

Curate in Cloonfad

AFTER FOURTEEN happy years I left Tooreen in July 1959. Just a few weeks before I was changed I had passed through the village of Cloonfad on my way to Galway. As we drove down the long dreary hill leading out of the village we passed the local curate walking along the road. I said to my companion, Jim Ganley: "I know that I am going to be changed soon and I would not like to come to Cloonfad. That curate looks a very lonely figure indeed."

Two weeks later I got my letter of transfer and, sure enough, Cloonfad was to be my new mission. I went immediately to meet the curate and get all the details of my future pastoral duties in the area. Shortly afterwards the same Jim Ganley called to see me. "Well you have come here after all," he said.

"Yes indeed!" said I, "and if it is not the place that I would have liked, perhaps I can turn it into something." That I did, because I spent the four happiest years of my life in Cloonfad. I did more work in those four years than I ever did in any other parish. And there was ample scope for good work, because Cloonfad was a very depressed and neglected area.

Straight away, the week after my arrival in the parish, somebody came and told me that a married man in the area was in desperate need of a job. He had been drinking heavily, his only cow had died, and the man's neighbour asked if I would try to get work for him. The neighbour also explained that his little girl, an only child, had been sick for a few weeks and hinted that it might be due to malnutrition.

The most likely possibility for creating employment was in forestry, something I had been thinking of for some time. There had been an afforestation scheme initiated in

Cloonfad some years previously by Fr. Eamon O'Malley, who later became parish priest of Kilmeena. I got in touch with the Forestry Department and I was told that the only obstacle in the way of further progress was the acquisition of land. I called a meeting of the people in the area and told them of my plans and how they could be achieved. I explained that if afforestation was to succeed in the district, then the farmers would have to sell waste or unused land to the Forestry Department.

We formed a committee and sent two men to each village to persuade the local farmers to make their waste land available to the Forestry Department so that they could develop it and plant trees. However, the price per acre offered by the department was very low and there was no great incentive to sell. There was another big obstacle in the shape of a farmer on top of Cloonarkin mountain who was not willing to part with any of his land. He was the key to the whole place because he owned a big portion of the mountain, and without his co-operation it would be impossible to drain and develop the area. Though I had appointed working parties in the various villages I could not get anybody to do Cloonarkin, so I decided to do it myself, and asked Michael Eaton, Lavallyroe, to join me.

One Monday afternoon we went to Cloonarkin to do the job. We went from house to house and got on very well, finding the farmers willing to commit some land to the project, and we were now ready to face the man who seemed to be so sticky. I decided that I would not press my luck that evening but would let the matter rest for a few days so as to think it through and be very sure of making the correct approach. But before I had the opportunity to return

to Cloonarkin the man called on me and said that he was very disappointed that I had not visited him when I had called on the others. I explained that at our meeting in the school everybody had felt he would not sell. He said very angrily: "They had no right to say such a thing. They had no authority from me on the matter."

There must have been a guiding hand behind the scenes. That farmer gave us his full support and with no further problems to hamper us the afforestation went ahead on schedule. We had up to twenty people employed in afforestation during the following years. The scheme certainly solved the difficulty of the man who had been drinking and had lost his cow. Some years later I met his daughter, and I was delighted that she had got on well and that everything was in good shape at home. With that success behind me I set about working on further community improvement schemes.

I co-operated with the Dunmore people in promoting afforestation in that part of Dunmore parish adjacent to Cloonfad. I attended meetings with TD's Mark Killilea and Mick Donnellan in Dunmore and spoke to the farmers about the advantage of afforestation both for beautifying the countryside and for giving employment. Great progress was made and the results can be seen clearly today; a drab and dreary landscape has grown green and beautiful. Districts can only benefit from more co-operation between parishes in regard to projects such as afforestation, drainage and other activities.

Cloonfad was a very low-lying, boggy area and needed a lot of drainage. I organized many drainage schemes, making use of the Minor Employment Scheme to do the job initially, but that grant only provided

about £600-£700 each year. The amount depended on the number that was unemployed in the district on a particular date the previous year, and when I went to the department for more money I was told that there could be no further grant under that particular scheme. I was informed, though, that they had millions of pounds under a Rural Improvement Scheme, and it was also explained to me that I would have an advantage under that scheme because people in Cloonfad had very low land valuations - about £5 per farm on average. So I promoted projects under the Rural Improvement Scheme and for all the work that we did - on by-roads, drainage and various other projects - we got a 90% grant. At the same time I persuaded the local workers to take £1 less per day in wages so as to make up for the 10% shortfall in the grant. They may have been getting less than a County Council worker but they were improving the roads and land in their own villages, and on the strength of their efforts an incredible amount of work was carried out in a short time.

