

The healing art: Abbot-elect Christopher Dillon, who will be liturgically installed tomorrow by the Archbishop of Cashel. Photograph: Jack McManus

On the eve of the installation of a new Abbot at Glenstal, Sean MacReamoinn visits the abbey and examines its history

Brothers in alms

EVEN in midwinter, the approach to Glenstal Abbey up the long high oak-lined Front Avenue is undeniably impressive: but in May and June, when the rhododendrons explode in all their glory, it is quite breathtakingly beautiful. And then at the final turn you are confronted by this great Gothic Pile looking like a film set for *The Name of the Rose*, or one of the Brother Cadfael whodunits. Not only Benedictine but medieval as well. Or rather, Benedictine, *therefore* medieval. Right?

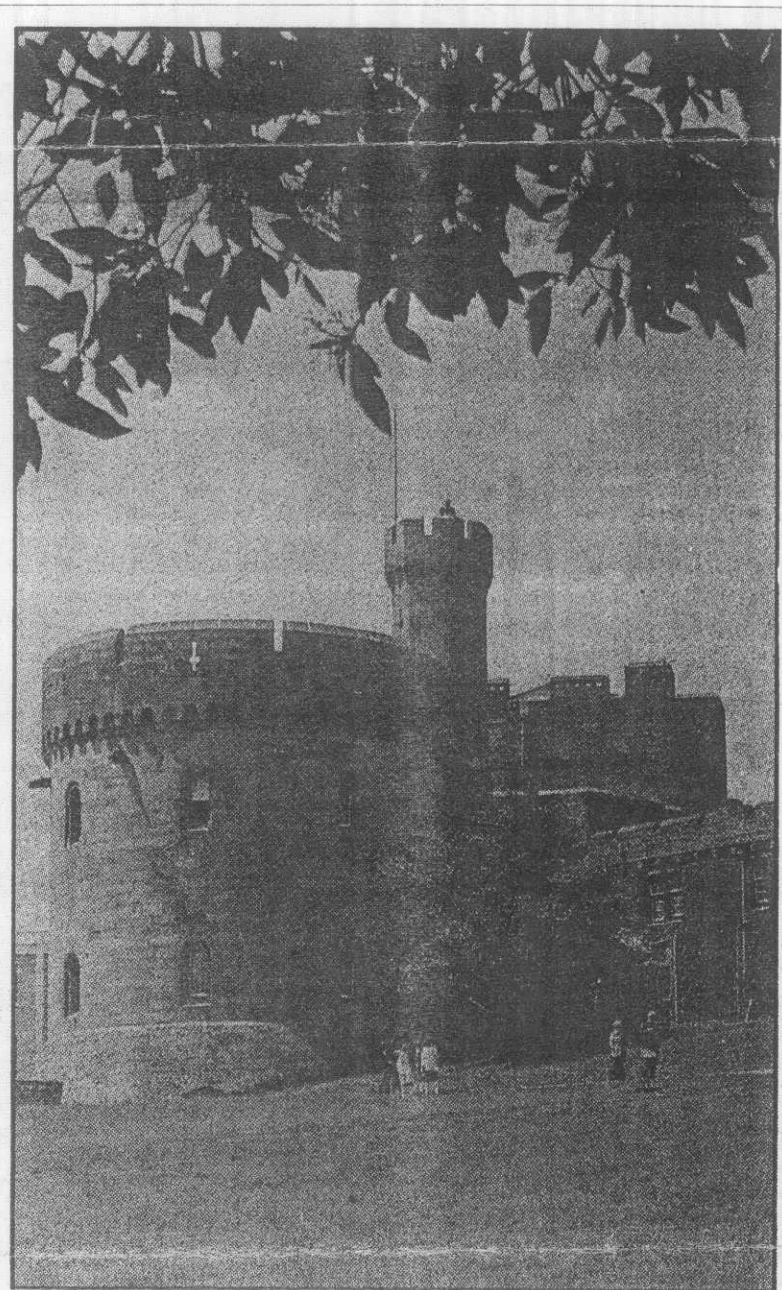
Wrong. For one thing the Gothic Pile is actually a 19th-century exercise in opulent nostalgia, a "Norman Revivalist Castle, all fronted with an impressive facade and Norman gatchouse". For another, Benedictine monasticism was well established before the Middle Ages, has survived — and indeed helped to forge — the cultural changes of a millennium and a half, and shows little sign of regression. Anyway, Glenstal has very little to do with medieval Ireland.

Abbot Christopher Dillon, who neither looks nor sounds middle-aged, let alone medieval, and who will be blessed and liturgically installed tomorrow by the Archbishop of Cashel, is only the fourth Benedictine ever to have held this office in Ireland.

