

The Late Fr Vincent Kavanagh CSsR

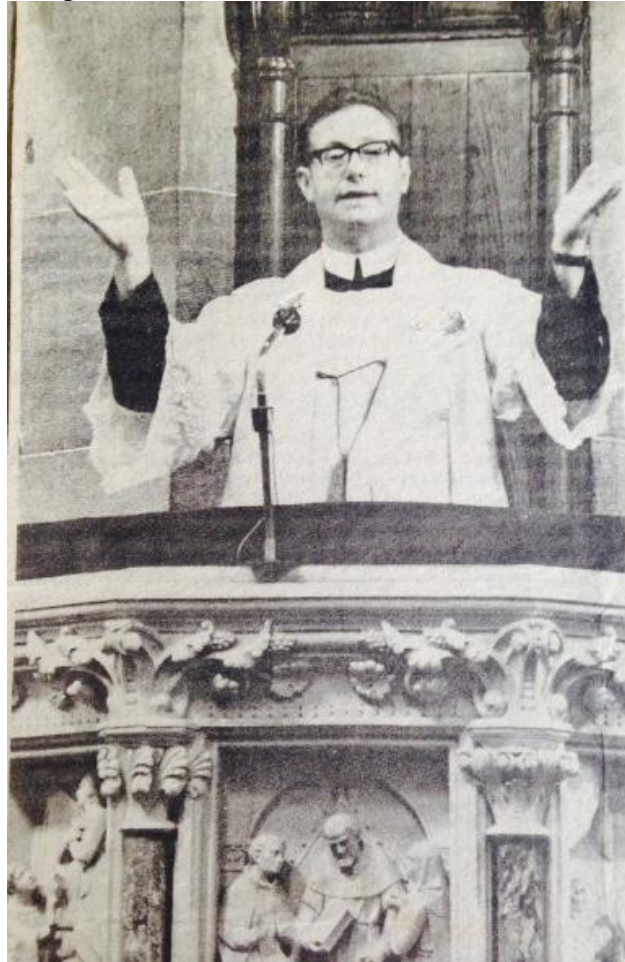
The death has occurred at a Galway nursing home of Fr Vincent Kavanagh CSsR. He was a member of the Redemptorist Congregation and had been attached for many years to the community of Esker in Co Galway. Fr Kavanagh was a native of Arklow in County Wicklow. He entered the Redemptorist Congregation in 1947 and made his noviciate in Dundalk. This was followed by studies for the priesthood in Cluain Mhuire, Galway where he was ordained on 21 August, 1955. Fr Vincent would probably have wanted to be sent to one of the Redemptorists' foreign missions in the Philippines or India. It was not to be so. He was sent instead to Esker as 'socius' or assistant to the novice master. Freed finally from his formation work in 1964, he was assigned to St Clement's Retreat House in Belfast. For the next decade or so, retreat work became Vincent's primary occupation in Belfast, the new retreat house in Cluain Mhuire being developed after the theology students left for a new house of studies in 1968 and Our Lady of Perpetual Help Retreat House in Limerick. Vincent enjoyed retreat work and made the houses places of welcome to the men who came – most of the retreats were for men. He was aware that many of them had never been away from home on their own before and spending a night in a monastery might have been a challenge to them. Sundays, when not giving talks or hearing confessions of the men on retreat, were spent preaching in parishes and working up the co-operation of the local 'retreat promoters' who organised the local group, often even organising transport of them. Vincent never took the contribution of the promoters for granted. He deeply appreciated their loyalty and they knew it.

New Apostolate in Limerick

New developments in the ministry of the Church of Mount St Alphonsus led to Vincent being assigned there as leader of a group of Redemptorist priests and brothers known as the 'church team.' Their goal was to make the church, already popular in the city as a place of prayer and devotion, the centre of a dynamic 'mission church' modelled on the apostolate of the Redemptorists in St Benno's church in 18th century Warsaw where St Clement Hofbauer and his companions ran a "perpetual mission."

Vincent and his team were given charge of the famous men's confraternity. The confraternity had celebrated its hundredth birthday some years previously, but was beginning to show signs of age and decline. Vincent breathed new life into it. The annual retreat for example in his first year consisted of well-known figures from the world of business and politics giving witness to their faith in an interview conducted by Vincent or some other Redemptorist, notably Fr Sean O'Riordan, the

Rome based moral theologian. Vincent's own preaching style was vivid and direct. His sermons were short but the language was usually crafted with care and if he managed to strike a particularly good phrasing of an idea, it was likely to be recycled in another sermon. While the emphasis on the preaching was on the joy of faith and devotion to the Mother of the Lord, he could be hard-hitting especially when it came to the fundamentals of the justice of the Gospel. Preachers who did not measure up to his high standards were seldom asked back!



Vincent in the Pulpit of Mt St Alphonsus

The Solemn Novena

The weekly novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help also attracted the attention of Vincent's team. He had been given a team of Redemptorist priests and brothers to work with him. Vincent was applying modern business techniques to their work including regular team meetings with a business consultant. They decided to put new life into the weekly novena, increasing the congregations at the several sessions of the novena each Saturday. More importantly, the team decided to give a new shape and format to the annual nine days of prayer preceding the feast of the Mother of Perpetual Help in June. It became the Solemn Novena, or as Vincent preferred to call it, the "Festival of Faith." Ten sessions each day filled the large church of Mount

St Alphonsus from early morning until late at night. The congregations were so large that they spilled into the corridors of the monastery and extra sessions were held in a large marquee erected in the garden. The emphasis was on joyful celebration with music and song at the heart of it, led by priests or lay cantors with fine voices and often, local bands were brought along to play for the crowd in the church yard before and after the event. The surroundings of the church were decorated with flags and bunting. The sacrament of reconciliation with a large number of confessors was available all day. If there was not enough room in the church, Vincent hired caravans and set them up as confessionals in the church car park. He also appreciated that people own something the more they are involved in it. Myriads of lay helpers were drafted in as car-park and church stewards, first-aiders, caterers and cleaners. So successful was the novena in Limerick that other places were soon applying for novenas: novenas became an alternative to parish missions in places like Carlow cathedral, Holy Cross, Galway Cathedral and in towns and parishes throughout the country. They are still a major part of the apostolate of Irish Redemptorists in both their own churches and elsewhere.

