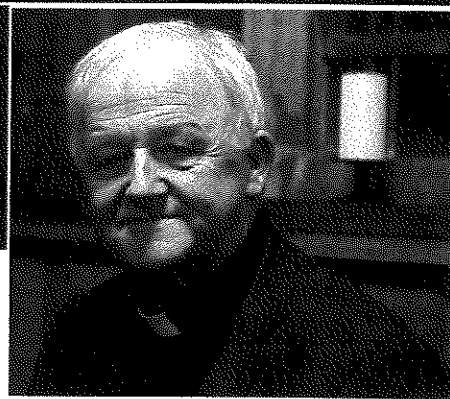


# Article from Africa Magazine

*Part 1: The editor in conversation with...*

## Bishop Brendan Kelly Bishop of Galway



**E**ditor: *You are a Galway man through and through – born, raised and educated in the county. Your ministry as a priest has been in parishes and schools in the diocese. Was it a dream come true for you to be appointed bishop of Galway?*

**Bishop Kelly:** I couldn't say that. I never wanted to be the bishop of Galway – or indeed of any other place. I was shocked to be asked because I was 71 years of age. I had been 10 years in Achonry [as bishop]. I believed I was going to die there! And I was very happy there – the people were great and very welcoming of me. It's an entirely rural diocese... there were no big third level institutions or hospitals, for example, as Galway has: the university and the Galway/Mayo Institute of Technology and of course there are big hospitals here. No town in Achonry had more than 1,600 people. I felt I could manage that.

I couldn't get over the atmosphere of joy and welcome when I was installed in Galway. The Cathedral was full to the brim with over 2,000 people. I discovered that day that it really was a homecoming for me. I never thought that I would be coming back here, but it is good to be home.

**Editor:** *What influenced you to become a diocesan priest as opposed to joining an order or becoming a missionary?*

**Bishop Kelly:** There were different influences when I was growing up. I knew the Redemptorists well in Esker. We knew the SMAs (Society of African Missions) in Cloughballymore and there were the Carmelites in Loughrea. And then there were all the different people who came to St Mary's (a diocesan high school in Galway) to talk about their groups – the Kilteagans and particularly the Columbans – they were very impressive. But I'm a bit of a home bird and essentially that was it. While I travel a little bit, it's not a passion for me. But also I had all that experience of the home mission. This was familiar ground and I liked the priests. Also, the diocese offered both parish ministry and teaching and I was open to both. I was happy when I was sent teaching after one year in a parish as curate. I spent 23 years teaching...the last 9 as principal.

**Editor:** *There are very few vocations to the diocesan priesthood these days or to the religious life in general. Has God stopped calling people? What's your take on what is happening with regards to the fall off in vocations?*

**Bishop Kelly:** It's a huge question and I wouldn't regard myself as having the answer to it. But I do know this, that the vocation to the priesthood is hugely dependent on the centrality of the faith perspective in the various communities but particularly in the family in which the person is brought up. I think fundamentally – in my own case anyway – that vocation is born out of faith and a respect for the priest. It was in my own home. There was also a pride in the parish in their priests.

Today, because of all that has happened, the whole world has discovered that priests are sinful and can be grievously so – that has been a very significant factor.

I think also that the broadening out of people's worlds – the opening up of our own little Catholic world – the discovery that other people live other kinds of lives – all of that has had an influence. The advent of television in Ireland, in every living-room, has meant the opening up of many questions regarding the culture, and therefore regarding the faith and the Church.

People are very intolerant of hypocrisy and rightly so. My words must be matched by my deeds. There is a huge questioning of authority now in society – authority is not given by the office – it has to be earned in a personal way – you have to have it within yourself. Also, the awakening within the Church itself at the Second Vatican Council – that has been critical too. After the Council, we knew that the People of God was central. We realized that baptism is prior to ordination and is the sacrament from which all others derive – that it is the baptized who form the Church, not the ordained. The ordained are there to serve the Church and to listen to the Church as much as speak to the Church. Leadership has to do with listening and it has to do with building up. This is part of the revolution that was the Council and I think that is a good thing.

The gospel is constantly telling us that it is the love of God for us that is primary and that we have to live out of that and that all will be well, as Julian of Norwich said. That's where we take our stand and that's how we will be able to cope with the vicissitudes and the horrible realities that we encounter in our day-to-day lives, in each other and in ourselves. That's the wonderful liberation that it brings. My failure and my sin

will not have the last word. The light and not the dark will triumph. That's the story of Easter.

**Editor:** *We are in a time of transition both in society and in the Church in Ireland. What's emerging – what shape is the Church taking do you think?*

**Bishop Kelly:** For many years, the Redemptorists in Esker used to have a monthly gathering – a day of retreat, of recollection day for priests. The man who used to speak at it was Fr Gerry Crotty. He was a moral theologian and he'd been completely bowled over by the Second Vatican Council. It changed his approach to theology. He used always say to us that the job of the priest was to have eyes and ears and senses for the green shoots in the Church. That was the principal job of the priest in the parish. In those green shoots was the future of the Church. There is a real sense that our job as priests is to decrease so that others may increase.

**Editor:** *Are you seeing any green shoots?*

**Bishop Kelly:** I am, yes. I think green shoots are everywhere. For example, I was at a meeting the other night. We were presenting the diocesan accounts to one of the deaneries and it was a gathering mostly of lay people – the priests and their finance councils. It really struck me – isn't there something magnificent about these people? They've taken on this role, they are out here tonight in the middle of winter. They knew an awful lot more about finance than the priests did and they were involved.