Monks and abbots were indeed plentiful here before the Reformation, but even when Continental monasticism superseded the old Celtic ways, the Benedictine rule, accepted by Irish monks over there, didn't really "take" at home — except in its Cistercian form which certainly did.

In the post-Emancipation revival it was the Cistercians again who made the running and became established in new foundations from Melleray to Portlengone. Glenstal, founded in 1927, is the first and only Irish Benedictine community to attain the status of abbey.

Irish it clearly is: the monks of Maredsous who parented it in the 1920s had the good sense to let it grow up in its own way, and so it did. After a slowish start, recruitment grew apace until by 1957 the number of



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constitutions provide that sometimes he must decide (after consultation) and at other times he must accept the decision of the community — as, for instance, in the acceptance of a novice to profession. I suspect he will do both with clarity of mind and will.

But what is a place like Glenstal for? The abbot suggests that some people *need* to live in community if they are to find fulfilment. (And this has been true at all times and in a range of religious cultures).

But then there is actually no other place quite like Glenstal: Benedictine monasteries are special, with their unique ethos of Christian humanism and each monastery has its own autonomy within the Rule and its own character. So the serious inquirers keep knocking.

OPUS DEI is not just the name of a Catholic organisation (with a strikingly non-Benedictine approach): the words mean "God's work", which centred for Benedict and his followers on the daily round of liturgical worship, in which all take part.

Many monks are also priests but others do not seek ordination: at present, out of 46 solemnly professed monks in Glenstal and Ewu, 29 are priests. Abbots must be ordained but the Prior need not be — nor indeed the School headmaster.

Glenstal School is commonly seen as the abbey's "public face". An ambiguous face to many of us, for as well as its high reputation for Christian, humanist, holistic education, there's a perception of elitism, of catering for the privileged and training them to remain privileged. It's a hard indictment and not easily brushed aside.

Abbot Dillon would not seek to. But in emphasising the school's educational qualities, he seems to see the class element as an accidental one which he might wish otherwise. To correct this, to provide, say, free places on any significant scale, would be far, far beyond the abbey's resources. The Gothic Pile was a gift, but beyond that there have been no endowments. So the school, like the abbey farm, is a necessary source of income as well as a service — autonomy is financial as well as juridical.

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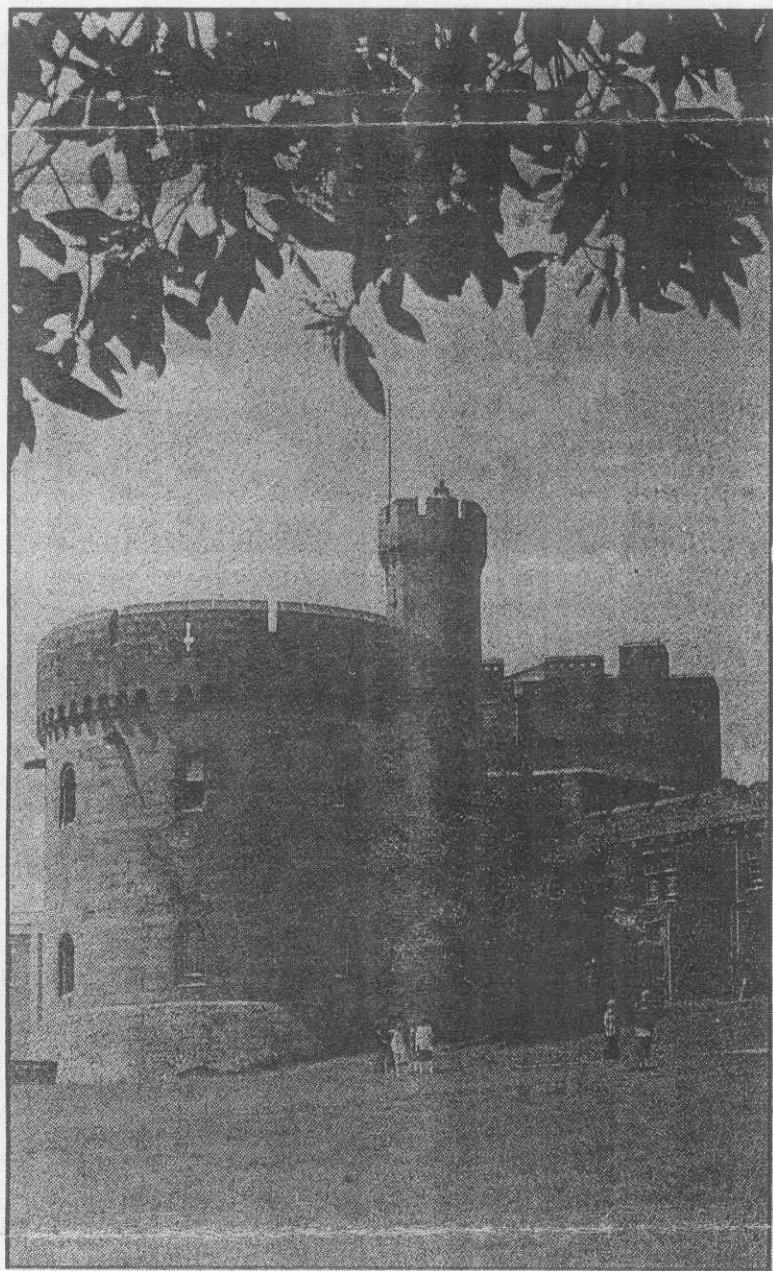
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monks, Irish and Belgian, had reached the magic total of 50. That was in the pre-Vatican II heyday of the Irish church triumphant (or, at least, "triumphalist").