Selling the Novena

On the advice of his business consultant, Vincent used 'saturating advertising.' His novena posters were never distinguished for their artistic quality but you could not miss them. Bold black lettering on florescent yellow or orange cards stuck into the soft verge of a country road glowed in the headlights of a car on a dark night. Posters were often set up often within a twenty mile radius of the church or local businesses displayed them in their windows. Car-stickers were distributed at novenas announcing dates and times, and were eagerly taken, so that the attendees were marked out in the small world of rural Ireland. Children clamoured for badges asking "Are you one of the twenty thousand?" Or thirty thousand, or forty thousand: the number increased yearly and Vincent never underestimated the attendance! While other might have counted the number per session, he preferred to count the total attendance over the nine days! Radio advertising was beyond his budget, but he managed to get local, and even national, radio to carry announcements about traffic conditions on the roads around the novena church, thus giving the impression that something was happening!



Church entrance decorated for the novena

Product Endorsement?

Vincent appreciated too the importance of having his product endorsed from on high and where was there higher than the Vatican? In 1977, having secured the support of the bishops in whose diocese he had successfully organised novenas, Vincent wrote to the Holy See asking for a personal message and blessing from the pope for all who made the novena. He got it in the form of a letter from the secretariat of state. Two years later, he sent a married couple who had made the novena to convey the thanks of all the novena to the new pope, John Paul II. The first photograph shows the Holy Father, with novena book in hand, blessing a copy of the picture with the lucky couple who got a private audience thanks to Mgr John Magee, the Pope's Irish secretary.



Social Outreach

Vincent Kavanagh was no “sacristy priest.” He devoted great energy to fund- raising for what is known ‘The Poor Campaign.’ It built up resources to help poor families in time of crisis such as the cost of returning to school after the summer holidays, first communion and confirmation outfits. It was all done with great discretion and courtesy to preserve the dignity of people. It came into its own especially at Christmas time when could be left in the empty crib in the days before the feast or money given at novena collections. His great co-operator on the poor campaign was Fr Gerry Daly, who as a noted musician, played a leading role in leading the singing at novenas. The Mt St Alphonsus Poor Campaign continues to thrive today with the help of many lay folk.

A problem in rural Ireland was often the delay in marrying due to conditions of small farm families. Fr Kavanagh took over the running of marriage bureau that had been established by an earlier Redemptorist, Fr Gerry Reynolds senior. Spin-offs from this included social club with badminton or beagling for young active adults. He also encouraged a social club for married people who often found it difficult to get a break on account of the cost. An employment agency tried to find employment for men and women in the 1970s when the economic scene was bleak.

Esker – the Final Years

Redemptorists seldom spend their time in one community. There is an itinerant character to their preaching of the Gospel that recalls the wandering life of Jesus and his apostles. It was time for Vincent to move on. He returned to Esker where he had begun his priestly life almost fifty years earlier. Older perhaps but with boundless energy, he took an interest in beautifying the extensive grounds of the monastery.

Esker had an old 'holy well,' St Dominic's Well, that went back to the Dominican friars who had originally lived there. Vincent refurbished its surroundings and revived the annual celebration at the Feast of the Epiphany. St Dominic's water was especially loved by the farming families of the area and during times like the foot and mouth epidemic or the swine flu, Dominic's Well attracted many people.

Making her Known to the World

There was no doubting the strength of Vincent's faith life and commitment to his vocation as a Redemptorist and as a priest. He would not have considered himself a profoundly serious theologian but he had the knack of making friends with the theologians and learning from them. Fr Sean O'Riordan, a professor at the Roman Alphonsian Academy, was a man on whose wisdom and insight Vincent relied and whose moral guidance was at the service of the confessors at the novena. For Vincent, the heart of a Catholic's relationship with God was celebrated at its deepest and most personal in the confessional. He had no time for a confessor who displayed irritability or harshness in the confessional. Like his founder Alphonsus Liguori, and Pope Francis, Vincent believed there was no sin God could not forgive and that every penitent was always to be received with graciousness.

Vincent was a man of deep but unassuming prayer. He only missed community prayer when he was genuinely held back by a serious reason. He was faithful also to his times of personal prayer – meditation on the Gospels early in the morning, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and rosary in the course of the day and in the evening. The energy he put into the solemn novena was deeply rooted in his fidelity to the charge given to the Redemptorists by Blessed Pope Pius IX when he entrusted them with the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help – "Make her known to the world!" Vincent Kavanagh made her known to millions and his personal devotion to Mary was unshakeable but manly.

Fr. Vincent's health began to decline some years ago. A stroke last year impaired his mobility and memory so he needed nursing home care. He died peacefully last Friday night, 15 May. He is survived by his sister Eileen, brothers Tom and Liam, sisters in law, nieces and nephews. Another brother, John, predeceased him. Fr Vincent Kavanagh will be mourned by the members of his Redemptorist Community who marvelled at his energy in the service of the Gospel, laughed at his wit and were the recipients of his unfailing kindness. A multitude of lay friends and anonymous believers throughout Ireland were touched and inspired by his ministry and his friendship.

Fr. Brendan G. McConvery, CSsR