

Doctor William Leonard:

Limerick-born distinguished Churchman, Biblical Scholar and Mystic

Limerick has produced many famous churchmen over the years but none as distinguished as the erudite and multi-lingual Biblical scholar and mystic Right Reverend Monsignor Dr. William Leonard, D.D., D.Ph., D.S.S. who had an international reputation in scriptural studies and spent most of his life in Rome and Australia where he is still fondly remembered by the priests who were his former students.

Born in December 1891 at Ballycraheen, Ballysimon, he was the eldest of a family of six – three of whom entered the priesthood – the others were Fr. Tim Leonard, the Columban missionary murdered in China in 1929 (who was featured in the *Old Limerick Journal*, issue no. 45, Winter 2011) and Fr. Joe Leonard, P.P., Athlaca, who died in 1973.

Educated at St. Munchin's College he entered the Irish College, Rome, in 1909 where he was ordained for the Diocese of Limerick in 1915. He went on to complete two doctorates in Divinity and Philosophy before returning to Limerick where he taught at his old alma mater, St. Munchin's College, for one year 1921-22. He then returned to Rome to gain a Licentiate in Sacred Scripture. The sunny climate of Australia then beckoned and with Archbishop Daniel Mannix's influence he sailed to Melbourne and thence to Sydney where he joined the teaching staff of St. Patrick's Seminary, Manly in 1923. He remained there for twelve years as lecturer in biblical studies, enjoying a good rapport with his students. But Doctor Leonard was not satisfied with his two doctorates and in 1935 he returned to the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, to complete his scriptural studies and gained the very rare distinction of a Doctorate in Sacred Scripture (D.S.S.) after publishing his thesis on 'The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews'. Only two other Irish priests had achieved the D.S.S. degree at that time.

Armed with triple Doctorates the multi-lingual Dr. Leonard returned to Sydney in January 1939 and was appointed Professor in the Faculty of Theology, Archaeology and Hebrew at Manly (St. Patrick's College).

Dr. Leonard was a master of many languages – Hebrew; Greek; Latin; French; German; Italian; Aramaic; Semitic languages and Gaelic. I was informed by an Australian nun (Mercy Order) that the eminent scholar spoke thirteen languages fluently.



