



## E-BULLETIN #112

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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

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Item 211

### **a childhood remembered - out of the ordinary**

**Cabinet minister, the last Governor of Hong Kong, chancellor of Oxford University and chairman of the BBC Trust – it's a golden career. But the key to such success turns out to be a Catholic primary school in a downmarket suburb – and teachers who let their charges' imaginations soar**



People who enjoyed blissfully happy childhoods, an Irish friend of mine argues, should be able to claim damages for deprivation of literary royalties. Contented childhoods, with loving parents and kind and warm-hearted teachers, don't sell books. So what chance could I ever have (even if I wanted to do it) of writing financially profitable memoirs?

I was brought up in the west London suburb of **Greenford**, the slightly downmarket end of Ealing, the self-styled queen of suburbs. Greenford was poised socially somewhere between lower-middle and middle-middle class, aspirant and hard-working commuters into "town" as my mum called it, or workers at Lyons or other local factories.

My dad was a popular-music publisher, the occasional glamour of whose life meeting the stars of music hall and radio rarely rubbed off on us in the post-Second World War estate of Hillside Road or the fancier semi-detached Courthope Road, to which we later moved, with its privet hedges and the Conservative Club on the corner.

My dad's family, way back, had been Irish immigrants to Lancashire; his parents were both head teachers at Catholic primary schools in Manchester. Dad turned down university to play the drums in a band and met mum at a gig in Exeter's Rougemont Hotel. She became a Catholic in order to marry him, horrifying her parents by marrying not just a musician, but a Catholic musician.

All my earliest memories are focused on the primary school that my older sister, Angela, and I attended, Our Lady of the Visitation. It was a low-rise brick building in the lee of the parish church and the presbytery, home to **Pallottine Fathers (five members of whose worldwide community are today candidates for beatification after their murder in Argentina).**

The school looks much the same today as it did then, though the surroundings are more neatly landscaped, the old church has been replaced by a concrete hangar of a building and there is a smart, well-used Italian coffee machine in the presbytery kitchen where once teaspooned Nescafé would have been on duty mid-

morning. And, it should be added, today's very **engaging parish priest dispenses excellent coffee with a smile (!)**.

What can I remember 60 and more years on from those happy times?

There is the day I led the May procession in my red cassock, hands devoutly and sweatily pressed together, my sticking-up straw hair plastered flat to my head with a dollop of glistening Brylcreem applied by Dad. I came at the head of two columns of Marian angels, little girls in long white dresses, with blue ribbons and posies of flowers.



Behind them came members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul (of which Dad was a member) and then the Knights of St Columba, some of whom carried a large plaster statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary on their shoulders. Finally, there was the parish priest, **Fr Canning sac, with his assistant priests**.

The procession started in the school hall, wound around the grounds, ventured briefly into the street outside with a small crowd of goggle-eyed spectators watching this exotic addition to Greenford's social life, and then turned back into the church between the lines of altar boys.

I was one myself, an early recruit to the Guild of St Stephen. We had our early coaching from teachers about the meaning of the Mass and why it had to be said in Latin. **But we were principally in the charge of the Pallottines** who introduced us to the Tridentine liturgy, pronounced with Italianate Cs and Gs. I served Mass on Sundays – no breakfast first because of the 12-hour fast – and once in the early morning during the week. The small vestry would smell of tobacco and Communion wine. I knew all the words to the Mass – Introibo ad altare Dei – but Mum stopped me repeating them all when I pretended to say Mass myself with Carr's water biscuits and a wine glass of squash; she thought it smacked of blasphemy, I suspect.

Then there was the inspection each year by the bishop, especially memorable when the cardinal archbishop himself came. We were a little scared, but Cardinal Griffin only asked us the easy questions from the catechism. Even the slower children in the class knew who had made them. Smart alects like me were not given the chance to show off our knowledge of the Beatitudes.



Most of our knowledge of the catechism came from our teachers; the clergy rarely came into class. We were taught our prayers (especially in preparation for our First Holy Communion) and some of the simpler stories from the Bible, mostly the New Testament rather than the Old. But I still remember listening with alarm to the account of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, a sentiment brought back recently looking at the famous Brunelleschi and Ghiberti competition bronzes of this scene in an exhibition in the Louvre.