My experience as a young priest in Kinvara in 1971 was this: I went there full of myself and what I had to offer after my training in Maynooth. And I can say that now – I didn't realize it at the time. The biggest experience of that first year in the parish – and it was a great lesson – was that I wasn't bringing the Gospel to these people at all, they had it already. And they had it more deeply and more profoundly than I had it. That was a shock to the system but I found myself rejoicing

in that...in what was already there and what I had been lacking myself. And that has been my experience right through my life.

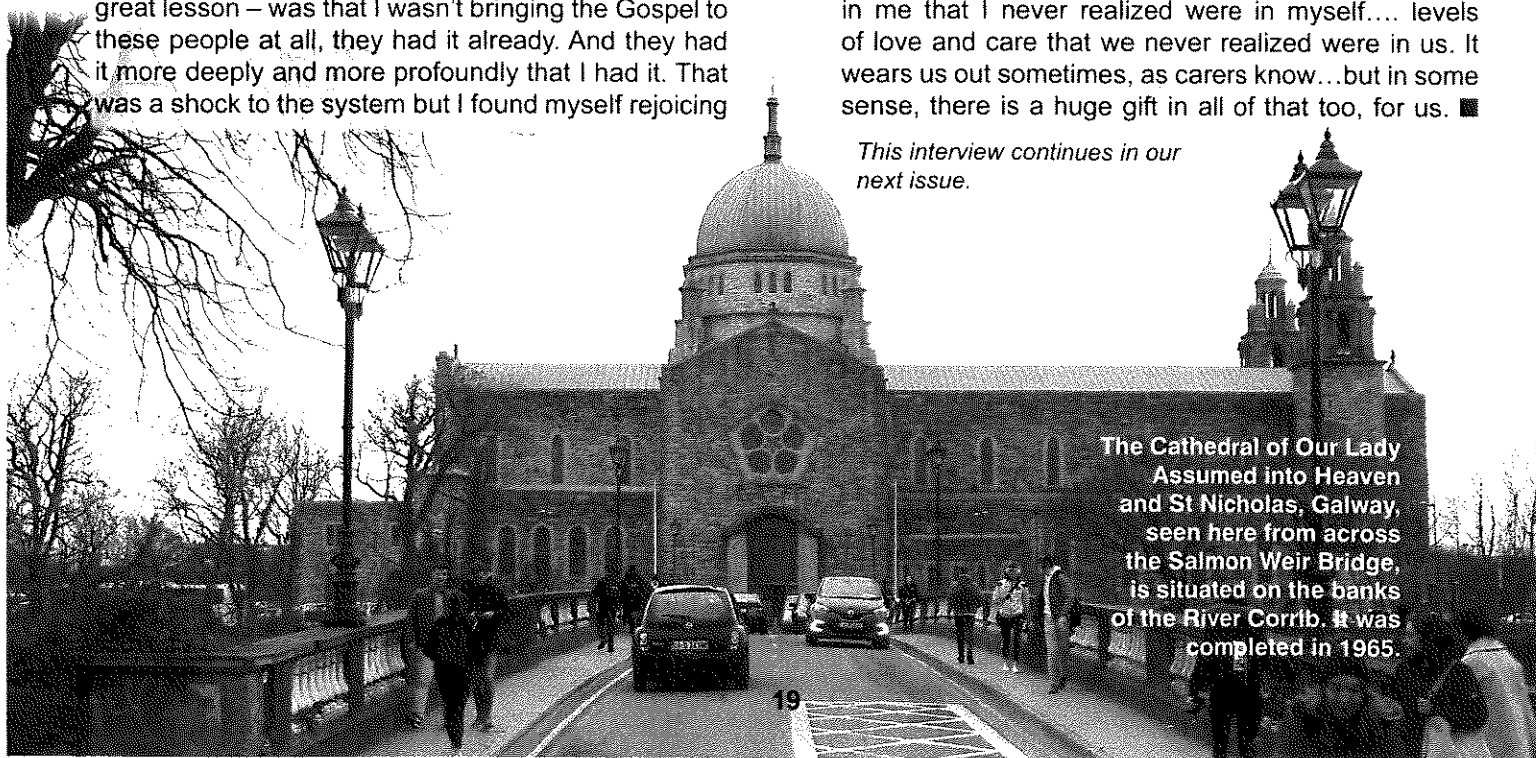
**Editor:** *Is there a readiness on the part of the hierarchy to look for and encourage those green shoots do you think?*

**Bishop Kelly:** I think there is. There is a lot of talk about being ready to see those green shoots and to affirm them – we need to focus on that if there is to be hope and if we are to bring the hope of the gospel. I keep discovering that if you are able to really listen to people and if they are able to open up and trust, you discover their extraordinary goodness and beauty. We realize that the great treasure we have, are people.

I was once asked if I would prepare adults who had serious mental/physical difficulties, to receive the sacraments. They had been unable to receive them and this was a source of great pain to their parents. It was an extraordinary experience for me. These people couldn't read or write and were in many cases confined to wheelchairs and needed to be helped all the time and couldn't live independent lives although they were adults. How do you prepare them for the sacraments?

The staff were amazing...and really eager to be engaged. In the end, we were the ones who were transformed. The encounter with people with disabilities re-ordained me in some way. That's what we bring to the world. Jesus emptied himself – we must empty ourselves and become as our neighbour is – especially our neighbour who is impoverished, crying out for support, who is suffering and who has been rejected. It's the guy in the prison, the guy who is dying...who is not useful anymore. We have to get beyond the fear of people who are different. Their wonderful gift is that they are calling forth service, love, relationship – qualities in me that I never realized were in myself... levels of love and care that we never realized were in us. It wears us out sometimes, as carers know...but in some sense, there is a huge gift in all of that too, for us. ■

*This interview continues in our next issue.*



The Cathedral of Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St Nicholas, Galway, seen here from across the Salmon Weir Bridge, is situated on the banks of the River Corrib. It was completed in 1965.