

JEREMIAH NEWMAN: 1927-1995

# Man who kept 'fighting the battles of long ago'

## Irish Times reporters

THE Bishop of Limerick, Dr Jeremiah Newman (69), was the most conservative, articulate and controversial bishop in Ireland. From his appointment over 20 years ago, he was frequently engaged in public argument with government ministers and, occasionally, with both Protestant and Catholic clergyman.

His favourite topic was Church-State relations and his regular target was what he saw as the increasing secularisation of Irish society. He issued a stream of pronouncements against artificial contraception, divorce and abortion, and waged vigorous battles against the various attempts to liberalise contraceptive laws and introduce divorce.

It was a period of accelerating change in Irish society and Dr Newman, with his theological and sociological training, was well equipped to criticise developments he saw as running counter to Catholic teaching. He was widely read and travelled, with an intellectual formation forged in Maynooth, Louvain and Oxford.

To his critics, however, he was an outdated version of Catholicism, redolent of pre-second Vatican Council triumphalism, when "error had no rights". A Maynooth contemporary remarked some years ago: "He is fighting the battles of long ago when everyone else has gone for their supper. His problem is that he has never learned to survive in a pluralist world."

Born in the east Limerick village of Drumcollogher into a small farming family, he was the only child of a late marriage. His mother doted on him and, under her influence, he became an extraordinarily dedicated and diligent clerical student. After secondary education at St Munchin's College, Limerick, he entered Maynooth in 1943, where he took a BA and MA in philosophy and was ordained in 1950.

The following year he studied for a doctorate at Louvain University in Belgium. He then went to Oxford to take a course in social studies. In 1951-52, he lectured in scholastic philosophy at Queen's University Belfast. At the age of 27, he became professor of sociology in Maynooth and was appointed the college's president in 1968. He was the author of over 20 books on subjects ranging from regional planning to post-modernism.

If he had not been a priest, he would probably have had a highly successful career as an academic and university administrator. Former colleagues at Maynooth,

religious ideas or sociological work, admitted that he did more in his six years as president to modernise the college and make it relevant to contemporary Irish society than his predecessors had done in a hundred.

It was the period when Maynooth was taking in lay students, male and female, and transforming itself into an all-inclusive university, an exciting and difficult time. But Dr Newman was often caught between the demands of students and staff and those of a hierarchy which ruled on the college's affairs while the president waited outside the room.

His Maynooth contemporaries recall that he was much more sociable than in his later period as a bishop, but equally fond of argument and controversy. He was a protégé of the late Bishop of Cork, Dr Cornelius Lucey, but his contemporaries note that, unlike his patron, he was unable to rise above the narrow Catholic social thinking of the 1940s and 1950s, which demanded that the rights of the religious majority should be enshrined in the Republic's civil law.

His appointment as Bishop of Limerick, in May 1974, removed him somewhat from the mainstream of Irish academic and intellectual life for which his background and professional training so well fitted him. He was ill-prepared for the work of a bishop in the fast-changing Ireland of the 1970s.

He was a firm believer in the right of the Catholic Church to intervene to influence civil laws governing both public and private morality at a time when the new sexual freedoms brought about by growing prosperity, women's equality and the new availability of contraception were undermining the old absolutes.

In personal terms, too, the new bishop appeared ill-suited to his difficult new pastoral role. Here was a man who had been closeted in elite academic institutions for 30 years emerging into an Irish church trying painfully to cope with the challenges of a liberalising, secularising society, and to implement the reforms demanded by Vatican II in the face of those challenges.

Dr Newman's way of coping was to state, restate and passionately and articulately defend the old fundamental truths as he saw them. His pronouncements on public affairs sounded more dogmatic and authoritarian than those of his older and more senior colleagues in the hierarchy, and there were indications from time to time that this caused some unease. Liberal Catholic and Protes-

ted ranged from mere disagreement to horrified amazement.

Perhaps his two most characteristically controversial interventions came in addresses on Church-State relations and ecumenism in the mid-1970s. In May 1976, he warned against the dangers to Irish Catholic society of "secularism, the strident propaganda of minorities and the effort to conciliate the North", and urged action to prevent the incorporation of "an inordinate special position" for non-Catholic minorities in the State's laws.

The following January, he ran into problems with the Church of Ireland, with a reminder during a Christian Unity Week service that, in a united Ireland, Catholics would still be the majority.

The Dean of Limerick, the Very Rev Walton Empey, said he presumed this meant that even then the Catholic Church would continue to be in a position to insist on the enforcement of its morality on everyone. He said that with such a statement, the bishop "might as well go North and load the guns of the UVF".

He took issue with the then government ministers, Dr Garret FitzGerald and Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, and several senior Church of Ireland clergymen, over their views on divorce. He said: "In Ireland, as elsewhere, the church is open to all reasonable change and evolution. But it would be ironical and anomalous if such change should take the form of according overriding rights to minorities or of replacing the former special position of the Catholic Church in the Constitution by an inordinate special position for non-Catholic groups in the legal statutory framework of our country. Let us make sure it will not happen."