Getting to school required quite a long walk. The journey took about half an hour, or longer when the smog descended on London in winter, and we picked our way from one pool of light cast by the street lamps to another.

I daresay that some later educational faddists would have been horrified by all that learning of tables, committing poems to memory, and testing of spelling. But it marked me for life. While I have never really comprehended mathematical concepts, I can turn miles into kilometres, pounds into euros or Fahrenheit into Celsius with a facility that occasionally even impresses my family.

And, as for the reading, I have loved books since I was able to understand words myself. I have a mind's-eye view of my childhood, lying on the carpet, chin in my hands, reading *The Wind in the Willows* or *Biggles* or, a little later, *Forester* and *Conan Doyle*. These days, having largely given up newspapers, except the *Financial Times*, I devour books on the bus and Tube, and read more than I ever have.

We went with mum and dad to hear an American priest tell us that the family that prayed together stayed together and recited the Rosary with him at a great rally. On dark winter evenings, we would go to hear the retreat sermons of Redemptorist Fathers. James Joyce would have been proud of their hellfire language. We were prepared for our First Communion and the worry of confession. What sins had we committed? Could we think of sin at all, at seven or eight? (Before long, its meaning would be all too clear.)

Did we feel different from those around us, a minority but for popular prejudice? I don't really think so, though perhaps we were aware of a certain curiosity among our neighbours, even suspicion, about what we were up to with that mumbo-jumbo in a dead language, the smell of incense, the infallible Italian and his court in Rome, and the distancing of ourselves from others who claimed to be Christian but denied themselves the glorious certainties of the faith of our fathers: the one, true faith. We were, to some, like Freemasons without the funny handshake.

Of course, we learned the same Bible stories as those other Christians who had protested against us and persecuted us. But was their God quite the same as ours, and did we not in those days before the Second Vatican Council think that we had a rather privileged relationship with him, an inside track? So mum and dad took us to midnight Mass at Christmas, where we would sing our favourite carols about shepherds and angels, and catch the smell on the breath of those who had started their Christmas celebrations early. We



knew about baby Jesus and could understand his mother's love for him because we received the same love ourselves, all year round, not just at Christmas. And what I learned in those days from teachers and mum and dad about Jesus – kindness, love, mercy, forgiveness – I still understand, even if I have always had a sneaking sympathy for the prodigal son's stay-at-home brother.

But what can you retain about God from a childhood's teaching that perhaps inevitably makes him into an all-wise, omnipotent Father Christmas? What do I now think of the Heaven and hell about which I once learned – the hell that terrified and the Heaven that was incomprehensible? I can still hang on to the story of Jesus, that golden thread, but what do I now believe happens when "life is changed not taken away"? I guess, wonderful as it was, my family and primary-school upbringing could not be expected to provide the answer to that. I am finally on my own, hoping still that "with the Lord there is mercy; and with him plentiful redemption".

**Lord Chris Patten of Barnes**

**- chairman of the BBC Trust  
- chancellor of Oxford University  
- Tablet trustee  
19.12.13**

## filming in East Africa

The American television network EWTN (Global Catholic Network) commissioned a documentary series about the Irish Pallottines in East Africa. Last August **Jass Foley** and **Kevin de la Isla O'Neil** travelled from Ireland to film the series in Kenya and Tanzania over a five-week period.

They filmed and documented the work being done in Nairobi, Arusha, Siuyu, Makiungu, Gallapo and Magugu. The three films in the series will show a day in the life of a Pallottine priest, a Pallottine student and a lay person, as well as providing an overall view of the work being done by the Pallottines of the Irish Province across East Africa. The films are now in post-



production and are due to be broadcast worldwide, including Ireland, in 2014.

Jass and Kevin extend warm thanks to all of the Pallottines in Ireland and East Africa for their generous help and assistance in the making of the series.



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22.01.14  
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## sac asia oceania e-bulletin

### you commented...

**on #111** Thank you - I really appreciate the widening of my vision which these 'bulletins' offer and, of course, was specially interested in the information about Myanmar.

**MG 16.03.14**