

FATHER RICHARD McCULLEN, CM APPRECIATION, MAINLY IN RELATION TO THE YEARS 1992-2015

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INTRODUCTION:

I was impressed by my first glimpse of Father Richard McCullen. It was at the beginning of my Vincentian life. He had recently returned from Rome, where he had completed highly acclaimed doctoral studies. What impressed me most about him then, and ever since, was his demeanour of quiet, strong dignity and sincere, unforced spiritual authority.

Later, in my student days, I had Father McCullen successively as spiritual director, professor of moral theology, and superior. My abiding memory of him from this period (1960-64) is of a priest, truly Vincentian, very prayerful, most intelligent, and deeply aware of the Church. He saw that relevant formation was required for us seminarians as we entered a world taking on new shape and as Vatican Council II was plotting a way of dialogue, hope, and fidelity.

Father McCullen went on to exercise the role of spiritual director in Ireland's National Seminary at Maynooth from 1967-1975. He then was Provincial Superior of our Province (1975-80). At the 1980 General Assembly, he was elected to the most demanding, responsible, highly-esteemed, and Christ-like serving ministry of Superior General.

RETURN TO IRELAND: SAINT PATRICK'S:

Over 12 years (1980-92), Father McCullen faithfully performed worldwide service for our Congregation, the Daughters of Charity, and several groups owning the charism. In 1992, returning to Ireland he was based in the community attached to Saint Patrick's College of Education for Teachers, Dublin and, in this university context, he was chaplain to the students.

However, the confines of a college campus were too limiting for a man of his zeal and talents. Having been so well known and respected

throughout the world by his confreres, the Daughters, and the Vincentian groups, he was now invited far and wide to give talks and retreats, and to participate in the extended gatherings under the Founder's inspiration. Thus, he travelled to share the good news, plant new seeds of the Spirit, and assist in watering or reaping golden harvests (see 1 Corinthians 3:6) in places from Britain and the continent of Europe to the USA and the Far East. He continued these spiritual missionary labours through his sojourn at Saint Patrick's (1992-96) and through his time as Superior in Saint Paul's Provincial House, Dublin (1996-2008).

SUPERIOR AT SAINT PAUL'S (1996-2008) AND LATER:

All through this lengthy period, both during his years as Superior and afterwards when I resided in that community (2008 and later), Richard maintained an almost uninterrupted ministry, along the lines mentioned, in his customary evangelistic vigorous mode. He only slowed down as the years and inevitable energy deficit took a toll on his long marathon course (see 1 Corinthians 9:24). Up until his final years, he undertook awesome flights to California in order to inspire Vincentian friends under the auspices of the Daughters. Nearer home, he was available for talks, days of recollection, keynote addresses, and homilies. The Pauline ideal never deserted him: preach the word; be urgent in season and out of season; ... be unflinching in patience and in teaching (2 Timothy 4:1, 2).

PRIESTS, THE FAITHFUL:

In the years from 1982, Father Richard maintained, as before, his concern for the whole Church – and a very concrete expression of this, ongoing assistance for priests to whom he gave spiritual guidance and support. In an increasingly harsh climate, his open welcome and appropriate sound direction were a soothing balm for many. As shepherd of the shepherds, he raised hearts and prolonged a Vincentian quality of what is true and ever new.

His own formation, early ministry, and indeed his family story against the background of his famous uncle, Msgr. McCullen, of Meath Diocese, afforded him a certain head start in this field. In this regard, he always kept in mind his former directees from his work in seminary and so he had numerous contacts and friends among his fellow priests.

This involvement with diocesan priests and others made him very accessible and sought after, not least in the Dublin Archdiocese.

We have seen major changes in the secular culture of our country in recent decades. Father Richard was acutely aware of the challenges posed to Catholic life and faith-commitment. He was a wholesome influence among his relatives, including two first cousins who served at different phases in the Irish Government. His two brothers who predeceased him were in professional life; they, his sister, Mary, her husband, Billy, and their family were very close and dear to him. He was involved with all his extended family and had deep interest in them all, including his cousin Sister Mura McCullen, DC. In all this, he reminds us of Saint Catherine Labouré whose letters dearly recall her love and apostolate among her family members.

