

**TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS** delivered by **REV PROFESSOR ENDA McDONAGH**, Chairperson, Governing Authority of University College Cork - National University of Ireland, Cork on 10th May, 2002, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*, on **FR JEROME MURPHY-O'CONNOR**

A Sheansailéir, a Árd Mhéara, a mhuintir na hOllscoile, agus a dhaoine uaisle,

The early years of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, the Cork years, were no doubt rich and varied. Only the barest outline is possible here. Born on 10 April 1935 to Kerry Murphy-O'Connor and Mary McCrohan, the first of four children, a sister Sheila, a brother Kerry, a priest of the diocese of Cork and a brother, Brian, an architect, all three together with Brian's wife Beatrice, happily with us today. He attended the Christian Brothers in Cork, before going as a boarder to Castleknock College, Dublin, run by the Vincentians. While there he seems to have made up his mind to become a Dominican and returned home to spend his final Leaving Cert year at the Christian Brothers. According to family lore much of his apparent study time for the Leaving was spent more happily reading novels. The written word in its narrative form had already captured him. And in this time of Munster glory it is well to remember he was a keen rugby player and in that Munster tradition of giving and taking hard knocks.

He entered the Dominican Novitiate in Cork in 1953 where his baptismal name James, (Jim to the family), gave way to his name in religion, Jerome, a symbol of his new life commitment and unwittingly perhaps of his later scholarly engagement. Jerome is the patron saint of biblical studies. After novitiate he did a year's philosophy before moving to Tallaght to continue his studies and to the University of Fribourg, Switzerland to complete them. His life-cycle of scholarship and travel had already begun.

He was ordained a priest in July 1960. It was in Fribourg also that the central passion of his scholarly life had begun to emerge. His first serious study for the lectorate was on the theme of Preaching in St. Paul which he then developed into a doctorate thesis under the direction of another great Dominican and biblical scholar Ceslas Spicq. The Order of Preachers had found in Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., a fresh and powerful mind and voice to articulate the scriptural and particularly the Pauline roots of its own founding charism.

He received his doctorate Summa Cum Laude in 1962. The following year he studied in Rome and from there he went to Jerusalem to the Ecole Biblique which was to become his religious, scholarly and even personal home for approximately the next forty years. For all the travelling still to come, circling the globe as he did so often, for Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, the Holy City and the Holy Land with all their glorious and tragic histories became the centre of his life and work. The Ecole Biblique founded in 1890 by French Dominican scholars was a world-famous institution in biblical studies and archaeology. Earlier scholars such as Lagrange and de Vaux had courageously pursued and developed studies of the Old and New Testaments in a pre-Vatican II Church whose leaders were still fearful of such scholarship after the Modernist crisis of the early 1900s. The first great modern Catholic translation of the Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, had emanated from here. For Murphy-O'Connor already exposed to the fresh air of Vatican II in Rome, the École Biblique and his own particular mentor, Père Benôit, offered adventurous prospects. And there he thrived. And there he remains to this day.

Meantime he has become an institution himself, not just for scholarship, teaching and publications to which we must return but as a reference point for the English-speaking residents and visitors from the whole world. It was fitting that this role really began with his

archaeological visits and lectures for the United Nations Trust Supervision Organisation in 1970. In 1971 he became leader of the Sunday group, friends of different nationalities and professional backgrounds who liked to hike and to explore! And shortly afterwards he was to become the leader of the Ecole's own archaeology programme. One significant result of all this was the invitation by Oxford University Press to write an archaeological guide to the Holy Land which was published in 1980. Translated into several languages with a revised edition in 1986, it has become the standard guide-book.

Given its continuing political and religious tensions, Jerusalem was always a centre of media attention. For the more thoughtful journalists, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor offered an unusual resource. So for many viewers around the world he was our anchor man in Jerusalem. This was particularly evident at the time of the Millennium and of the Pope's visit.

And yet this was the man who in these years produced thirteen books and hundreds of scholarly articles in serious journals as well as major contributions to encyclopedias and reference works. The still and solitary scholar is the dominant picture most of us would have of Professor Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. How could it be otherwise given the volume of his publications and the commanding position he has occupied in the world of Pauline studies.

From his first to his latest publication, he has made Paul the centre of his work. His recent book, *Paul, A Critical Life*, was widely acclaimed by professional reviewers. Its immediate forerunner, *St. Paul the Letter Writer*, offers a delightful and informative read to the general reader also. And his latest commentary on *St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, reinforces his reputation as one of the most distinguished commentators on the Corinthian letters.

