

## NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND / OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

**TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS** delivered by **Dr Art Cosgrove**, Vice-Chancellor, President, University College Dublin - National University of Ireland, Dublin on Thursday 10 April 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **Archbishop Walton Empey**.

Chancellor and Members of the University,

I am privileged and honoured to present to you for the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws the Most Reverend Walton Newcombe Francis Empey, a very formal name for a most informal man!

Cherished by all sections of society for his personal charm and warmth, his genuine interest in the human condition, his concern with the common man, and his long service in the Ministry, Walton Empey was born in Dublin on 26 October 1934. From a clerical background, he is the eldest son of the late Reverend Francis Fullerton Empey who was successively incumbent in Donoughmore and Donard, Fenagh and Enniscorthy, and Mildred May 'Mimi' Empey (nee Cox). He was just a few months old when the family left the South Circular Road for County Wicklow on the appointment of his father to Donaghmore and Donard. He was educated at the local national schools in his father's parishes, at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen and at Trinity College Dublin where he took the BA degree in 1957. In 1968 he obtained the BD degree from King's College, Nova Scotia. An honorary degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred on him in 1997 by the Central School of Religion, Indiana.

The young Walton Empey's interests included motorbikes and rugby. A report from his Housemaster included the comment "If this boy showed the same application to his studies as to rugby, there might be some future for him". Fortunately Walton showed application and aptitude in other areas, otherwise we might not be here today. A defining moment in his life came when as a young student helping out at the Seaman's Mission, he encountered a lonely seafarer celebrating Christmas with a frugal meal of tea, a boiled egg and bread, alone in the galley of a tramp coal boat moored at Sir John Rogerson's Quay. This meeting was the catalyst for his deciding to be ordained and from that moment he began to look at life a little bit differently.

Walton Empey was made a deacon in 1958 and was ordained priest the following year. He served a curacy in St Paul's Parish, Glenageary, Co Dublin before leaving Ireland in 1960 to serve in the Anglican Church in Canada. His first three years there were spent as Rector of a mission parish at Grand Falls, New Brunswick where he was the first priest in the parish in twenty-seven years. He served for a further three years as Rector of Madawaska, a lumber parish with an eclectic and colourful group of inhabitants. He retains a great fondness for Canada, where as a young curate he found an invigorating freedom of expression and action which was very different from the ministry at that time in the Church of Ireland.

On his return to Ireland in 1966 he served as Rector of Stradbally, Co Laois for five years before being appointed Dean of Limerick and Rector of Limerick City Parishes in 1971. Ten years later he was elected Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe. In 1985 he succeeded Dr Donald

Caird, the former Archbishop of Dublin, as Bishop of Meath and Kildare. He was elected Archbishop of Dublin, Bishop of Glendalough, Primate of Ireland and Metropolitan by the Episcopal Electoral College in April 1996 and enthroned in Christ Church Cathedral in the following June.

As Bishop of Meath and Kildare he took a keen interest in the Irish Army and was a frequent visitor to the Curragh Command. He is the only Church of Ireland Bishop to have served in the Defence Forces. He was a member of An Fórsa Cosanta Áitiúil (FCA)(now known as the Reserve) and served with the 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, based in South Leinster. He left the FCA as a three star Private in 1957 with the reputation of being a very good shot with the Lee Enfield 303. Since that time he has taken a keen interest in the Defence Forces. He visited Irish troops in Lebanon on four occasions in the 1980s and 1990s. He also saw the valuable humanitarian contribution of the Defence Forces in Honduras when he visited that country in 2002.

A true man of the people, his avuncular, good-humoured exterior contains a core of deep spiritual conviction and integrity. He has never taken the easy passage through life and has been forthright in his commentary on political and social issues in Ireland he has expressed keen concern with the plight of asylum seekers, has spoken out against racism and championed the causes of the third world. Yet he has the common touch and during his long ministry was known to visit Garda stations and army barracks to express his appreciation of their contribution to society. As a mark of the esteem in which he is held by all denominations in the force, the Garda Representative Association marked Archbishop Empey's retirement with the a personal presentation to him of a statuette, normally reserved for retiring members of An Garda Síochána.

Throughout his life he has been devoted to the cause of ecumenism, following in the footsteps of his parents. When his father was rector at Donoghmore, Co Wicklow, he and the local Catholic parish priest were firm friends, an unusual circumstance at that time. Later as minister in Enniscorthy his father attracted the same cross-community popularity. When he died suddenly in 1953 many Catholics wished to attend the funeral but had to seek permission from the Bishop of Ferns to do so, because, hard as it is for young people to believe now, Catholics were then forbidden to enter Protestant churches. The bishop refused permission, though a number of Catholics attended anyway. Shortly before his father's death the young Walton Empey had been one of an FCA guard of honour for that bishop. On hearing of the ban on Catholics attending his father's funeral, he expressed with characteristic forthrightness his regret at not having given the bishop a poke of his FCA bayonet while in that guard of honour!

A resolute opponent of sectarianism both within his own church and outside it, he believes simply that ecumenism is not an option but a necessity. *"The search for unity is not a matter of taste but rather an obedient reaction to the prayer of our Lord that we 'may be one' "*.

Walton Empey's interests are not entirely of a clerical nature. He is a devoted family man and especially enjoys interacting with his grandchildren in boisterous play. Today the National University of Ireland honours him. I am delighted that his 'best friend, constant companion and wife, Louie, and their family are here to witness the occasion - for we honour a man of

great personal integrity, a pastor to his flock, full of energy and concern and the embodiment of ecumenism.

*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 utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.*