POOR, SPECIAL OUTREACH:

I often noticed in Father Richard a genuine universal charity. All persons mattered to him, in the best sense, like the Lord. He did not calculate who the individual was, his/her background, ability, status, or virtue, though of course he was prudent, discerning, and esteemed the uniqueness of each one. Like the missionaries being sent forth in Jerusalem (Gal 2:10), he had a special love for the poor. There were needy people whom he met on his travels, some who begged for material aid, and some whom he assisted, consoled, and guided. In this last context, Richard showed compassion, interest, and gave time to Christ in his peripheral members. This hidden, unheralded attention in less fashionable areas of charity is noteworthy in the former General's pastoral inclusion.

SOURCE OF IT ALL:

The wide-ranging goodness and service of Father Richard was not something fortuitous. It was founded on a sound spiritual life and prayer. He was most devoted to the liturgy of daily Mass and the Hours, daily Rosary of Our Lady, visit to the Blessed Sacrament, and personal intercession for the many intentions he took to his heart. His meditative prayer, so far as I could see (from my six years at Saint Paul's) was closely bound to scripture, especially the Psalms and the New Testament, prominently the Gospels of Saint John and Saint Luke. He had some favourite texts such as Ephesians 1:3-10, which appears

every Monday at Evening Prayer. His specific method or school of prayer was not easy to detect. Yet, I think he always kept basic, tried practices at hand, those helpful tools we learned in seminary days. We have, for example, the Vincentian method derived from Saint Francis de Sales's *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Part II). Variations on this theme are Vincentian insights on the use of scripture story and religious practices as seen in the Conferences of Saint Vincent to the Daughters of Charity (translated by Joseph Leonard, CM) on pages 26-28 and 1131-1132. Father Richard used beautiful images and drew upon biblical texts: Saint Vincent's distinction of discursive (active) and contemplative (more passive, divinely inspired) forms of prayer would be familiar (see *idem*, p. 374). Father Richard was well versed in mystical theology and, I daresay, he was sometimes favoured with bright beams of heavenly light. I really think he reached Teresian prayer of quiet and passive recollection, if not Prayer of Union.

SIMPLICITY, TRUTH:

Coming down to earth now, we saw him among us every day, doing the most ordinary things, like helping in the kitchen. His simplicity was tangible, as seen in admission of faults, as he saw them, in telling humorous tales of student days or of childhood years and even his personal tribulations along his journey, but always with prudence and charity. He spoke the truth in concern for the Glory of God, the good of everyone, out of pure Christian love and integrity. His simplicity and truth were refreshing and transparent, and especially at a time when blurring of clear thought had become commonplace. Sure conviction led Richard to write to editors and public figures who had been cavalier on essential realities, or arbitrary and selective on definition of human rights. Again, we see the man of evangelistic and prophetic fruition rising up amidst the nettles of hostility and indifference. This courage and real confidence in God's grace and his own gifts are significant qualities, perhaps needed now more than ever.

HUMILITY:

Humility is a virtue sometimes present in people when it seems absent or absent despite a false humble façade so that often a long testing is needed. Father Richard met the test of this virtue. I imagine his love of the poor, his closeness to Christ in prayer life, and, always,

his sense of all giftedness were streams flowing into and forming his 'lowliness' reminding us of Mary in the Magnificat. God looked upon the lowliness of his maidservant (Luke 1:48). Humility is most often built on humiliation. A few times, I saw him placed under a truly embarrassing disregard, but while he felt it, I thought he triumphed admirably. Gentleness, controlled conquered anger went hand in hand with the humble characteristics present. Wise restraint and harnessed energy added authentic serenity.

Vows:

Father Richard lived his vowed life in constancy and faithfulness. He was very aware of having his affairs in order as he came along the finishing stretch. His earthly goods were taken care of and congregational norms were observed.

His vows expressed his full dedication to God and the evangelising of the poor. As poverty, virginity, and obedience in the New Testament are directly inspired by fascination with God, and the abundant life of God (John 10:10), so Richard grew more and more into this total oblation abounding all the more (1 Thessalonians 4:1). This life centred on God had great effects on the lives and hearts of people encountered. He had a rich capacity for friendship, true compassion, and cheerfulness, so that many felt an attraction towards him, and a certain fatherliness and freedom in his presence. His extensive correspondence and use of modern technology in communication greatly aided his valued relationships and pastoral benefit.

