



Troubles viewed in light of Passion narrative

THE idyllic setting of the Passionist retreat house in Tobar Mhuire, Crossgar, provided the setting for a conference exploring 'The Passion Narratives and the Ministry of Reconciliation'.

The aim of the conference was explained by Fr John Friel CP.

"The experience of conflict in the north of Ireland has received political analysis, psychological analysis, sociological analysis, historical analysis – and rightly so," he said.

"However, the experience also calls for an in-depth theological analysis of the issues that both give rise to and that have arisen from the experience of the conflict.

"This conference aims to contribute to such analysis."

Fr Donald Senior CP was the three-day conference's keynote speaker.

A member of the Passionist Congregation, Fr Senior is president of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

In 2001 Pope John Paul II appointed him a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and he was reappointed in 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI.

His insights into the scriptures and the Passion narratives in particular accompanied the wisdom of people

The Passionists are applying some theological thinking to the legacy of the Troubles and the challenge of peace and reconciliation, **Brian McKee** writes



who lived through the experience of conflict.

The conference also heard from community activists, people who have lost loved ones, former combatants and politically motivated prisoners, politicians and people whose lives have been changed utterly by the conflict.

The conference began with a workshop exploring the experience of the Holy Cross parish in Ardoyne, a community that saw 99 conflict-related deaths between 1969 and 1998 – more deaths per head than any other community in the north of Ireland.

Conference uncovers impact of trauma

THOSE who took part in the conference spoke of its impact upon them:

"I didn't live in a troubled area. I didn't think the Troubles affected me but when I listened to the stories I was suddenly aware of the trauma I did not feel but had so far remained hidden.

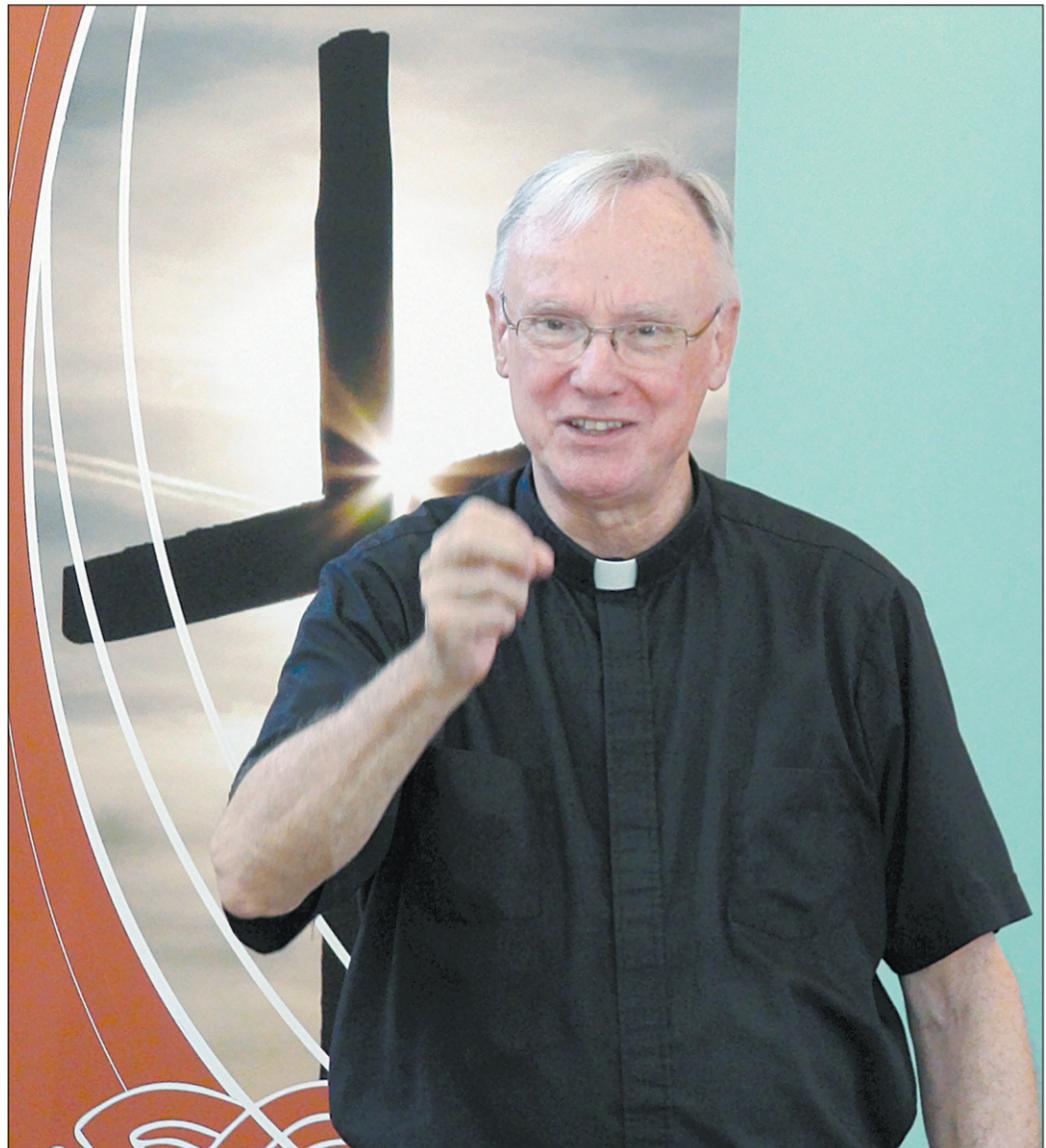
"I think the effect of the conflict has been wider than many of us liked to think or dared to imagine."

