

Philbin, William Joseph

by Ambrose Macaulay

Philbin, William Joseph (1907–91), bishop of Clonfert, and of Down and Connor, was born 26 January 1907 in Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo, the middle child and only son among three children of James Philbin and Brigid Philbin (née O'Hora), both of whom were national schoolteachers. Educated at St Nathy's College, Ballaghaderreen, and St Patrick's College, Maynooth, he read a distinguished course in classics before proceeding to theology. Ordained priest on 21 June 1931, he returned to Maynooth for further studies in theology which led to the award of a doctorate in 1933. After service in England as a curate for a year, in Eastbourne in the diocese of Southwark, he joined the staff of St Nathy's College, Ballaghaderreen, in 1934. Two years later he was appointed to a chair of dogmatic theology in Maynooth, which he held for seventeen years. During that time he wrote articles for the *Irish Theological Quarterly*, the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, and *Studies*.

In December 1953 he was promoted to the see of Clonfert and was ordained bishop on 14 March 1954. As bishop he took a keen interest in social studies, and published pamphlets on subjects on which he had already given addresses at conferences. In *Patriotism* (1958) he remarked that Irish people needed reminding that 'the greater heroism is not always found in spectacular exploits, in spite of the applause they may attract'. Referring to the need to correct 'the undue emphasis on nationalistic, political and violent aspects of patriotism' he claimed that 'probably the most patriotic work in Ireland today is being done by those associations that are improving productivity in our chief industries and raising standards of life socially and culturally'. He developed this theme in *The Irish and the new Europe* (1962) where, commenting on the moral challenge presented by entry to the Common Market (EEC), he remarked that Irish people were often thought to be 'lacking in self-discipline, especially in what concerns our everyday work and our business relations with others'. Consequently, many observers felt that 'our whole attitude to work could do with some straightening out'. Every individual should therefore see his work as 'his duty to himself, to other men and to his Creator'. A keen Irish scholar, he translated the writings of St Patrick (qv) from Latin into Irish (*Mise Pádraig: nua-aistriú Gaeilge ar scríbhinní Naomh Pádraig* (1960)).

In 1959 he was appointed a member of the preparatory commission of the second Vatican council, which dealt with the discipline of the clergy and Christian people. He attended all the sessions of the council but was unenthusiastic about some of its decisions and the developments that sprang from it. In Clonfert he increased the provision of secondary education for boys by extending St Joseph's College, Garbally Park, Ballinasloe.

In 1962 he was unexpectedly chosen to succeed Bishop Daniel Mageean in the diocese of Down and Connor. As bishops in Ireland were not normally transferred from a diocese in one province to a diocese in another, the transfer caused much surprise. Shortly after his arrival in Belfast, he was invited to visit the lord mayor at the City Hall, a courtesy which had not been extended to his predecessors and which was taken to herald better intercommunal relations.

In 1965 he publicly challenged the employment practices at the Sirocco works in Belfast. Four years later when violence broke out in the city and catholic homes came under attack, he demanded the protection of the British army. Within a year the army, which had been deployed to protect the catholic community, began meeting hostility from republicans. Bishop Philbin in November 1970 pleaded with the catholics of the Ardoyne area in Belfast not to throw stones and missiles at the soldiers; he argued that local people would be the victims of such attacks. In January 1971 he told a congregation in Ballymurphy that members of secret organisations were not bound to obey 'immoral orders', and, in fact, were bound to disobey them. A few days later a group of women from Ballymurphy protested outside his home against this advice.

After the internment in August 1971 of some 300 men assumed to be members of the IRA, battle was joined between that organisation, in its different branches, and the security forces. In an address to the Irish Association in Manchester in 1974 (published that year as *Ireland's problem*), the bishop deplored the financial help given to supporters of physical force by people of Irish descent abroad 'whose sentiment was out of touch with the present situation'. He bewailed the evil influences wreaking havoc on many catholics' lives: 'the general climate of lawlessness and disorders, the incidence of brutality of every kind, the currency of what everyone knows to be lying propaganda, the prevalence of robbery and destruction and dishonesty, the contempt for human life and human rights, the utter callousness and ruthlessness of what developed into an attempt to bring a whole community to its knees so that it would be ready to accede to any demands'. And he concluded that Ireland's problem was the continued existence of underground armies.

Apart from brief interludes the conflict lasted till long after Bishop Philbin's retirement. He frequently appealed to catholics to desist from participating in or supporting violence. He also denounced the assassination of catholics and their intimidation from their homes and places of work. He condemned the atrocities committed in his diocese both by republican and loyalist militants, but found both his appeals and condemnations rejected or ignored.

In Belfast Bishop Philbin succeeded in negotiating an end to a dispute between the government and the Mater Infirmorum Hospital in 1972, which enabled the hospital to offer its services to and receive financial support from the state. His continued interest in education was manifested by the establishment of St Patrick's College,

a grammar school for boys in Belfast, and by extensions to St Malachy's College, Belfast. During those years of violence he completed his translation of epigrams and fragments from the Greek Anthology, which was published under the title *To you Simonides* (1973), and eleven years later he published a small volume of poetry entitled *The bright invisible*.

His retirement from Down and Connor was announced on 8 September 1982. He died nine years later on 22 August 1991.

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William J. Philbin, *Neighbourliness* (1958), *Does conscience decide* (1969), and other writings mentioned above; personal knowledge

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