

Intercom November 2021 Tom Hamill - Fallen Oak Tree

Fr. Tom Hamill (1939-2020) was Director, Mount Oliver Pastoral Centre, Dundalk and later Coordinator, Armagh Diocesan Biblical Initiative 1993-2016. A charismatic and inspiring educator he became widely known throughout and far beyond Ireland. His friend Fr. Bobby McKenna who was the original director of the Catechetical Centre at its opening in 1969 recalls something of a widely missed and unique personality.

Those of us in Ireland and abroad who knew Fr Tom Hamill were surprised and saddened by his long illness and subsequent death on 27th March 2020. His outstanding and complex personality was captured by his friend John O’Leary at the time of his death *“An oak tree has fallen and we are at the loss of his presence and bereft of a man of intellect and culture and wisdom, not forgetting a man who could be irritating and challenging but who was also kind and affirming”*

Born 13th April 1939, Tom was the eldest of eleven children. During his childhood years he spent most of his waking hours with his granny, who had a big influence on him. Her home gave him the undisturbed peace to do his homework and his continuous reading during his years at the Christian Brothers’ School in Dundalk, where he was an outstanding student. He developed a great love for, and proficiency in, the Irish language and literature. A pointer to his ability was when he transferred to be with the Vincentians in St Patrick’s College, Armagh. He was sent there to study Greek before he could enter Maynooth to progress towards priesthood. In one year he covered the prescribed 5-year course in Greek and came first in Northern Ireland.

He steered his way successfully at his leisure in Maynooth. Meanwhile, Cardinal Conway, who was then Archbishop of Armagh, was noting his talents and ability and asked him to go to Rome to pursue scripture studies after his ordination in 1964.

He enjoyed three years in Rome and Jerusalem and became totally immersed in the scriptures. In those years of excitement, immediately after the Vatican Council, he came to discover that the Bible was not only something to be read and analysed by exegesis, but something to embrace as a story of relationship between God and his people, between God and us intimately. His reflections on all aspects of this wonderful story had a profound influence on his subsequent life and work. He dedicated himself to inspiring others to live this way of life.

When Tom was appointed to the new Mount Oliver in 1969, he found a group of mature students, mostly religious and priests at the outset, who were keen to share

the fresh air of our renewed Church. Most of these were fascinated by his lectures and poems and stories, whether in the lecture hall or on his hill-walking expeditions at the weekends. These often included a celebration of the Eucharist in the Cooley or Mourne Mountains, celebrating God's love and creation. In so many and diverse ways, his influence on students was palpable. His kindness and thoughtfulness, his talent as musician, vocal and instrumental, was appreciated by many, his big heartedness, if he discovered anyone was going through difficult times. Many stories are told about his support and generosity, but never with any fanfare. Memories of the Village Schoolmaster by Oliver Goldsmith often came to mind "*And still they gazed and still the wonder grew, that one small head could carry all he knew*".

An incident which threatened his professional work in Mount Oliver, and even his life, was a visit he made to India during a summer vacation in the 1980's. While there he contracted an illness called Shigella, a type of dysentery, which made him extremely ill. Medical people considered he was very fortunate that he survived the journey home to Ireland, where he was almost immediately put on a life-support system. He remained in that condition for 6-8 days in the Meath and Adelaide Hospitals in Dublin. Because he was considered to be at "deaths door", his family were called in to be with him at the end. But he survived and was transferred to the Lourdes hospital in Drogheda for a lengthy recovery. Some of his family were convinced that his experience of illness had a transformative effect on the rest of his life. He later became deeply involved in healing ministry.

In later years, after the winding down and subsequent closure of Mount Oliver as an institute of education, Tom transferred his extraordinary energy to summer courses and to what became known as the Armagh Diocesan Biblical Initiative. This was a series of biblical/experiential hints prompted by each Sunday's scripture readings, week in and week out for over 10 years. They were distributed throughout the Armagh diocese and much further afield and were variously met with bewilderment incomprehension and wonder, even by those few who had the patience and perseverance to disentangle and meet their challenge. After hundreds of weeks of unrelenting endeavour, Tom himself wrote "*After about a decade, the biblical initiative affectionately called by many "ADBI" has reached its final edition! Perhaps it will be re-strewn in another form! Like the sower's seed it has found its way, willy-nilly, into many corners and crevices of the planet Earth! And has offered opportunities to those who would embrace their often unfamiliar resonances to engage imaginatively and experientially with biblical narrative! I want to acknowledge the aversion that many had for ADBI! Obviously a great variety of reasons for this! But I'm pleased to boast, like you-know-who, that I adorned the biblical imaginings that moved innerly with my best*

language and form! Another initiative will follow, that hopefully can broaden and deepen this biblical initiative! Thanks to the many who supported the work". (Most of our priests supported him, but did not tend to give him the time or perseverance that was necessary). I hope that someone will emerge with the genius and prowess to point up the ongoing relevance of these reflections, a treasure trove of the scriptural readings to the contemporary church.

Tom's sad and sudden illness – with a stroke – put an unexpected curb on his remarkably rich and profound gift of expressing his genius. We will never appreciate the weight of that cross on him. During over two years in the nursing home, he was never heard to complain or show any signs of complaint. He accepted his illness totally in silent communication with the Word of God.

I can only turn again to the expressions of affection and admiration heard around the time of his death, some of them quoted from rip.ie, by Archbishop Eamon in his homily: "A man of God", "A Holy Man", "Another Baptist", "A Prophet and Poet", "An inspiring scholar", "A brilliant linguist", "A voracious reader", "A deep thinker", "A gentle listener", "A caring mentor", "A unique and special man of admirable simplicity: gan amhras ar bith, ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann". To which I add "i measc na naomh go raibh sé".

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