In 1983, his claim that the Muslim world was "way ahead" in upholding religious values drew a retort from Dr O'Brien, who referred to him as the "mullah of Limerick". Dr Newman believed that the "mullah" tag showed that he had been misinterpreted when he was merely trying to illustrate that religion and everyday living were better integrated in the Muslim world, and he was certainly not in favour of public floggings and amputating hands as punishments.

More criticism came his way when, at a ceremony at Sarsfield barracks, he condemned the "constant stream of propaganda in favour of unilateral disarmament emanating both from foolish liberal sources and devious sources that were not at all liberal but who use disarmament for their own ends". He told members of the Defence Forces not to

confuse them with persuasive pacifist words of a kind that would question their role."

At a time when his then-colleague, the Bishop of Galway, Dr Eamonn Casey, was calling for the breaking off of diplomatic relations with the United States over its policy in Central America, Dr Newman declared pointedly at a confirmation ceremony "that the Irish Hierarchy in general recognises and appreciates the efforts of the United States — in continuity with its tradition — to seek to preserve liberty in the world. Without its help, we in Europe, including Ireland, would be very vulnerable indeed."

In the 1980s, the controversies of a decade earlier over the coalition government's family-planning legislation and the role of legislators in a State with a large Catholic majority surfaced again. This time he had different opponents in the shape of the Minister for Health, Mr Barry Desmond, who was responsible for liberalising the contraceptive legislation, and the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Agriculture, Mr Peter Barry and Mr Austin Deasy, who emphasised the freedom of Catholic legislators to legislate in accordance with their consciences in what they considered to be the best interests of the Irish people.

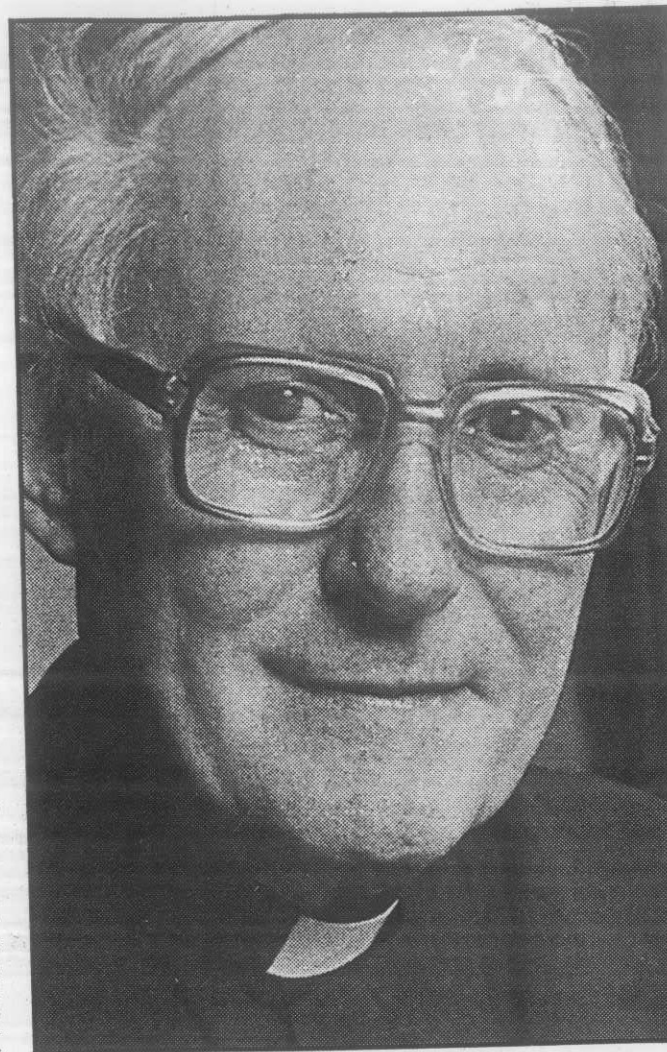
He warned that the price to be paid for a greater say by the Oireachtas on matters of public morality should not be a "ransom for the soul of the Irish nation".

He returned to a familiar theme when he went on to declare: "We know as well that politicians who profess to be Catholics are not entitled to follow their consciences in a void, as if a teaching authority did not exist in the Catholic Church. That would be something approaching extreme Protestantism."

In 1993, he warned that there was a "worrying" growth in Ireland of unhealthy criticism by too many Catholics of their church. It was undeniable that bishops and priests were open to criticism, he said, "but one should take care that such criticism is not overdone". He also warned of the dangers posed by "misleading ideas" about the nature of law, and he called on the President, Mrs Robinson, as a person versed in the theory of law, to set things right.

Opposing Sunday trading, he said that turning Sunday into a general shopping day would advance the secularisation of society, adding that people needed time for composure.

