

Easter Aftermath



Ned McGinley, National President

This is an article to remember as we think back to 1916 and the Rising.

“Echoes Of The Risings Final Shots”

(A manuscript found in the Capuchin Archives in Church Street in Dublin offers a new perspective on events during the Easter Rising of April 1916, writes Benedict Cullen.)

Between April 30th and May 4th, 1916, Father Columbus Murphy, a Capuchin priest, was called on to help and administer to the prisoners in Kilmainham Gaol prior to their execution. The following is based on a portion of Father Columbus's manuscript between these dates.

The day after the surrender of the Four Courts on April 29th, there was still confusion in North King Street about whether this was a truce or a surrender. To clarify, Father Columbus went to the Four Courts in an effort to retrieve Pádraic Pearse's note, which had led to the surrender there of Comdt Ned Daly. Failing in this effort, Father Columbus crossed the river to Dublin Castle to see if someone there had the note.

He met Capt Powerscourt and explained to him that he needed the

document to convince the Volunteers in the North King Street area that the Rising was over. The officer suggested he should go in person to Pearse at Arbour Hill detention barracks and ask him to rewrite the surrender note.

A two-seater army car was then provided to take Father Columbus to headquarters to ask Gen Maxwell's permission to see Pearse. As the car passed through James Street, a dangerous zone still manned by the South Union Volunteers, the Capuchin stood up in the car so that the Volunteers would see him clearly and allow the car to pass.

At headquarters, Gen Maxwell received him courteously. Father Columbus asked to be allowed to see Pearse. Having consulted some officers Maxwell said: "Very well! I will grant your request."

"May I also see the other prisoners?" asked the priest.

"Yes," replied the general.

Gen Maxwell deplored the loss of life and property which had occurred.

"Oh, but we will make those beggars pay for it," he said.

"But," replied Father Columbus, "the blood of martyrs is the seed of martyrs."

"Are you backing them up then?" queried the general. Concluding that prudence was the better part of valour, the priest said

nothing.

Handing the written permit to Father Columbus, the general said: "I hope, Padre, you will make good use of it to prevent further bloodshed."

The priest was taken by army car to Arbour Hill barracks.

Presenting his permit to the governor, he asked to speak to Comdt Pearse. The sarcastic reply came back: "I believe there is a man here who calls himself that!"

The governor accompanied Father Columbus down the right wing to the door of Pearse's cell.

The cell door was opened. Pearse was seated with his head bowed and sunk deep into his arms, resting on a little table. He looked a sad, forlorn, exhausted figure. Disturbed by the opening of the cell door, he slowly raised his head. He had the vacant, dazed look of someone waking from sleep. Then, recognising the Capuchin habit, he got up quickly, stretched out his hand and said: "Oh, Father, the loss of life, the destruction! But, please God, it won't be in vain."

The priest explained briefly why he had come, and asked Pearse to rewrite the document. Pearse agreed, saying his one wish was to prevent further loss of life and property.

In the governor's office, Pearse wrote:

In order to prevent further slaughter of the civil population and in the hope of saving the lives of our followers, the members of the Provisional Government present at headquarters have decided on an unconditional surrender, and commandants or officers commanding districts will order their commands to lay down arms.

- P.H. Pearse, Dublin, 30th April 1916

Shaking hands with the priest, Pearse said: "Hurry, Father, as time is precious and perhaps there are lives depending on it."

The next time Father Columbus saw Pearse was shortly before his execution.

At about 10 p.m. on Tuesday, May 2nd, a motor car drove up to the friary in Church Street carrying two soldiers who told Father Columbus that Father Aloysius Travers OFM Cap was required at Kilmainham Gaol. Within minutes the car drove off with Father Aloysius.

About a half an hour later Father Columbus answered the door again. Two policemen handed him a written message that had just been phoned through to the Bridewell. The note read: "Please tell the Franciscan Fathers at Church Street that the two men they wish to see at Kilmainham Detention Prison should be seen by them tonight."

Father Columbus consulted his superior, who agreed that Father

Columbus should go. Fortunately, he had gone only a short distance when the car, which had collected Father Aloysius earlier, returned. It had gone to pick up Mrs Pearse, but the sniper fire had been so fierce that it had had to turn back without her.

Father Aloysius, feeling the cold in the open car, had decided to pick up some extra clothing. Availing of the car, Father Columbus accompanied his confrère to Kilmainham Gaol.

When they arrived, they were shown into a little room. There, Father Columbus was informed that three men were to be shot at daybreak. He was also told that one of them, named MacDonagh, had asked for a Father Aloysius.

"Father Aloysius is here," said Father Columbus. "But who are the other two?"

"Pearse and Clarke," replied the governor.

Father Aloysius went to see Thomas MacDonagh. Father Columbus went

into Thomas Clarke's cell, where he remained for about an hour.

Clarke told him that the three men had been court-martialled early that morning, but that sentence had not been passed on them until after 5 p.m. He also said that he had received no food since breakfast-time and that he would like something to eat. At Father Columbus's request, one of the soldiers went to get a couple of

biscuits and a tin of water. Grateful for the biscuits, Clarke gave his Volunteer badge to the priest as a souvenir.