Dr Leonard during his days as professor at Manly College

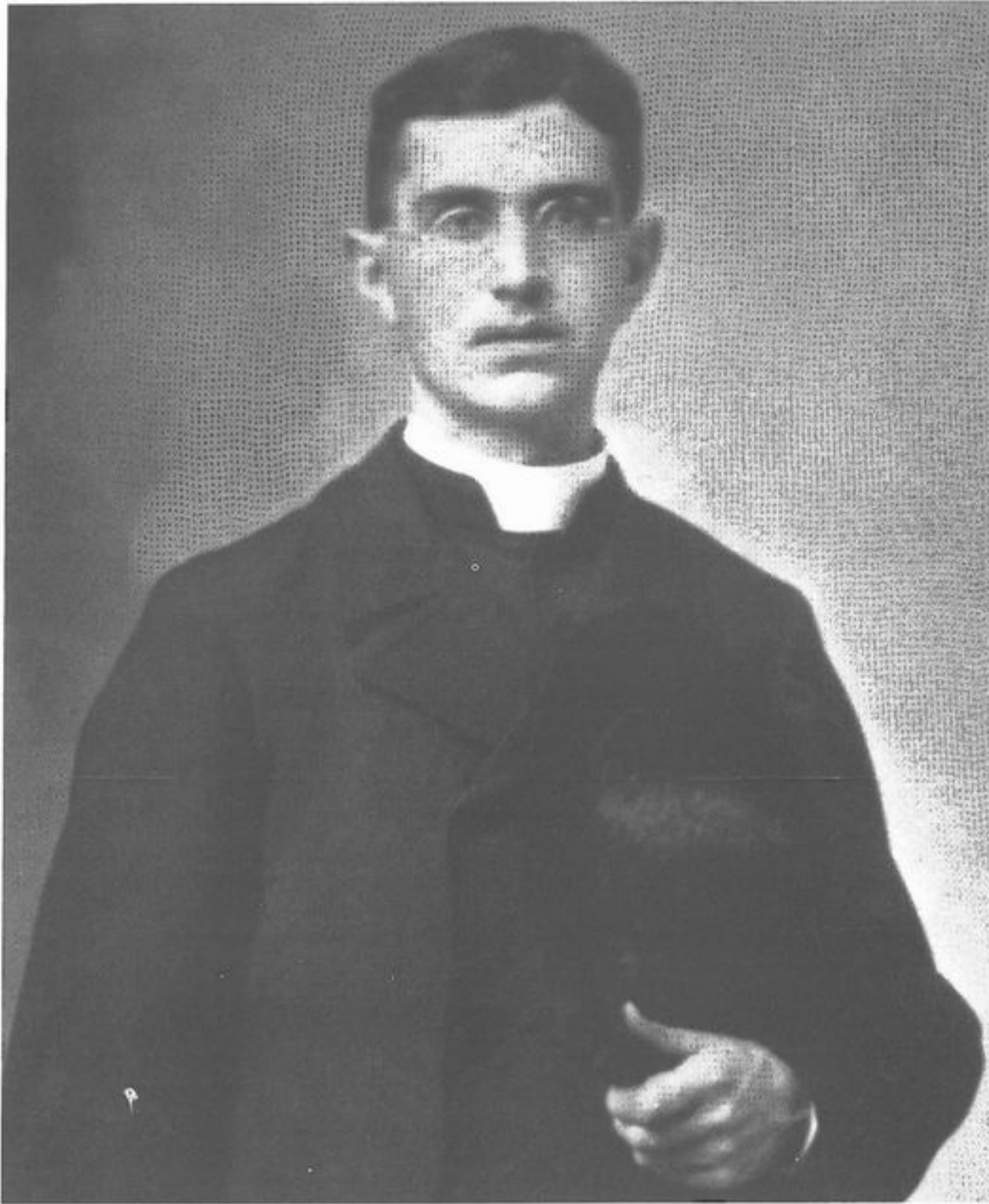
by John Leonard

His interest in the Hebrew language began when as a boy he read the inscriptions on the tombstones in the Jewish Cemetery near his ancestral home at Monaleen – that is, the little graveyard hidden up a laneway opposite "The Hurlers' Pub" at Castletroy.

A prolific writer his contributions to the tome "Catholic Commentary of the Bible" are masterpieces in the pantheon of biblical scholarship, namely the exegesis of Saint John's Gospel; the Epistle to the Hebrews; the Book of Ruth and the place of the Bible in the Church, plus his preliminary essays to the volume, portraying his depth of learning and religious spirit; his power of quotation and humility of approach.

For thirty-seven years (1924-1961) Dr. Leonard contributed a multiplicity of articles on scripture to the "Australian Catholic Record" and these are held in the archives of C.I.S. (Catholic Institute of Sydney) at Strathfield which I had the privilege of viewing. C.I.S. replaced St. Patrick's College, Manly as the Seminary for students to the priesthood while St. Pat's is now the International College of Management (I.C.M.S.). Dr. Leonard also contributed over fifty articles on biblical subjects in the "Australian Catholic Weekly" under the apocalyptic pseudonym (by-line) "Philadelphenus".

The distinguished Churchman died suddenly in May, 1961 and the homilist at his funeral Mass Monsignor James Madden (President of St. Pat's, Manly) in a tribute to his esteemed colleague said:



Dr. Leonard as a young priest

On St. Patrick's Day, 1923 the students of St. Patrick's College saw for the first time the new Professor of Sacred Scripture just arrived from Ireland and Rome with the laurels of learning upon him. It was the beginning of a fruitful life in the service of the Church in Australia. Soon the fame of Dr. Leonard's deep knowledge of the word of God and his love for the Holy Spirit who inspired it, became widely known and was an inspiration to all who had the privilege of being his friends, and especially to the students who sat at his feet. Dr. Leonard had a retiring character and he led a hidden life devoted to study and to prayer. He was a holy man. But the effect of his natural and supernatural gifts could not remain unknown. He made friends among all classes and shades of people and even those who did not share his convictions were profoundly impressed by his scholarly approach to the study of the Bible and by the influence upon his own life and the truths he so deeply appreciated. For four years he was absent from Manly pursuing further studies in the Sacred Scriptures and earning the coveted degree Doctor of Sacred Scripture. Returning to Australia in 1939 he resumed his devoted task at Manly. His death

has left a gap in the ranks of the Australian clergy. The memory of his scientific labours and priestly zeal will always be an inspiration to his colleagues and students who attended his lectures.