"I learned a lot, particularly from the stories of people in the Troubles. I have become aware of the pain of the prisoners. Before I

came here I thought they deserved it and while many no doubt did deserve what they received, I am also thinking differently about their plight. I want to learn more."

"I have learned that listening, particularly to those who think differently to me, although difficult, is also essential to us all moving forward."

"Stories of hurt, pain and betrayal are hard to both tell and listen to but I am aware now of how important they are. "We need to be doing this in our own communities."



KEYNOTE SPEAKER: Fr Don Senior CP addresses the conference held in the Tobar Mhuire retreat centre in Crossgar, Co Down, from July 26 to 28 about 'The Passion Narratives and the Ministry of Reconciliation'

The workshop highlighted that in this Passionist parish in north Belfast, the crucified was no stranger.

Participants reflected upon how a shared experience becomes a shared memory and in the recalling of such memories, both for individuals and for a wider community, the experience can become 'real' again.

Such shared memories are not confined to their historical context but become part of the DNA of a community and are passed on through future generations.

These memories are easily triggered through slogans such as "Remember 1690" or "1916" or through the sight of an Orange parade or the sound of the Lambeg drum.

It is in recalling such shared memories that history is shared but history can either empower us to move towards a new and shared future or imprison us in the past.

It is also in the calling to memory of another shared experience, the story of the Passion, that the Passion narratives can become a source of hope, healing and reconciliation.

Fr Senior led participants through the various portraits of the Passion as presented to the communities for whom they were written in a way that made sense of their particular historical and cultural context.

From the stark reality of Mark's Passion story to the Christian community undergoing persecution in Rome and where Jesus dies with "a scream" in his voice, to the Passion story in Matthew, where the former close-knit Christian community is now expanding into a more diverse community.

As Gentiles join the early Church, we find a society reflecting upon how they can remain faithful to the past but also courageously move into a shared future.

Similarities with the challenges

facing people in the north of Ireland were stark.

Fr Senior moved to Luke's Gospel, where Jesus is presented as 'the man of integrity'.

Participants were struck by the distinction he made between 'the innocent man' and 'the just man' – the innocent being the one who is 'not guilty', whereas the 'just' person is the one who lives a life of integrity and while suffering is not sought out, it is accepted as a consequence of living this life of integrity.

Further inputs reflected upon John's Passion narrative as the triumph of life over death, of love over

of privacy.

This system was originally intended to bring about a conversion and rehabilitation of the monk, for him to see the error of his ways, but it has subsequently come to be seen as retribution and punishment in today's prison system.

Fr Scanlon pointed out the Gospel passage where we are commanded to visit those in prison and how we can often dilute this by interpreting prison as those who suffer loneliness or some form of isolation.

He maintained that the institutional forces in society benefit from what he described as the "destructive status quo" in the prison regime today.

He also maintained that the public view of prisoners made citizens indifferent to their plight and ignorant of the systematic injustice they faced.

During the course of the conference, participants reflected upon core issues such as: what would it cost to embrace people who have inflicted trauma upon you or upon your community?; the role of prisoners and their influence in setting the rest of the community free from violence in their acceptance of the peace process; what would it mean to move forward in creating a new society while still remaining faithful to the core dreams and visions of those who have gone before us?

Conference talks are available from Tobar Mhuire retreat house. For further information on the conference and the wider programme at Tobar Mhuire, telephone 028 4483 0242, email secretary@tobarmhuirecrossgar.com or visit www.tobarmhuirecrossgar.com.

Brian McKee is a member of the retreat team in Tobar Mhuire and also works with the Passionists in Holy Cross parish, Ardoyne, Belfast.

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hatred and of finally bringing all people into communion.

The role of Paul, the former terrorist who became an "ambassador for peace", was not lost upon those present.

Fr Tom Scanlon CP, a chaplain to high-security and mainstream prisons in the north, presented an analysis of the penal system and how it was being challenged to reform.

He reflected upon how the modern penal system had its origins in the monks' penitential system with the emphasis on the cell, solitary confinement, the peephole and lack