LYNN JOLLY

A life less ordinary

An Interview in the magazine 'Open House' with Fr Willy ('Speedy'!) Slavin

I share with many readers of *Open House* a long association with the subject of this interview. Mine goes back to an early appreciation of social justice as inherent to the gospel. I credit him with first alerting me to that compelling truth over 30 years ago. In light of that, subjecting both of us to the *Open House* interview process was unlikely to be a relaxed affair, loaded as it was with a mix of remembered youth (mine) and taciturn reserve (his). Experience told me to keep the questions focussed and not to expect wide-ranging discourse. Since the subject on this occasion was 'himself' I further expected to be in and out in five so what follows was no small feat.

Willy Slavin retired from his last diocesan appointment as parish priest at St Simon's in Glasgow in 2013. Finally giving place to a lifelong contemplative instinct he took a hut in the woods near Falkland in Fife where he spends half of his time. Another long-standing impulse to write has also been given space in retirement and his recently published book seemed like the most fruitful place to start the questions. *Life is Not a Long Quiet River* (reviewed by John Miller in OH 282) was published earlier this year by Birlinn and is billed as a memoir, although it is also a mix of theological reflection, polemic, and autobiography. I put this to him and ask what the motivation was for writing, and for publishing.

'I was clearing out in preparation for the move to the hut. I had kept a diary every year since 1956 so I had a lot of them. I knew I needed to get rid of them but it seemed a shame to have written everything down like that and then just throw it away. I tried writing it all up as an autobiography but it was boring and I thought no one would want to read it. Then I was asked to lead a seminar for some priests in Wales under the headings of obedience, poverty and celibacy. That struck me as a better structure for the writing so I tried again and it seemed to work'.

I make the same schoolgirl error I make repeatedly and think there must be more. I reflect back to him that I get the practical bit about the diaries but what was the *motivation* for writing a book? Any book. He gives me a familiar, weary look that says, 'I just told you'. Persisting, I observe that most people who write do so because they have something they need to express, much as the painter paints. This gets a shake of the head. In a final stab I resort to sarcasm and ask him if he's trying to tell me that he wrote a book to save space. 'Exactly!' he responds, obviously delighted with that description. Enough with the writing. I ask about the decision to publish. Had it been an ambition or just an obvious consequence? Neither.

'I wasn't thinking about publishing anything beyond just sharing what I'd written with family and friends. It was a personal project. But I sent bits of it to a few people I know well for comment. One of them, a friend who's a journalist, came back to me and suggested taking it to Birlinn. She knew them and thought it was the sort of thing they might be interested in, and they were. People seem to be interested in the hut, the hermit life, and it coincided with Birlinn wanting to branch out into spirituality and religion so I suppose it hit a bit of a niche'.

I express some curiosity about his reason for seeking the comments of others on what was essentially, at that stage, a private project. I'm searching. Was there some hidden, perhaps unrecognised desire to get it all out there? He doesn't think so. He wanted some critique is all. This time I resist the 'yes, but....' option and ask about the experience of publication. I was at the launch. He seemed uncomfortable. Writers often bemoan the whole publication bandwagon. Does he?

'I was a bit uncomfortable with the exposure. The thought that your life is

now there on a shelf is a bit unnerving. I'm quite a private person so the reality of knowing it was there for people to read makes you a bit vulnerable. But I also knew I wouldn't have done any more work on it. If they'd said they wanted a rewrite I would have dropped it. But they didn't want much changed and were happy to take it as it was'.

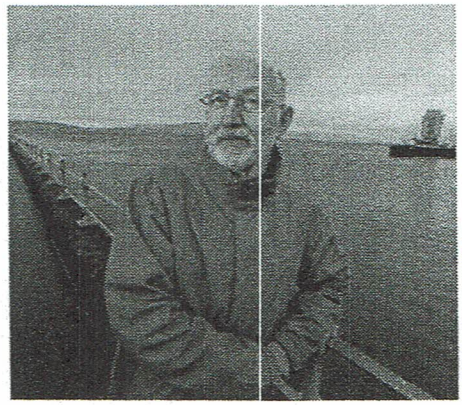
It was that easy? Was he surprised by that? 'I know I can write' he says, in a manner that belies the confidence that knows that is true while also knowing it's not quite an answer. A shot at another deep dive is tempting, but while I ponder that many 'private' people paradoxically choose to publish their memoirs, I conclude that we're probably done with exploring paradoxes.

