

## Echo Opinion

# A priest who has opened so many doors

June 19 was a momentous day for Fr. Des Wilson. After dedicating his life to serving Christ and God's people he had a celebration Mass, not only to thank god for his sixty years of priesthood, but most of all to thank the people of West Belfast and beyond for their love and friendship.

Fr. Des said that it was the people who deserved all the praise and the response of these wonderful people was to fill Corpus Christi Church to overflowing. Their tribute to Fr. Des as he entered, and when leaving, was overwhelming.

The next day, Fr. Des celebrated Mass again. With him was Bishop Noel Trainor, Bishop of Down and Conor. Bishop Trainor spoke beautifully as he thanked Fr. Des for all his work of the past sixty years.

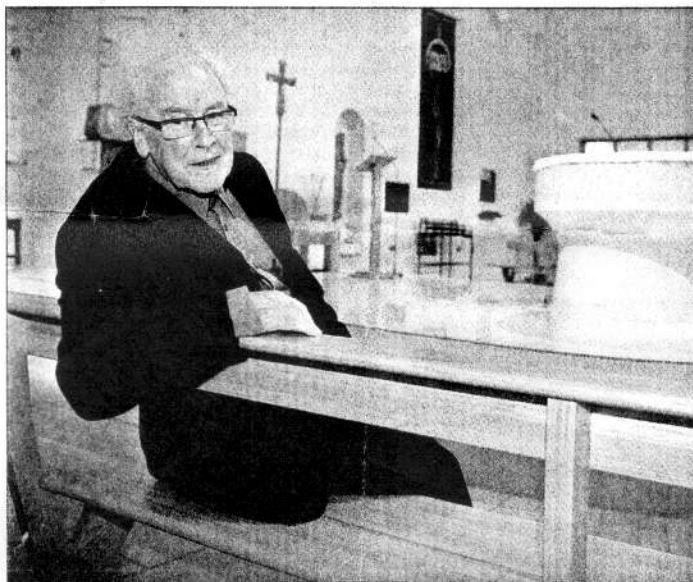
And rightly so. His high standards of love and compassion for the suffering of others brought Fr. Des to West Belfast during the worst years of strife as people struggled for basic human rights.

Unemployment was as high as 87 percent during those years, causing much poverty, hunger, and very low morale in the community. Fr. Des worked to deal with the situation with patience and forbearance, while he set up education courses, job training, and relaxation sessions through music, plays and more.

Fr. Des and the community kept their dignity, their sense of humor, and, most crucially, their willingness to work together to improve conditions, often by speaking out to government officials, urging them to provide assistance.

In 1985, my husband and I visited Fr. Des in Belfast and saw for ourselves the need for money for basic community assistance at a time when unemployment was so very high.

When we returned home, Gerry Coleman and I began a fund raising appeal called "Aid To The Conway



Fr. Des Wilson has been a priest for sixty years but his outstanding service to the people of Northern Ireland continues.

Mill."

Within a short period, we raised a few thousand dollars. Others asked if we could continue by incorporating into an active organization. Along with Gerry, Fr. Maurice Burke, Ed Brady, Phil Brady, my husband, Ed Logue, Marge Suter, and others, we worked together under the name of "Doors of Hope," which was formally chartered in 1988.

Over time, we were able to send an average of fifty thousand dollars annually which was distributed to not only Fr. Des, but also Mary Nellis at Dove House and many other groups. While the amount was not large, it gave people in the north of Ireland hope and they, in turn, began to make wonderful progress.

By 2005, It became too difficult to continue this work. Many of the committee workers had died or were not well enough to continue. Thanks to the kindness of Maggie Van Cleve in Pittsburgh, a group was organized to

continue the work under the name of The Conway Mill Trust.

Americans who have met Father Des can well understand why he is so well loved and respected. He made many trips throughout the United States seeking assistance for his work. He was not only looking for financial aid, but also moral support and, all the while, letting us know the truth of what was happening in the Six Counties.

There were years when he was required to come as many as three or four times to America speak for passage of the MacBride Principles and for human rights. He made friends in every state.

None of us could keep up that heavy pace and for the past ten years, while he has continued his work, Fr. Des but does not travel as much.

During our recent visit to Belfast, Fr. Des continuously talked about how appreciative he is to Americans for their kindness and their assistance

in attaining the West Belfast of today, so different now to what it was twenty years ago.

The government there has finally recognized the need for education, making his efforts in this field a little easier.

Health Initiatives, education classes and social events are a large part of the ongoing work, thanks to Noelle Ryan and Elsie Best who are based at the Conway Mill.

There is, too, the Irish Republican History Museum, which was started by a local teacher. Eileen Haddock and her husband Johnny did a marvelous job. Unfortunately, Eileen died before it was completed but her husband made sure this tribute to her remains the very best.

It is with much pride that we today look upon the new construction underway at Conway Mill. This dream began forty years ago as eight men, led by Fr. Des, were given the opportunity to take over this abandoned linen mill. Conditions were, and in many parts still are, pretty run down with broken windows, poor plumbing and electricity.

With the aid of several charitable groups in Ireland and in England, and the Investment for Ireland Group, there is finally sufficient funds available to complete the construction work. It will take about 18 months and you can be assured it will be a work of art given the plans that we have seen.

Many Americans have generously sent \$500 to fund a window. You can have them memorialized in your name, or that of a loved one. Donations can be sent to Conway Mill Trust, P.O. Box 101529, Pittsburgh, PA 15237.

*Conway Mill Trust undertook fundraising for the people and communities of Northern Ireland in the Fall of 2005 when eight Pittsburgh-based men and women took over Dóirse Dochais (Doors of Hope), this after Elizabeth Logue, one of its founders and last remaining board members, retired. Logue lives in Midland Park, NJ.*