

## BEYOND THE GRAVE

### (1) The cause of Beatification and Canonization

In the years immediately following his death, belief in the great holiness of Father Sullivan was continually manifested. There was a constant demand for portions of his clothing as relics, and many reports were heard of favours granted through his intercession. It was, however, only after some years that various events took place which — providentially, as it seemed — brought about the introduction of his Cause of Beatification and Canonization.

The first was the publication of his biography in 1941. I had been asked in 1933 to write for the *Clongownian*, the school magazine of Clongowes Wood College, an obituary notice of Father John, and even in the short time devoted to its composition, an amount of very striking information had emerged. About 1938, Father Patrick Kenny, who had been an intimate friend of Father John, suggested to me that a full biography should be written. My immediate reaction was that, though we were all convinced of the great sanctity of Father John, there was too little incident in his life to justify the committing of it to writing. However, Father Kenny suggested that we should have the *Clongownian* obituary reprinted and sent out to various communities and individuals with a request for further information. The result was astonishing. Letter after letter arrived bearing testimony in the most enthusiastic terms to Father John's extraordinary virtues, his humility, mortification, union with God in prayer, kindness and understanding as a confessor, devotion to the poor and suffering. These testimonies left no doubt that his life was worth being perpetuated in writing. As the work went on, more and more witnesses appeared who had striking stories to tell, and so the Life practically wrote itself. It was published in 1941 and resulted in a more widespread devotion to Father John and a

growing desire that his Cause should be introduced.

Another fact that favoured the introduction of the Cause was the publication of letters of the Father General of the Jesuit Order, Father Ledochowski, in 1933, 1935 and 1936, urging the various provinces to take means to perpetuate the memory of men of outstanding holiness. In response to this direction, the Irish Provincial, Father John R. MacMahon, addressed in 1943 a questionnaire to a large number of Jesuits who had known Father Sullivan, asking for their opinion as to the desirability of introducing his Cause. The response was unanimously affirmative. In 1944 Father Sullivan's name was placed on the list drawn up by the Postulator of Causes in Rome, Father Carlo Micinelli, S.J., of those whose Causes should be promoted, and Father Charles O'Connor, S. J., was appointed Vice-Postulator to direct proceedings in Ireland.

The first step now was to set up what is called the Judicial Informative Process in the Cause of Beatification and Canonization. The rule is that this should be in the diocese where the death occurred of the person concerned. Father Sullivan had died in St. Vincent's nursing home in Dublin, and the late Archbishop, Most Rev. Dr. J.C. McQuaid, who, as a boy at Clongowes had had Father Sullivan as his spiritual guide, gave his warm approval to this step. The tribunal, consisting of three judges, one of whom was appointed president, the notary (secretary) and the promotor of the faith (popularly known as the devil's advocate), was sworn in at St. Francis Xavier's, Gardiner Street, in 1947. In the course of time, illness or death caused several changes in its personnel, but happily the president, Mgr. Patrick Dargan, and the Notary, Dr. Michael Browne, continued to give devoted and invaluable service until the work of the tribunal was completed. The process was necessarily slow, as some seventy witnesses had to be examined, and their evidence taken down in longhand. The task of the tribunal fell under three headings, the establishment of the heroic virtues of the Servant of God, evidence that no undue veneration had been paid to him; and the examination of his writings. In connection with the last

named, appeals were issued in the press in 1953 from the Archbishop of Dublin and the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, Dr. Thomas Keogh, for the submission to the tribunal of letters or other writings of Father Sullivan.

The hearing of the evidence was completed in 1953, and there followed the laborious task of having fair copies made and attested. During this time, further devotion to Father Sullivan was stimulated by the publishing in 1954 of a second biography, *The Port of Tears*,<sup>1</sup> by Father Matthias Bodkin, S.J., one notable feature of which was its skilful evocation of the Victorian atmosphere of Father John's youth. In 1958, the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death was marked by a radio talk, given by Father Bodkin. The work of transcription of the proceedings of the Process was completed in 1960. The ten volumes of evidence were signed, sealed and placed in a specially made oaken chest at Archbishop's House, Drumcondra and in August of that year were brought to Rome in the care of Mr. Seán Ó hEideáin, Secretary at the Irish Embassy to the Holy See, being granted diplomatic coverage by courtesy of the Department of External Affairs.