Justice and peace

We move on to the theme that has defined his ministry, possibly his life, and for many people in the Scottish Catholic community, is almost synonymous with his name: justice and peace. It was the prospect of taking on the role of secretary to the Scottish Bishops' Justice and Peace Commission that brought him back to Scotland in the early 1980s after five happy years in Bangladesh. At the time the anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid movements were high on the national and global agenda. Poverty was always high on his. If he were coming to such a role now, I wondered, where would he start?

'With poverty', he says, without hesitation. 'Where?' I ask. 'How?' Here many issues like homelessness, low pay, and unemployment have become so absorbed into the mainstream discourse they've become sanitised. Everyone 'cares' but no one is moved. People in work use food banks and many of those out of work are better off. It's a muddy picture. He absorbs this then seems to decide he's thought of a better question. And, as it turns out, he has. He answers it by referring back to what took him on those journeys: out to Bangladesh and home again.

'I went overseas to broaden my mind and my sense of the world. What I saw there, living and working with a community of Xaverian priests, put everything else in perspective. Poverty there was, and is, nothing in comparison. Global poverty, the level most people live at in what we refer



Willy Slavin.

to as the developing world, is on a different scale. It reduces life to survival and it's unlike anything we experience. When I came back I saw the justice and peace role as an opportunity to raise the consciousness of the church here to that fact, as I saw it. It was a chance to educate, and to help people understand the gospel in those terms."

In his description of that transition there is something of the wrench that it was to leave Bangladesh. There was, he says, a real temptation and desire to stay. Only the pastoral invitation to bring the learning home, and attempt to make the necessary change in awareness and behaviour here, was sufficient to make his return an appealing prospect. The point is not lost that the offer of a parish probably wouldn't have clinched it. I note this and wonder therefore if the work of the justice and peace commission, didactic and mission-oriented as it was, entirely fulfilled his pastoral ministry. He recognises the dichotomy and acknowledges that no, it didn't.

'I think that was expressed more in the prison. I worked as prison chaplain, mostly to Barlinnie, during the same period of time I was justice and peace secretary. I think that's where I found the pastoral side of ministry. I was always very clear about being there for the prisoners, even if that meant challenging the institution, and it often did. At that time Barlinnie was a terrible place. Many of the reforms that have happened in prisons hadn't happened yet. Some of it was barely human. Much of life in there was just about survival too. It was a contrast to the theory and campaigning nature of justice and peace. It was instant and immediate and mostly awful'.

These last two exchanges are of a different quality. Less question and answer; more prompt and reflection. Any pretence at detachment on my part disintegrates. He's remembering how things came together in service and mission. I'm hearing again words that planted a seed: 'You can't talk about the gospel without talking about justice and peace'. I remind him that they were his words and the seed they planted was in my own mind. I ask him if he still thinks it's that clear. He does. And so, given that the church still seems at times considerably *less* clear, how does he see it and his place in it now?

'The church? As the institution it just represents the best and worst of human nature. It's capable of trampling over people, but then also capable of providing hope and showing courage when often it's all that people have left. That seems to me to be what makes it profoundly religious: the best and worst, transformed into something beyond our individual efforts. It's mystery in that sense and also very human'.

It's a typically realistic description and it occurs to me that, in all he has said, and done, there is something determinedly immediate, concrete. In fact the correct term is, 'incarnate'. I'm about to try and engage him in some theological speculation on this theme when I notice he's finished his fish and it is five minutes short of an hour since we began. I regroup and divert instead to a conclusion, explaining that I like to end on a lighter, quirky note. He looks as though he doesn't care if we end on a chorus of Auld Lang Syne, just so long as we end. So I ask him, since two of his favourite recreational activities are reading and cinema, which he would choose, if forced to.

'I think I'd choose a film'. And why is that, I ask? (I'm aware that I'm now inflicting actual pain but I'm genuinely curious and a wee bit surprised). 'Maybe because it's a bit more instant, a bit more interactive'. I decide I don't need to know what this means. He's picking up *The Herald* and we're done. As often before, it has felt less like talking and more like exercising, and as *always* before, I've got what I need. Life is not a long conversation.

Lynn Jolly works in the third sector and is a member of the parole board.