And now in this hour of crisis and dismay, with vocations drying up and monasteries emptying (or so we're told), the new abbot's flock is reduced to ... 47! But that's only in Glenstal itself: in the priory in Ewu-Ishan, as well as four monks from here, there are another 13 (all Nigerian), including four novices. There is only one novice in Glenstal this year, but there are several serious inquirers knocking on the door — as there are nearly every year now. And these tend to be men of some maturity, well qualified either academically or in a profession or trade.

Christopher Dillon was 22 when the door opened for him in 1970. A son of Celtic scholar Myles Dillon and Elizabeth La Touche, his more widely known forebears had played a prominent public role ... James Dillon TD, John Dillon MP (the Home Ruler), John Blake Dillon (the Young Irishman). But the latter two and another uncle (Theo) were physicians by



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Last in a short line

THE BENEDICTINE foundation at Glenstal, near Murroe, Co Limerick, was first established in May 1927 (at the invitation of Archbishop Harty of Cashel), by a small group of monks from the Abbey of Maredsous in Belgium, where an Irishman, Joseph Marmion, had recently been abbot: they were installed in the property then known as Glenstal Castle, former home of the Barrington family, which had been acquired by Monsignor James Ryan of Thurles.

The community remained subject to Maredsous until 1945, when it became an independent priory with a considerable number of Irish members. A school of arts and crafts was opened in 1928 and a secondary boarding school in 1932.

The priory was raised to the status of abbey in 1957, and the monks elected Don Joseph Dowdall as their first abbot. Aged 29, he was then the youngest abbot in the Benedictine world: he died just over nine years later. His immediate successors were Abbot Augustine O'Sullivan (1966-1980), and Abbot Celestine Cullen (1980-1992); the former is now with Glenstal's first missionary foundation at Ewu-Ishan in Nigeria, and the latter was last year elected Abbot-President of the Benedictine Congregation of the Annunciation, with monasteries in four continents.

profession, and Christopher first saw his own vocation as the healing art.

But his early years as a monk and a priest were spent in the school, where yet another uncle, Dom Matthew, had been a formative headmaster. He continues to teach and clearly enjoys it. But even more clearly his great enthusiasm is for Glenstal-in-Africa, where he lived and worked in 1990 and 1991.

"Enthusiasm" is perhaps too shallow a word for what lights up his face, his voice, his whole being as he talks of his time in Ewu. To say that the true missionary learns more than he teaches and gains more than he gives has become almost a cliché: Christopher Dillon doesn't say it. He doesn't

need to. He speaks of his "happiest two years", he speaks of human life and worth pressed to the edge and reaffirmed, and he sets us both talking about hope and its link with faith. Love isn't mentioned, but that's what it's really about.

The rule of St Benedict, interpreted in the "constitutions" of the various congregations, might be fairly called democratic in its admirable balance between freedom and authority. As in the election of an abbot: until just over 20 years ago the job was for life — now it's for eight years, renewable.

This abbot still thinks it hard to realise that he is where he is but he is quick to see what he has to do, and is not afraid of decisions. Again, the

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which he would insist, as the evangelical corollary to worship. And if one murmurs, a mite ungraciously, about "the Option for the Poor", he can and does point to the Nigerian mission, among people who have nothing and give everything. Charity doesn't have to stay at home ...

And service comes in many shapes, touching minds and hearts all over Ireland and abroad. In the art and craft of wood and metal; in joining the musical traditions of *sean-nós* and plainsong; in the liturgical apostolate, scholarly and pastoral; in offering hospitality to all, and a centre for dialogue to Christians who seek unity in their diversity; in shaping the vision of Mary Martin, whose worldwide sisterhood have been missionaries of healing.

Perhaps that's the core of it all: healing. Benedict and his followers are rightly honoured as builders of Europe. But before building there had to be healing, there were broken men and women to mend. The watchword was PAX ... and Peace demands wholeness.

It still does. A monk is still called to the healing art. Especially an Abbot.