During this year, Father Paolo Molinari, who had been appointed Postulator General in 1957, suggested to the Vice-Postulator that the Cause would be furthered by the exhumation of Father Sullivan's remains and their transfer from Clongowes to St. Francis Xavier's Church, Upper Gardiner Street, Dublin. This project received the approval of the Archbishop of Dublin and the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin.

1. 'The Harbour of Tears', *Port na nDeor*, was the interpretation of the name of his old school, Portora, given by Father Sullivan in a preface which he wrote for the biography (p. viii) by Father Joseph Darlington, of John Haughton Steele, son of Dr. William Steele, headmaster of Portora. The name was traditionally derived from the fact that in ancient times Portora was the place of departure for boats carrying the dead to their last resting place on the holy island of Devenish in Lough Erne.

## (2) The Exhumation

It was with mingled feelings that the news was received at Clongowes that it was proposed to transfer the remains of Father Sullivan to St. Francis Xavier's Church. On the one hand, it seemed very fitting that his last resting-place should be among those who had been the most constant witnesses of his holiness, and there was the further fact that, during twenty-seven years, his grave had been a centre of devotion for pilgrims from all over Ireland. Yet, on the other hand, it was understood that the exhumation of the remains was an essential part of the Process of Beatification, and that their transference to a large public church in the capital city would mark a definite step forward in the progress of the Cause.

The ceremony of exhumation commenced at Clongowes on September 27th, 1960. It was presided over by two officials appointed by the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, Mgr. James F. Conway, *Iudex Delegatus* and Mgr. William F. Miller, *Promotor Fidei*. At the request of the Bishop of Kildare, His Grace the Archbishop of Dublin had appointed as *Notarius* Rev. Michael Browne, D.D., who had had experience in the same office at the exhumation of the remains of Matt Talbot and had also been *Notarius* in the Dublin Process of Father Sullivan's Cause. The Society of Jesus was represented by Father Paolo Molinari, Postulator of the Cause, who had come from Rome, Father Charles O'Connor, Provincial and Vice-Postulator of the Cause, his *Socius*, Father Brendan Barry, and the Rector of Clongowes, Father Hilary Lawton. The witnesses to the identity of the grave were Father Patrick Kenny, who had been Minister of Clongowes at the time of Father Sullivan's death, and two of the Clongowes employees, John Cribbin and Frank Smyth, who had assisted at the burial.

The doctors charged with the examination of the remains were Dr. Edward T. Freeman, who had acted in the same capacity at the exhumation of Matt Talbot, and Dr. George O'Reilly, medical adviser to the college. The public authorities

were represented by Dr. Brendan O'Donnell, Medical Officer, Co. Kildare, Mr. Joseph Reynolds, Public Health Department, Naas and Mr. Patrick Coen, Chief Health Inspector, Dublin Corporation. The actual exhumation was carried out by two gravediggers from Glasnevin Cemetery, Ernest Cummins and Bernard Farrell, under the direction of Mr. J. C. Doyle, Superintendent of the cemetery (who stated that every member of his staff had volunteered for the task). To secure privacy, a small body of the Garda Síochána was present, 'under the direction of Chief Superintendent O'Driscoll, Naas. The transference of the remains to the People's Church and the provision of the coffin were in the hands of Messrs. Corrigan, Dublin, who were represented by Mr. Gerard McNamara and a number of his staff.

At 10 a.m. all who were to take part assembled in the Castle, and took the required oath not to remove anything from the coffin or place anything in it which might be regarded as a relic. They then proceeded to the graveyard, where the exhumation began at 10.30 a.m. The day was cold and the sky overcast, but the rain kept off.

