

The planning of this Mass of Thanksgiving long preceded the much welcomed news coming from Rome on April 27<sup>th</sup> last. The announcement followed immediately after a private audience Pope Francis had with Cardinal Angelo Amato, prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. During that audience the Pope authorized the Congregation to promulgate several decrees including that of the recognition of a miracle associated with our friend who brings all of us here from north Kildare and beyond, this Sunday afternoon - Fr. John Sullivan S.J.

On that morning of April 27<sup>th</sup> last, miracles associated with one 'Blessed', one 'Venerable' and ten 'Servants of God' were officially recognized by the church. The ten 'Servants of God' break down neatly into five men and five women. The Blessed one whose miracle was recognized hails from the southern part of Italy, Blessed Alfonso Maria Fusco, a diocesan priest, and the Venerable Servant of God is of course our own John Sullivan, a Jesuit priest. The fact that John Sullivan was only declared Venerable on November 8<sup>th</sup> 2014, the announcement of his being declared 'Blessed' has happened very fast indeed.

The very detailed documentation and testimonies which the Congregation took their time to reflect on, spans into a tome of 629 pages with appendices of close to a further 80 pages, so if anyone thinks this is a fast track for John Sullivan or maybe convenient that we have a Pope who himself is a Jesuit, nothing could be further from the truth. The detailed documentation was presented in April 2004 and assigned the protocol number 956 in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. The process which the Congregation engages in is robust, is thorough and is engineered for the good of the church and for the deepening of the faith of the people. The recognized miracle must be verified by strong evidence; the life of the 'Beatus' or 'Blessed Elect' must be endorsed by strong character testimonies and statements. In other words, it's not about who you know, it's not about money and it's not about being well connected. Blessed Elect John Sullivan is held up for all of us now as a heroic example of virtue, goodness and holiness, but of course you his faithful followers knew that for years already.

To date Pope Francis had authorized the beatification of 50 people, Fr. John Sullivan becomes his 51<sup>st</sup>. His predecessor Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI declared 871 people 'Blessed'; while St. John Paul II broke all records beatifying 1,327 people and before him Blessed Paul VI beatified 145. Beatification is as I mentioned at last year's annual celebration here in Clongowes Wood College, another significant stage on the road to becoming a Saint. The very first hurdle to cross in this process is establishing that the deceased person is worthy of recognition in the wider church, this takes time and usually involves testimonies and witness statements by people closely associated with the one whose cause is being promulgated, or whose lives have been deeply affected and moved by the same person. The first process is establishing that someone is worthy of being called a 'Servant of God'. For John Sullivan that was bestowed on him back in 1960 – 56 years ago; he was declared Venerable in November 2014 and Blessed on April 27<sup>th</sup> last.

We have come in huge numbers this afternoon May 8<sup>th</sup>, to honour one whose legacy and influence is still very much felt and appreciated in these parts. As I journey around the Diocese I continue to hear stories of deep devotion and fervent faith in John Sullivan. He was ordained a priest 110 years ago this July. His life is remarkable in many instances in that he was 35 years living in the Anglican tradition and 37 years a Catholic. The news of his being declared 'Blessed' has been warmly welcomed by both traditions. Having been received in to the Catholic faith in 1896, he entered the Jesuit Novitiate in 1900 and would spend 33 years of his life with the Jesuits. Most of that time was here in Clongowes and how appropriate it is that we come here today to say thanks for whatever favour we have received, whatever intention has been answered or for whatever healing we needed.

While Clongowes is today synonymous with excellence in education and on the sportsfield, John Sullivan was not particularly remembered as a good teacher. In fact, an over anxious parent might have issues around his lack of discipline in the classroom. Apparently he was self-effacing, but he had a great desire to do the best for the boys, to bring out the best in them. For nearly all his years in Clongowes, he was the boys Spiritual Director. As I read his life, it gave me an appreciation of how important it is for boys, for young men to have good priestly role models and mentors. The students in John Sullivan's time and the authority on his life Fergal McGrath was one of those said students, recognized his holiness, appreciated the interest he took in them, they were delighted to go to Confession to him. He was a splendid confessor. At the time of his death another of his students remarked in a class: "*Sir, isn't it a great thing to be able to say you were taught by a Saint? And the funny thing is that we knew it, even if we pulled his leg a bit!*"<sup>1</sup> The fatherly care he showed the boys in their boarding school loneliness was genuinely cherished. I believe past and present students continue to hold John Sullivan in deep affection; I imagine the nearer it is to exam time, the deeper the affection!

We are now in the sixth month of this Jubilee Year of Mercy, nearly half way there. It is significant that the particular devotion most associated with Fr. John Sullivan centres on being blessed with his Cross. He was not a medical expert or a faith healer, but he was a man who through his own sense of prayer and holiness, was able to transmit the healing power of Jesus Christ. It was from here, from Clongowes he went on many errands and journeys to sick beds and hospitals. His fellow Jesuit Fergal McGrath summed up his pastoral outreach with the splendid comment: "*The apostolate of the poor, the suffering and the afflicted never flagged during thirty years. Father Sullivan was a great walker, and his figure was a familiar one on the roads around Clongowes*"<sup>2</sup>. Today, eighty-three years after his death, the faithful continue to look for the Cross of John Sullivan. A blessing with the Cross will happen at the end of our Mass. When we look on the Cross we recognize the sufferings of Christ and see our own pain and suffering in a very different light. John Sullivan, in delivering spiritual talks to the students of his day, reminded them how different the mercy of God is from the cruelty of the world. He illustrated his point with the story of a boy who came from a well to do background but enjoyed a very harsh relationship with his dad. He had strayed away from home and like the Prodigal in Luke's gospel thought of returning, only to have the door closed on him by his dad.

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<sup>1</sup> McGrath, Fergal: '**Father John Sullivan S.J.**', Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1941, pg. 98.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pg. 155.

In a temper he broke the windows of the home and lived the rest of his days on the road. Fr. John added *“what a contrast the father’s action was to the mercy of God”*<sup>3</sup>.

In these addresses to the students Fr. John would not hold back when it came to being self critical. He might let fly as he did on occasion in religious houses, perhaps leaving those who lived with him in community, that little bit uncomfortable. Then again it never is easy to live with a saint! We’ve all tried it! On religious houses he said: *“religious houses where charity had grown cold, were hell upon earth”*<sup>4</sup>. Maybe it’s a good time as we give thanks for the life and witness of Blessed Elect John Sullivan today to ask ourselves have we a crucifix in our own homes, maybe a small one in our pocket, purse or car? John Sullivan believed we should all have a personal love for the Cross. I don’t know of anyone else for whom devotion to his Cross is central to the promotion of his cause. On the mercy of God, he reassuringly reminds us: *“God always leaves the door unlatched”*<sup>5</sup>. It’s up to us to walk through.

For 27 years Fr. John Sullivan’s remains rested here in Clongowes until 1960 when on his being declared a ‘Servant of God’, his remains were exhumed and buried in St. Francis Xavier’s Church on Gardiner Street in Dublin. While his remains have rested there now for 56 years; his memory still lives strongly in these parts. The crucifix he held at the moment of his death is venerated in St. Francis Xavier’s Church, while the crucifix placed in his hands and buried with him in 1933 is revered here in Clongowes. For many of us, the cross represents triumph over suffering and an end to sickness, I pray that this may be your experience this Ascension Day, World Communications Day as we gather in Clongowes to commemorate Blessed Elect John Sullivan, and we continue our prayers that one day he may be honoured with the greatest accolade of all – Sainthood.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, pg. 231.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, pg. 231.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, pg. 219.