sixties. There on the wall was a faded picture of President JF Kennedy, the first "Irish" President. We were all so proud of him.

When it was time to eat we were summoned to the table. During the time of greeting many were already in the kitchen eating their fill. At a country funeral it is important that the house has plenty and the guests are invited to table. Now it was the turn of the "dignitaries" i.e. Church people. I was to sit at the end of the table pinned to the wall. To one side were Fr.'s Morgan and Richard. At the other side sat Sr. Felicitas, Fr. Morgan's sister the nun, with her companion nun. Pinned to the table at the other end facing me was Sr. Rebecca, their chauffeur. The feed started. Plates filled to overflowing were presented to each one of us. Two octogenarian priests and an elderly sister were asked to eat the dinner of a large truck driver. "Would anyone like gravy?" shouted through the steam. We tucked through mounds of potatoes. Big cuts of beef hardly made way for the garden of vegetables hanging onto the plate. That lot finished we were offered steaming bowls of homemade bread and butter pudding and it was really good. We finished that lot off with burning cups of instant coffee. Through all this toil great conversations were taking place about the church and did

anyone have any more vocations. O, well, "could I have some more gravy please?"

During the visit we made some decisions about sleeping arrangements. Morgan and Richard were to join with the sisters. They were going to spend the night in John Curran's guesthouse. This palatial house, "Greenmount", Grade A\*, was situated just outside the town on a hill. It had a view of the mountains that not even God himself could afford to buy. Meanwhile I slipped away to check into Benner's hotel nearby for some rest and a bit of privacy. For \$150 I was put up in a wonderful room en suite. For the rest of the night I ate rubbish and watched some television.

Monday morning was bright and sunny in Dingle. Having time to spare I wandered down to the quay to see the boats and the harbour. The town was quiet and sleepy. This was the winter season and most businesses were closed. At the quayside I gazed upon the new sculpture, a statue of a dolphin. For some unknown reason a stray dolphin had made Dingle harbour his home since 1988. People flock to this place to get a glimpse and Dingle has done well out of the publicity. I gazed upon the notice. People were able to get on a boat here and go out into the harbour to see the dolphin. The nice touch was to say that if the dolphin was not sighted the people would get their money back. A nice rural Ireland touch I thought.

When I arrived back at the Church remote preparations were taking place for the funeral. Gradually people arrived and visiting priests headed for the sacristy. Fr. Morgan arrived with his family. They seated themselves in the front seats. As all the priests were vesting in the sacristy Fr. Richard walked in dragging Fr. Morgan with him. It was not acceptable that he should sit with the family. Today he would have to vest and sit himself in the sanctuary. This was difficult for Fr. Morgan, a priest of the old school. He never concelebrated in all his priestly life. Today he would sit among men. The chief celebrant was An. Tathair Padraig O'Finnerta. He was the Canon and revered in the district as a great Irish speaker and scholar. It is imperative that any priests appointed to Dingle be able to speak Irish because Dingle is in the heart of the Kerry Gaeltacht. By that I mean, that in various parts of Ireland there exists pockets where Irish is still spoken on the streets and in the Church worship is conducted in Irish. The Mass started with the intoning of the choir. Priests and people stood and knelt and sat and prayed. An Tathair Padraig said the few words. He said his few words in Irish and in English. He was not aware that he was moving from one language to another. It all came to him so smoothly. To listen to his Irish, to hear the "blas" of his Irish, was like nectar and molasses pouring from his mouth. Irish spoken properly with all the right intonations paints pictures and landscapes with its sounds and utterances. The choir sang "Be not afraid". This beautiful hymn sung in the big city churches would sound rich and musical. Here in Dingle, they sang it in the seannos style. A lone voice sang the verses in the style of singing that is reserved for traditional singing of lonely Irish

emigrant songs. The words receive more emphasis. The music is not precise but guessed at. The hymn is sung in phrases and endings. It was haunting and beautiful. Communion came. "Nearer my God to thee" in Irish. A flurry of prayers and incense and then we reached the end. Outside in the churchyard neighbours and friends were coming up to Fr. Morgan to pay their respects. Eventually we got to the car and raced to join the funeral, which had already departed. The burial was to take place in Milltown cemetery. The cemetery was situated on a hill outside of the town. To one side the landscape sloped down to the sea and the far off hills. To the front a huge mountain vista was overpowering and dramatic. They carried the coffin to the grave and priests and people gathered. As the prayers began I thought how easy it is to have faith in a place like this. Everyone should be buried in a place like this. Here we would stand and dwell and think about what is real and meaningful. Here we would sit and talk to our dead. Fr. Morgan grabbed my arm and asked me for support. We prayed and recited. They placed the coffin in the ground. A decade of the rosary was said. "Eternal rest grant unto him O Lord....." Prayers said, the people began to come close again and commiserate. Stories were told of late nights drinking in the shop/pub. "He was a lovely man". "I am sorry for your trouble". "He's gone to God now. 'Tis all before us". After a litany of platitudes and handshakes we left. All the family headed for the pub and restaurant. We all assembled in Long's Bar and Restaurant. This was also once a sailor's cottage transformed by more returned sons and daughters. What was once decrepit and run down was now chic and pricey. We all sat and talked and relaxed. A tasty lunch and an even nicer desert plunged into the chasm of hunger. Now it was time for departing and saying goodbyes. People got up from their seats and offered parting words to Fr. Morgan. Slowly we made our way to the car. "Seat belts on? Are you all right Fr. Richard? Mary is waving at you Fr. Morgan." Off we went.

Killarney hastened soon and once again we headed for the toilets. We headed east over the mountains and arrived once again in hallowed ground, the Rebel County of Cork. As we journeyed I glanced at Fr. Morgan a couple of times. I noticed that he never blinked or moved. I wondered what would I do if he died on the journey. Soon we were in Cork and tired from our journey. After depositing Fr. Richard at "The Sacred Heart" Morgan and I headed for home. We arrived home glad to have made the journey, satisfied that it all went very well and promising that we would visit soon again.