When digging had been in progress for an hour, some fragments of the coffin were found, and later the metal breastplate. As the midday Angelus was ringing, the outlines of the coffin began to appear. It was apparent that the lid had decayed, so from now on only trowels were used, to avoid damage to the remains. About an hour later, the feet of the remains were uncovered, the boots being intact. It took several hours more to free the coffin and raise it from the grave, but at about 5.40 p.m. this was accomplished. The coffin, wrapped in a white sheet, was placed in the hearse, and brought to the People's Church and thence to an adjoining room where the triple coffin was ready for the re-burial. It was observed that, as the first sign of the remains had been seen when the midday Angelus was ringing, so the exhumation was complete and the remains placed in the hearse just at the 6 o'clock Angelus.

The two doctors, in the presence of the clerical officials, worked from 7.30 p.m. to 10.45 p.m., preparing the remains

for re-burial. These were laid on and sewn to a light wooden pallett, covered with white silk, and then transferred to the inner oaken coffin, into which were put a copper cylinder containing the authentication, signed by various witnesses, lay and clerical.

At about 11 p.m. the lengthy process of sealing the coffin began. The inner oak coffin was placed inside the leaden coffin, which was then nailed and soldered down and sealed in two places with the seal of the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin. While this was being done, Dr. Freeman dictated to Dr. Browne, The *Notarius*, a full account of the exhumation and the medical findings. Finally, at 1 a.m. the leaden coffin was placed in the outer oak coffin and transferred to the People's Church, where it was laid on a catafalque.

### (3) Transference to Dublin

A day had been left free before the transference of the remains, lest the exhumation should not have been completed on the 27th. Accordingly, the coffin rested during the 28th in the People's Church, which became the scene of striking and spontaneous devotion. Father Rector celebrated the morning Mass in presence of the remains, the church being filled with the senior boys and many of the faithful. Shortly afterwards, a stream of pilgrims began to arrive. All day long, the two avenues were filled with cars, and towards evening, a queue of over a hundred persons was waiting to secure admission. When the church closed, the coffin was transferred to a catafalque before the high altar of the boys' chapel.

On the morning of September 29th, after Mass attended by the whole school, the stream of pilgrims was renewed, in even larger numbers than on the previous day, and from places far distant from Clongowes. Many invalids were amongst them. A conservative estimate of those who venerated the remains during the two days was about three thousand.

At 2 p.m. the Absolution was pronounced by Father Provincial in the presence of the community and boys.

**(5) Father Sullivan's Clients**

During the forty-three years since his death, there has been constant evidence of the veneration in which the memory of Father Sullivan is held. The numerous testimonies received display not only belief in his intercession, but also a personal affection which is remarkable in persons who never knew him during life. By courtesy of the Vice-Promoter of his Cause, Father Charles O'Connor, S.J., there follow a few passages taken from the hundreds of letters which have been received during the past three years alone. Names and addresses have been omitted.

'I would like to publish a great favour of Father Sullivan. I was very bad with asthma for five years. I went on a holiday to my sister in Kildare and I got a very bad attack, so she got her husband to bring me in to get blessed with Father Sullivan's cross. From that day to this I never got the asthma, and that is two years ago this month. I will never forget Father Sullivan, as I am the mother of three young children and I don't know myself since I got cured.'

'In 1974 Mr. X. lost the sight of his left eye, whilst his right eye was failing fast. Being a literary man, this was a hard blow. Having made the novena to Father John Sullivan and wearing the relic, his failing eye became strong and well, the other eye slightly improved. All danger of total blindness had vanished. His specialist was greatly surprised.'

'I wish to record that I have received a great favour through the intercession of Father John Sullivan. My little son had a very bad virus pneumonia and both of his lungs were badly congested. He then developed measles, and the doctors thought he would not survive. My husband and I prayed to

Father Sullivan all during my little boy's illness and I got a relic and kept it under his pillow. He is now perfectly well again. Our doctor had a great devotion to Father Sullivan and also her husband, who is a past student of Clongowes and knew Father Sullivan. They both prayed to him to save our little son. In our small town two other people called to my husband and told him they were praying to Father Sullivan for John.'