Father Murphy-O'Connor always attends carefully to both text and context. The immediate context is of course that of the writer and the recipients of the letters. His book on *St Paul's Corinth* is an outstanding example of his work in this sphere. His ability to move between text and context with his passionate attention to detail in both has ensured for him high esteem among his peers. But he has another larger context always in mind.

The still and solitary scholar, with "the necessary scholarly attribute of being able to sit concentratedly on his nether regions for hours and weeks, even months and years", as an admiring Dominican confrere once said to me, is also a member of a world-wide religious order, of the universal Church and of the modern world. These further contexts have greatly influenced his ways of dealing with the Scriptures and again in particular, the writings of St. Paul.

A couple of instances are worth developing. His early work on Preaching in St Paul had clear relevance for modern Church practice, or malpractice, as too many congregations might still experience. As he moved on he discovered the interests and categories of great biblical scholars like Rudolph Bultmann who were seeking to interpret Paul for to-day, and who were using contemporary philosophy, particularly the existentialism of Martin Heidegger. Murphy-O'Connor in engaging with this material had begun to discover the existentialist relevance of St. Paul for contemporary life. Categories such as authentic and inauthentic existence and alienation shed light on Pauline categories of grace, freedom and sin.

For Paul and Murphy-O'Connor true freedom was very much a community reality as against the more individualist accents of Bultmann and others. Freedom in community might be a useful summary of Murphy-O'Connor's summary of Paul and provide the foundation for his exploration of life in a religious community like the Dominicans. The witness provided by such a community of dedicated and so increasingly free people was how he interpreted the role of religious orders in a series of writings in the seventies and eighties.

A further development of this is a fine book entitled, *Becoming Human Together*: it offers Pauline insights into the formation and development of all communities, secular and religious, including I might suggest, the community of scholars, as embodied in a particular institution like this one or in the more informal groupings of kindred scholars or institutions across the scholarly world. Perhaps it is not surprising considering how our universities developed from the medieval monastery schools including in their development great Dominican scholars like Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.

A rather different debate of wide interest was in play as the young Murphy-O'Connor began his work in Jerusalem. In 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls, as they were called were first discovered in a cave near Qumram. They were probably the product of a Jewish religious community, called Essenes which flourished around New Testament times. If memory is reliable, when the first issue of the Sunday Press appeared on the first Sunday of September 1948 (in those more settled times also All-Ireland Hurling final Day), in that first issue the famous Maynooth scripture scholar Edward Kissane had an article on those same Dead Sea Scrolls discovered the previous year. Such was their fame even by then as various attempts were made to assess their influence on Jesus and the New Testament scriptures. Some hasty conclusions sought to reduce the whole Jesus tradition to an Essene development or borrowing.

Twenty years later serious scholars were still trying to catch up. Fr. Murphy-O'Connor's mentor Pierre Benoit was one of these and suggested that he, Murphy-O'Connor, should teach a course in them. To prepare himself he took two years with leading scholars in Germany and later began to publish his own very carefully informed views on their influence. His scholarly methodology was refined in this work and his conclusions were broadly accepted. He held for example that Essene influence was more evident in the extra-Palestine writings of the New Testament such as the letters of Paul and much less evident in the writings from within Palestine such as the Synoptic Gospels.

The solitary, still scholar with ever accumulating publications was also as indicated earlier something of a gypsy scholar, travelling the world during the long summer vacations to give summer courses at universities and religious institutions, and even to work with pastoral teams in Latin America. He was also Visiting Professor and lecturer at prestigious universities around the world from the University of Harvard, USA, to the University of Sydney, Australia. These travels, academic and pastoral, sharpened his sense of the basic questions agitating people today and stimulated his scholarly appetite to address these questions. They also enabled him to deepen his friendship with a variety of people from a range of backgrounds.

As there are no doctorates in friendship, it is important today in honouring the scholar to reflect on his wonderful talent for friendship and the gifts, as he would see it, which family and friends have always been for him. Freedom in community as a Pauline theme might be translated accurately as friendships in community for Paul's distinguished disciple. It can only be that such friendships began here in Cork. Like Paul, Jerome is a citizen of no mean city and whatever about Tarsus, Cork is famously a friendly city. So the scholarly explorer returns today from Corinth to Cork, from the Holy Land to the Holy Ground once more, only to find with T.S. Elliot that 'the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.' (1856)

*PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:*

*Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totaeque Academiae.*