Last year, he refused to allow the Mayor of Limerick, Senator



Dr Jeremiah Newman: He was a firm believer in the right of the Catholic Church to intervene to influence civil laws governing both public and private morality

Church of Ireland, to read a lesson at a Mass to launch the civic week ceremonies in the city, quoting from the Hierarchy's 1976 Directory of Ecumenism to support his decision. Dr Newman later wrote to Ms O'Sullivan, and the two shook hands when they met at the St Patrick's Day Mass for the troops and civic leaders at Sarsfield Barracks.

She remarked at the time: "I am happy that we have put this incident all behind us."

He was embroiled in several other controversies, among them his warning that Europe could be overrun by Russians, Turks and Algerians; his attack on the Protestant ethos at the Adelaide Hospital and his implication that it did not condemn abortion, and his criticisms of the excessive pressure being put on the government by groups campaigning on behalf of the poor.

Dr Newman was not slow to speak out on economic issues. He offered to travel to the Netherlands to try to prevent the permanent closure of the Ferenka factory in Limerick, and he advocated a plan for more industrial democracy involving a greater say for workers in the running of their companies.

Warning against any downgrading in the status of Shannon airport, he said it was about time Dublin realised that the country as a whole did not accept metro-

politan domination.

"For any representatives of the Pale to seek to do so will be at their peril. We in rural Ireland have put up with enough," he declared. On another occasion, he said that to regard the western part of Ireland as developed in any way comparable to the eastern was "poppycock".

He could also be surprisingly open to new ideas. He could quote Kate Millet and Germaine Greer as well as any feminist, for example, and on occasion appeared sympathetic to some of the ideas of the women's movement. About others he would be as vitriolic as about any group he perceived to be undermining traditional Catholic values.

Dr Newman was not a person who related easily to people. Some felt he made himself more isolated in his bishop's palace than was necessary, believing that he had to perform the role of the aloof, traditionalist bishop who must take the controversial stands he did in defence of the church because no one else would.

He was respected by his senior priests, but rather feared by younger ones, whom he tended to berate rather than encourage. "Making him a bishop was the worst thing that ever happened to him," was a comment among people who knew him.

## Higgins confirms talks on third television channel

From Patrick Smyth, in Luxembourg

THE Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Mr Higgins, yesterday confirmed that active consideration was being given to the licensing of TV3 to provide a third TV channel.

Mr Higgins said that talks on a possible third channel were taking place between the private consortium headed by Mr James Morris and the chairman of the Independent Radio and Television Commission (IRTC), Mr Niall Stokes. However, the Minister refused to be drawn on suggestions that the company might be offered a licence in return for dropping its court action against the IRTC.

The Minister was here for a meeting of Ministers of Culture to discuss the EU's controversial "TV without frontiers" directive. In the face of certain deadlock, the ministers referred the issue back to ambassadors and to another meeting next June.

TV3 has won a ruling in the Supreme Court that the IRTC unreasonably deprived it of a licence to provide a new television station on the grounds of financial viability. The issue of compensation has yet to be determined.

Mr Higgins said that he had received no further formal application from TV3 and that the matter was one for the IRTC. The

draft Green Paper on broadcasting policy, which has been seen by *The Irish Times*, assumes that there would not be a third independent television channel and suggests that diversity of news and current affairs will have to be achieved by the creation of an independent news service which would broadcast on local radio and on Network 2 television.

At yesterday's ministerial meeting, Mr Higgins welcomed the proposals from the European Commission to double to £320 million the Media II programme for supporting film and TV production, but warned against devoting all the available resources to US-style blockbusters.

He urged ministers to accept an amendment to earmark at least 50 per cent of the Media II funding for small and medium-sized productions. Such an approach, he said, would go a long way to giving producers in smaller countries genuine competitive access to the market.

He pointed to the relative success of medium and low-budget films such as *The Crying Game* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* as marking the way forward.

The Media II programme now goes to the Economic and Social Committee and before the European Parliament for further consideration.

## Bill for beef fraud may rise

By Maol Muire Tynan, Political Reporter

AS THE Cabinet meets today to consider a report on the £75 million EU bill for alleged fraud in the beef industry, the Government is understood to be annoyed at warnings from the Irish member of the European Court of Auditors, Mr Barry Desmond, that the cost could be higher.

The Minister for Agriculture, Mr Yates, is today due to bring a report to his Government colleagues on how his Department proposes to fight the "disallowance" in European intervention fund payments. He will provide a summary of the procedures that must now be followed as officials accept that the final bill, when accounts for 1992 and 1993 have been completed, could in fact be higher than £75 million.

The central plank of Ire-

land's defence is that controls on policing the industry were updated in 1991 — but it is acknowledged that this plea may not carry much weight. Officials in the Department of Agriculture will also argue that, due to BSE, or "mad cow disease", huge stocks of beef were flooding the system while Ireland was selling only 10 per cent of its bullocks.

Meanwhile, the officials are continuing to insist that no formal Commission proposal has yet been received. When it does arrive, probably within the next few weeks, Mr Yates and his Department will embark on a "conciliation" period in which they can put the Irish case to the Commission.

Mr Desmond's suggestion that Ireland would find little sympathy for attempts to have the bill reduced is regarded in Government as "an unhelpful intervention".