When Father Columbus had concluded his ministry to Clarke, he went to see MacDonagh, who, together with Pearse, had already been attended by Father Aloysius.

"Father," said MacDonagh, "they are going to shoot us after all." He then said he was looking forward to a visit from his sister, who was a Sister of Charity at Basin Lane Convent.

Time was passing. The governor told Father Columbus that Tom Clarke's wife and Willie Pearse were on their way, but that the visit of MacDonagh's sister, the nun, was out of the question because of practical difficulties. When MacDonagh was told this he was so disappointed and upset that Father Columbus promised that he himself would bring her to the prison if at all possible.

It was now past 2 a.m. An open military car, driven by two Dublin-born British soldiers, was put at the Capuchin's disposal and he set out for the convent. Soon after, he was able to return to the prison with Sister Francesca, MacDonagh's sister, and the Mistress of Novices.

Father Columbus conducted Sister Francesca to her brother's cell with only the flickering of a candle to light the way.

Following a brief visit with Clarke and his wife, Father Columbus

left Clarke's cell and met Father Aloysius, who told him that he had forgotten to bring the holy oils for the anointings after the shootings. It was now past 3 a.m. and Father Columbus set off again in the military car to obtain holy oils from Father Tom Ryan in Goldenbridge.

When he returned to the prison he found that the governor was anxious to get the nuns to leave, as time was almost up. Sister Francesca was numbed and dazed with grief. To gain more time she asked for a lock of her brother's hair as a keepsake. But there were no scissors. The governor then produced a penknife with a small scissors attached. It was given to Sister Francesca, but she could not use it, as her shaking fingers refused to work. A soldier took it from her, and, cutting a lock of her brother's hair, handed it to her.

Still she was unwilling to leave. Finally, after she had hung her rosary beads around her brother's neck, Father Columbus led her away and supported her down the stairs to the military car outside. As the car drove away, the firing squad marched up the road to the prison.

When Father Columbus re-entered the prison the governor informed him that both priests would have to leave immediately as it was now 3.20 a.m.

"We have not finished giving the rites of the church to the men," said Father Columbus.

"Do so immediately," replied the governor.

The priest explained that the anointings could only be given after the shootings.

"Well, in that case," said the governor, "it cannot be done at all as it is written in the regulations that all except officials have to leave the prison."

The priests were surprised and indignant, but were unable to change the governor's mind. Having administered the Sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion, the priests accepted the ruling, but lodged a formal complaint. Then they said a last farewell to the three prisoners without telling them that they would not be present at the shootings.

As they left the prison the governor told them that they were to keep the executions a secret. Then it was home to the friary to celebrate Mass for the repose of the souls of the three executed men.

The following night, Father Columbus slept soundly until he was woken shortly before 3 a.m. and told that he was wanted again at Kilmainham. As he came downstairs he saw Fathers Augustine, Albert, and Sebastian OFM Cap waiting for him.

At Kilmainham, an excited governor told them that four men were to be shot at 3.25 a.m., and that there was only a short time left for the priests to exercise their ministry. He asked that one priest go to each man adding: "Of course this time you will remain for the executions and do all that is necessary for them."

To their dismay, the priests realised that none of them had brought the holy oils. As Father Columbus knew Edward Daly, he went to his cell. Father Albert attended to Michael O'Hanrahan, Father Augustine to Willie Pearse and Father Sebastian to Joseph Mary Plunkett.

When he entered Daly's cell, Father Columbus saw a look of relief and gladness appear on the prisoner's face. The prisoner received the sacraments of Confession and Holy Communion with great fervour and prepared for death.

When it was realised that that Holy Communion had not been brought to J.M. Plunkett, who was in a different wing, Father Columbus went there and literally gave him the Sacrament as he was being led from his cell.

Anxious to see Daly for the last time, the Capuchin rushed back, only to discover that he had been led out already to be executed. As the priest proceeded to follow him, the shots rang out.

Father Columbus went back to where the other prisoners stood

chatting with each other, with the priests and with the soldiers.

The whole process was callously informal. The governor said a name and gave a signal. The prisoner shook hands all round. His hands were then tied behind his back, and a bandage placed over his eyes. Two soldiers took up their places, one on either side to guide the prisoner, and the priest went in front.

When the prisoner reached the outer door another soldier pinned a piece of white paper over his heart. The procession went along one yard, then through a gate leading to the next. Here the firing-squad of 12 soldiers was waiting, rifles loaded. An officer stood to the left, a little in advance; on the right were the governor and the doctor.

The prisoner was led in front of the firing-squad and was turned to face it. The two soldiers guiding him withdrew quickly to one side. There was a silent signal from the officer; then a deafening volley. The prisoner fell on a heap on the ground - dead.

After the executions the four friars were driven to the friary at Church Street, where they celebrated Mass for the repose of the souls of the executed men.

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