When the County Council elections came around the people of Cloonfad and Ballinlough realized that the more councilors they had from the parish the better chance they would have of getting grants for local improvement, so they decided that they would try to have two councilors elected, one from Fianna Fail and one from Fine Gael. They succeeded in that: Michael Mitchell from Ballinlough was elected as a Fine Gael member, and Pat Moylan of Ballinlough was elected for Fianna Fail. We had a foot in both camps and the Roscommon County Council was very good to us subsequently.

I had a great relationship with the county engineer, Mr. Earner, and with Dan O'Rourke, chairman of the Roscommon County Council. Through our efforts we persuaded the council to renovate the road from Cloonfad to Dunmore; winding

through the bleak hills and entirely open to the elements, it was in a poor state of repair. Roscommon County Council was one of the first councils in the country to use gravel as the foundations for the main roads. The gravel proved to be a more stable foundation than stone; while the stone would often sink in one area and remain solid in another, the gravel formed a kind of bridge across the foundation to keep the road level and uniform. Gravel roads were also fifty per cent cheaper and could be built at twice the speed of other roads. When the Cloonfad-Dunmore road was completed work began on improving the steep hill leading from Cloonfad village to Ballyhaunis. The road was shaded from the Sun so that in severe frost it remained very slippery and dangerous for most of the day and cars and other vehicles en route to Ballyhaunis could not negotiate it. It caused much inconvenience but after the council's work the traffic problem on the hill was solved.

While in Cloonfad, of course, I lobbied politicians as I have always lobbied them for the good of my parishioners and for the good of the people in the West generally. Mr. Brian Lenihan, who became a very big man in politics, was then a Senator. More than twenty years ago I made representations to Brian and the results were good. He and Harry Boland helped me to get a grant for a new school, the building of which was left in the capable hands of my successor, Fr. Jarlath Canney. I had a great friend, too, in Jack Mc Quillan, an Independent TD for Roscommon. He seemed to be all-powerful and the government departments gave him anything he asked for - local people believed that the government departments were afraid of him and his word was law. He eventually married and gave up politics - maybe he was a wise man! I had a wonderful accord with all politicians in those far-off days. I claim to be a "bread and butter" politician and

someone of that ilk must have a good relationship with politicians of every colour. That kind of relationship is, of course, more difficult nowadays: I think that I should know!

The Cloonfad people backed me in all the things that I wanted to do; they knew that I was doing my best for them and that anything I had in mind was for them and that the atmosphere of the place changed once things began to happen. Our progress gave Cloonfad great courage and renewed spirit, and a marvelous feeling of community grew amongst the people. I was delighted with the excellent relationship I had with all the parishioners. I had been warned that I might have trouble with one or two villages that seemed unco-operative; however, I always made up my own mind in every situation, and the outcome was that I got the fullest co-operation from those particular villages. One should never make a judgment on hearsay!

The church in Cloonfad was a very beautiful building and served the people of the district well. I had 340 families, over 2,000 people, in my spiritual care. They were very religious, good living people and tremendously loyal to the priest. During my time in Cloonfad I installed new Stations of the Cross in the church; I also built porches at the side-doors to prevent draughts and make the building more comfortable. To raise money for landscaping around the church and in the presbytery grounds I organized concerts in the local hall owned by the Burkes. They gave us the use of the hall for a nominal sum and we always made £40 or £50 per function. The people of Cloonfad were very talented and provided the entertainment, and they always gave a good performance.

I loved visiting the school and meeting the children and the teachers. The children were talented, intelligent and well behaved. I tried



to get them interested in music and dancing, which they did. I always believed in sharing the joys as well as the sorrows of the people. In that way they get a chance to know the priest better and seeing him as a sociable, good-natured person, they will be more likely to seek his advice and guidance in any kind of trouble. The quality of the teachers and children in Cloonfad school was superb. In one particular year nine of the girls competed in a number of scholarship examinations and all nine won scholarships to different convents. They were all very successful in later life and distinguished themselves in their different professions; some entered nursing and teaching, others the civil service. They were really a credit to their school and to their teachers. That was also true of the boys in Cloonfad, though they were not as spectacular as the girls.

Some years later I was in the Department of Education and making no progress with the problem which I had on hand. I had been speaking to one of the secretaries of the department and was waiting for him to return with a decision. I was surprised to see a young girl coming over to talk to me. I said to her: "Did he send you down to persuade me to accept something that I am unwilling to accept?" I wanted a certain decision and I was determined to get it; I felt sure that I had right and justice on my side. "Oh, no," she said. "I came down because I know you. I was a pupil in Cloonfad school when you were our curate." Straight away I remembered her name and I remembered that she was one of the nine brilliant pupils who won scholarships.

I am glad to relate that I got good news from her: I got approval for an extension to the primary school in Knock. For fourteen years I had a prefab classroom that was in dreadful condition, so cold and damp that I was fearful for the health of the children using it. I had a very

good case but I was grateful, too, that she should have brought me the good news. Even when you have right on your side it is nice to have friends in high places. This happens at a time when we had a very tight economic situation in the country and the government was trying to practice "fiscal rectitude".

My work in Cloonfad was made very easy with the help of a wonderful parish priest, Fr. Michael Malone. I benefited from his help and advice from the first day that I called at his house in Ballinlough until the day that I was transferred from Cloonfad to Knock. I found him a gentleman in every way; he was my parish priest and my good friend. He helped me with every project that I undertook in Cloonfad and his curate, Fr. Tommie Mc Ellin, who later became my colleague at Knock, was equally kind and generous. When there is a team of priests in a parish that pull together and cooperate then marvelous things can happen.

I was anxious to act as chaplain on a pilgrimage to Lourdes so I offered my services to Shannon Travel, a company based in Dublin. I had been to Lourdes previously and had experience of all the spiritual exercises carried out by pilgrims. My application was successful and I was duly appointed chaplain to a group. My duty was to lead them in the shrine, celebrate Mass, conduct holy hours, perform the Stations of the Cross and lead them in the rosary and Blessed Sacrament processions. There was also a courier who as well as organizing accommodation arranged daytour to places of interest in the vicinity of Lourdes, usually places that had an association with the life of St. Bernadette. It was a big occasion for me because I also booked my father and mother on the trip; it was their first journey outside Ireland and they were very excited about it. They had heard so much about Lourdes and its shrine that they felt privileged to be part of the

pilgrimage. My brother had just got married and had taken over the home farm, so they were relieved of all responsibility and they could afford to take a holiday; their children were now settled in life. The old people had done a very good job and deserved a break. The pilgrimage was very worthwhile, especially for the sake of my father and mother. We made a return trip the following year, and now my father had to be taken around on a wheelchair as he suffers from arthritis. It was difficult to persuade him to sit in the wheelchair: he was a very proud man in that respect and had been very active all through his long life. There is that same reluctance in all of us to accept the disabilities that come with old age, but though he did not like it he had to face reality.

In my last year in Cloonfad I wrote to my archbishop, Most Rev. Dr. Joseph Walsh, to ask permission to go to Lourdes once more. Again I had decided to bring my father and mother on the trip. I got no reply. I met his secretary a week later and said, "I wrote to the archbishop about a trip to Lourdes but I got no answer."

"Well, I wrote the letter and handed it over to the archbishop to sign," he said, "and I do not know what happened after that."

I decided to write again, an identical letter to the one I had already written. This time I got an answer by return post. It told me that the archbishop was delighted to hear that I was making a trip to Lourdes but he assumed that it would be part of my annual holidays. I had got away with it the previous year and I suppose he felt that it was time to call a halt to my gallop. Now that I am much older and wiser I know that I had blundered badly by insisting on getting a reply. He had wanted to let me away with it, unofficially, by leaving my letter unanswered.

In Cloonfad I was very active also in the Legion of Mary and chaplain of the diocesan curia. The

praesidium in Cloonfad was made up of both men and women and we always traveled together to the curia meetings. The Legion of Mary did marvelous work and did everything pertaining to both spiritual and corporal works of mercy. It is still doing a terrific job in the archdiocese and I hope that God and Our Lady will help it to achieve even greater things.

I was delighted with my change to Cloonfad after spending fourteen years in Tooreen. It is a good policy for a bishop to change a curate every seven or eight years. It is better for both priest and people to have a change. A priest takes stock of his own spiritual life; he makes a better effort at serving the people and preparing sermons; he reviews his

commitment to his parish and to his flock. Generally speaking he makes a fresh start. I was able to work very hard in Cloonfad for the four years I spent there. They were the four happiest years of my life because I had scope for doing the things that I like to do. I had the opportunity to do social work. I helped the farmers and the people, old and young, in every possible way.

Nowadays I feel proud every time I pass through Cloonfad. It is such a tidy village with the streets and houses so neat and done up in great taste. Once the people began to take an interest in their village and gained confidence in their own ability to achieve things they never looked back. A village that once looked bleak and barren is now a place of

great beauty and grandeur. When I drive up the hill to Cloonarkin the windswept village on the side of a mountain now seems to have acquired the beauty of Killarney, with 1,500 acres of forest on every side. What a transformation! How I wish that the millions of acres of wasteland in Ireland could be used for the benefit of all the children of Caitlin Ni hUallachain.

This chapter about Fr. Horan's time in Cloonfad was taken from the book "MONSIGNOR JAMES HORAN MEMOIRS 1911-1986" I want to thank the Horan family for their permission to reproduce his memories.

1994 First Communion Class



Front row, left to right: Alan Corcoran, Diarmuid Cregg, Michael John Kearns, Seamus Brennan. Middle row: Mairead Keane, Leona Corless, Denise Costello and Amanda Burke. Back row: Fr. Des and Mrs. B. Lynch.