CULTURE:

Father McCullen was a man of culture. As students, we benefited from his musical skill, as he applied it to the liturgy. I recall him, up until his final days, having a well-informed interest in and love for high quality music and singing. He loved like Saint Augustine 'the sweet sound of the Church's singing!' I remember his observing something divine in the most beautiful classical symphonies. He was an admirer of good literature, especially fine poetry (Hopkins was perhaps his favourite). Translations of the bible were most appealing to him, as he looked for fresh nuances of the true meaning.

Richard himself wrote and spoke flawless English. His peers from student times mention his keen determination to write clearly and

vividly. His work, *Deep Down Things*, is a testimony to his art in transmitting the word and shaping it relevantly for hearer and reader. True appreciation of art and apt liturgical adornment were always observable. As we saw, he drew upon beautiful images for prayer – inspiration.

STRONG HOME BACKGROUND:

During my years in close proximity to Father Richard at Saint Paul's, I got to know more of the man and his solid provenance in the threads of history and family-faith woven into his formation.

His people had origins in County Meath, rich in tradition, Catholicism, and great farmland. The royal county, as it is called, boasts of Tara, seat of the ancient high kings of Ireland. It also contains the Hill of Slane where Saint Patrick is said to have set alight the Easter fire, which desirably will set aflame our country for all time. Saint Oliver Plunkett, the heroic Archbishop of Armagh, martyred for our Catholic faith in 1681, came from Oldcastle in the north of the county. The relics of Saint Oliver rest in Drogheda, Father Richard's hometown where his father, a medical doctor, and his mother, excellent Catholics, raised their family. I learned from Richard that his grandparents went on their honeymoon to Knock soon after the Apparition there in 1879! One could say that true faith was in the air he breathed. His home, early schooling, and secondary education with the Vincentians at Saint Patrick's College, Armagh gave him a permanent, wholesome preparation and direction for life and for all that was to follow.

TOWARDS THE ULTIMATE GOAL:

At local community level, Richard was exemplary, very spiritual but also most human, kind, joyful, and helpful. He had a good sense of humour and could calmly take jokes aimed at himself. His witty responses were always friendly, positive, and sometimes challenging. Advised by his doctor to take a glass of beer now and again, he joked that he was in solidarity with the Labour party!

His presence, even when he was greatly reduced in energy, was always cheerful and full of charity (Christian 'agape'). He always made his way to community exercises right up to his final illness, and his commitment to Eucharist, prayer of the Church, and morning meditation never waned. On a personal note, I found him unfailingly

gracious, and as we would have a while of conversation daily, I was impressed by his mingling of the earthly and heavenly spiritual thoughts going with everyday news; yearning for God's reign, yet awareness of the mundane and opposing forces. The inner markings of faith and hope were there, injecting a sense of Trinitarian vitality. Longing for heaven was a light beckoning onwards.

MATINS IN HEAVEN:

Father Richard had a very serious illness a few years before his death; we thought for a while that he had left us, but he rallied and came out for another lap of the stadium, so to speak. On the occasion of that sickness and slow recovery as we watched him, we could see something like a final purification of the person. Some moments revealed the process more evidently, like the agony of Gethsemane; at other times the victory of faith and acceptance of the Cross were apparent.

Our Provincial, Father Eamon Devlin, CM, was with him at the supreme moment of meeting with the Creator of us all. Serenity and oblation were characteristics of the Great Encounter. Death was swallowed in victory. It was early morning on 24 December 2015. Just before the passing of Saint John of the Cross in December 1591 the Great Mystic looked to glory: *hac nocte cantabo Matutinas in coelo* (tonight I will sing matins in heaven). Likewise, Father Richard could have turned towards heaven for matins (now Office of Readings) and wonderfully, they would be matins of Christmas Day. We pray for Father Richard McCullen; we thank God for him and his gifts shared with us; and we ask him to think about us 'in via' along the journey of all our Vincentian lives.

Father Gregory Gay, our Superior General, in his homily at the funeral, quoting Saint Vincent, summed up in succinct words the central qualities of Father Richard, 'a courteous welcome, an open heart, and a winning simplicity.'

I end with emphasis on the major sources of Father Richard's Vincentian spirituality and active life of holiness and charity: his love and dependence on God, the Holy Trinity, and, especially, his personal love for Christ and the Eucharist, and also his fervent, filial, authentic, truly Catholic veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary.