

On the road to a Diploma in Pastoral Theology



Parked up at Don Bosco Service Area north of Turin

It was great, or so I thought, to be heading out of Ireland, and away from the troubles that July weekend 17 years ago. Two years earlier, I decided to swop life in the classroom for life on the road. Whether or not it was the Kris Kristofferson film 'Convoy' which affected my brain, the honest truth was that the only convoy I was familiar with was the little village of the same name in Donegal!

I had invested in a new lorry and trailer. Their brightly coloured livery displayed my love for Celtic designs. I began life on the road collecting Dell computers in Limerick and delivering them to warehouses in Liverpool, Bristol and London. I soon progressed to continental work and the trip to Gothenburg in Sweden became a regular run. I also travelled to many other countries throughout Europe, but the run to Italy remains high on my list of favourites. This particular trip meant setting off for Larne to catch the all-night sailing to Fleetwood, then down through England to the Port of Dover, across on the ferry to France and then by motorway to Italy via the Alps.

I never saw much of Larne all the times I'd been there. The road leading into the port was as unattractive as other small ports I'd been in – mostly grey, gloomy with little or nothing to entice anyone back for a return visit.

But the bleakness of the road to Larne was replaced on that particular evening by hundreds of flag-waving protesters who had blocked entry to the harbour. To me it looked like Larne's own 'Check-point Charlie'. There was going to be no way I was boarding the Fleetwood boat that night. The police helped get me and other lorries turned around and I quickly left before anyone expressed an opinion about my Celtic designs!

Over the years I've met some amazing people on the road and made great friends. I have nothing but wonderful memories of life on the road. But when surgeons get at you with a Black & Decker drill and a chainsaw, you know it's time to park up for a while! (I believe the medical name for this procedure is a triple-bypass, but my description cheers me up more!). I haven't retired completely all the same, except that now I confine my truck driving to Ireland as much as possible.

Little did I ever dream that, given my own experiences, there would be anything in Larne that could ever attract me! But in June 2015 my wife drew my attention a notice in our Parish Bulletin, advertising a two-year Diploma in Pastoral Theology which was being run in Larne! Surely not? Larne? No! I must've read it wrong. Impossible! Anyway, I applied, was interviewed and got accepted.

The late Fr Gerry Hughes SJ wrote a wonderful little book called "God of Surprises." In it he relates some of his life experiences and his encounters with ordinary people. He tells us how he saw Christ at work in the lives of others but how many of them were unaware of His presence. Sometimes we can meet God in the strangest of places. I certainly found Him in many of the people I met and worked with during my driving years.

But an even greater surprise was waiting for me when I discovered Drumalis Retreat and Conference Centre, Larne, the venue for the course. Without doubt it is one of the most tranquil, homely places I have ever been in. It is run by nuns of the Cross and Passion in the persons of Sister Margaret Rose and Sister Anna - not forgetting Scottie, their pet dog - although he's more of a family member than a pet.

A lot of work went into getting approval from St Patrick's Pontifical College, Maynooth. Fr Perry Gildea, Maura Burns and the late Fr Martin McAlinden wanted to develop and offer a course with practical application, one for all sorts of people, coming from all sorts of backgrounds. The three of them worked on it and it was a wonderful day when they were told that Maynooth would authorise the course in Drumalis. Fr. Martin, in his capacity as Director of Pastoral Theology at Maynooth, was key to that process. Sadly he passed away last year after a courageous battle against cancer.

I remember the day I started the course, wondering if there'd be many, if any, other 'mature' students and if I'd fit in. But that's part of the magic of Drumalis. Age doesn't matter. In fact the age range of the present intake varies between mid-thirties to mid-seventies! So I didn't feel out of place at all.

It's the mixture of venue, setting, course content, speakers, staff and shared vision that makes Drumalis unique for everyone that experiences it. For anyone wondering or worrying about the pressure that academic study places on them, don't fret. Help is only a phone call away and there will always be others on the course who are always ready to assist and encourage you.

I have learned to juggle work and study, sometimes more successfully than others. It isn't unusual for me to carry some textbooks or other reading material with me in the lorry. I don't think you'd be likely to meet too many truck drivers reading theology and writing notes while they are parked up overnight at some service station or other. I try to fit in thirty minutes or so of reading here and there when I'm not too tired. Sometimes I find I haven't read a thing during the time I've been away, but I know that I can play catch-up at other times.

The experiences and stories that the others on the course bring with them is heart-warming and uplifting. I would recommend this course to anyone engaged in any Church ministry or activity or who is thinking about contributing to the work of their parish, or who simply wants to learn more about theology. It'll surprise you to learn how much you already know. What about the recommended texts? Again, don't fret. I had images of big books with even bigger words and phrases that meant you'd have needed a dictionary just to understand the title! There are men and women on the course who never sat a state exam and who wouldn't even have a spirit level to their name, never mind an 'A' level. We are all equals in Drumalis. Accept the invitation Jesus offered to his disciples "Come and see." If you accept the invitation, you will find a welcome in Drumalis and memories to last forever.

Raymond Logue

Information about the course including application form is available from the Drumalis website: <http://www.drumalis.co.uk>

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