'In January, 1975, my husband was seriously ill with pneumonia. He had a very severe rigor and suffered frightful delirium. I placed a relic of Father Sullivan under his pillow. From that night he slept soundly (never taking at any time a sleeping-draught), and made a complete recovery.'

'You asked me to let you know how I came to be interested in Father John. Well, eight years ago my youngest child, a boy, was born. As I was very sick, a lady in the hospital lent me her relic and I began to pray to him. Thank God, my baby and I were fine, and ever since the whole family pray to him. He has helped me in many ways. My daughter is in hospital now having an operation. The reason I wanted the relic was I felt if I had it in her baby's pram while she is away, it would help me look after it. You can imagine how we depend on him.

'I hope to hear good news this year of the Cause of our friend, as it is the Holy Year, Rev. Father John Sullivan, S.J., God rest him. I trust to live to hear of him amongst the saints in heaven.'

'Two years ago this month we took our little girl, who was suffering from allergic asthma, to you at Clongowes Wood. You blessed her with Father John Sullivan's relic and said

prayers for her. Since then she has not had a severe attack. In fact last year she only missed two days from school. Words cannot express my thanks. We say the prayer every evening. Life is so different for me. Each morning I see Mary off to school and say: "Thanks be to Father John Sullivan".'

'I was out of work and tried many places, but could never get what suited me. Thanks to Father John Sullivan to whom I had prayed, I have got a lovely job which suits me. I'll always believe and trust in him, and my advice to all people in trouble is to pray to him, and he will assist them in their needs and wants. I pray every day for his speedy canonisation.'

'I am ten years old. Athletics is my favourite sport. In October last, just as the cross country season was starting, I got a very sore heel. Daddy took me to a doctor. He put an elastic bandage on my foot and said I could not run on it for a long time. I was very sad. I wrote to Father X., who is my uncle. He sent me a relic of Father John Sullivan. I said the prayer to him every night and put the relic to my heel. It immediately got better. I was able to run again. I ran in many competitions in the Club. I am very thankful for this favour received through Father John Sullivan. I shall say the prayer every night and hope some day he will become a Saint.'

'I would be so grateful if you would procure a relic for me of Father John Sullivan. I have just finished a book written by a fellow-Jesuit, and I can honestly say that it has made a great and lasting impression. I hasten to add, with some shame, that I am not overburdened with religious fervour, but his biography touched me deeply... I can't think why Father Sullivan has not been beatified.'

'As I have the greatest faith in the intercession of Father John Sullivan, I would be most grateful if you would kindly say a Holy Mass for me, for the relief of arthritis, please God. I am a semi-retired nurse and it is of urgent necessity that I may be able to cope with a light post until I retire, and there is great need here to help patients remain in their own home.'

'Mrs. X. was very seriously mentally ill, making no response to the treatment in hospital. As a result of the Novena and wearing the relic of Father John Sullivan, she was discharged from hospital and appears in perfect health. Her recovery took place from the time the family commenced the Novena. She was home within a fortnight.'

'I have just finished reading the booklet entitled "Father John Sullivan, S.J.". I am very impressed by this holy priest and I guess that at this particular time of my life I wish that such a holy priest as he were still alive. I have gone through one year of hardship. I quit my job just one year ago and have had two or three others in the past year, never happy at any. I have been going to Mass and Holy Communion quite often, if not daily. But there is something missing in my life and it is true love for Christ and Him crucified. Please pray for me that God may change my whole life. Please send me some more material about Father John Sullivan. I would like to let him be known here (a city in U.S.A.).'

'This was a very nice letter for us to receive, those lovely relics and cards. I have given them all away to people who are suffering, so as to have a great crusade of prayer to Father John Sullivan, S.J., and all are very grateful. Of course I have kept one for ourselves. We say the novena prayer every night with the family rosary, and bless our little girl with the relic.'

MORE MEMORIES OF FR. JOHN SULLIVAN

'On a pilgrimage day at Aylesford, Kent, I met a friend who was telling me about Father Sullivan. She has lent me his life story in a little book. My request is if I can have a few relics of Father Sullivan so that I can make him known more widely throughout the world. What a wonderful priest he was.'