As well as being a biblical scholar Dr. Leonard was also a *Mystic*. His mystical experience was manifest on Fridays when he became speechless and immobile during his celebration of Mass. He used to suffer a kind of paralysis. Mystical experience according to the dictionary is an apprehension of the divine.

It was apparent that the spiritual doctor experienced the passion Christ suffered at Calvary during the consecration of the Mass.

I, myself, with my parents and sisters witnessed this mystical experience as Dr. Leonard celebrated early morning Masses in the old homestead at Ballycraheen during a visit home in the 1950's. I was very young then but the experience is very much etched in my memory – the Masses were very long and during the Consecration the celebrant (Dr. Leonard) became immobile – went into a trance-like mode and looked to be in pain. It was perceived that he was suffering Christ's passion on Calvary. For us it was a surreal experience as we knelt in prayer.

Always proud of his farming roots at Ballycraheen he became an iconic figure in Australia and was described variously as scholar; theologian; writer; author; mystic; Holy Priest; Churchman of distinction; and multi-linguist. Above all he was a humble man with an affable personality. He was highly respected amongst all religious persuasions especially Judaism – everything connected with the Jewish people. A scholarly Rabbi once said of him that he (Dr. Leonard) "had outstripped him in Jewish lore", which started with his fascination of the Jewish inscriptions on the tombstones in the small cemetery near his County Limerick home.

He is still remembered in Australia fifty years after his death – especially by some of his former students who are still alive. I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Leonard's first D.D. student Dr. Eugene Stockton during a visit "down-under" in 2010. Dr. Stockton lives in the Blue Mountains at Lawson, 90km. west of Sydney. He described his former Professor "as a saint and scholar who made a profound impression on me". He kindly presented me with a copy of Dr. Leonard's thesis (Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews) and also a tape of him reading Psalm 136 in Hebrew shortly before his death in 1961. According to Dr. Stockton he used to lecture his students using a Gaelic script. Archbishop Simonds of Melbourne once said of him that he does his thinking in Greek. However on his death-bed he spoke mainly in Latin – which was his favourite language – with some quotations in Greek.

Another scholarly colleague said of him: "Dr. Leonard was not only a classical scholar; he was above anything else the devoted holy priest. To know him was to know a man of elevated thought and speech, a very holy man". His devotion to the Mass was extraordinary. Rising early he celebrated Mass even though he was wracked by pain in his later years, but that was not the end as he attended up to four Masses during the day. He had no interest for material comforts. His passion was for books and he built up an extensive collection which he bequeathed to St. Patrick's College Library (now C.I.S., Strathfield) on his death.

Once he was asked what was his favourite place on earth and he replied: "the happiest week of my life was the one I spent in Mesopotamia" (now Iraq).

Another colleague recalls – "I shall never forget the day when the news of his brother's (Fr. Tim) martyrdom in China was received. I had slipped into St. Mary's Cathedral and when I saw the saintly doctor standing in front of the altar of the Irish Saints I went across to offer my condolences. There were tears in his eyes as he listened to me but there was a smile on his face. "Rejoice with me, John (name of his colleague) he said, we have a martyr in the family".

At this traumatic time for the Leonard family he wrote to his dear mother back in Ireland at Ballycraheen – "Congratulations Mam, you have become the mother of a martyr".



John Leonard at his cousin's grave in Rookwood Cemetery, Sydney in 2010

Australian Archbishop Eris O'Brien once remarked that Dr. Leonard was the most distinguished essayist in Australia. The scriptural Doctor could compress an extraordinary amount of information into a few paragraphs. Names – especially biblical names – fascinated him. He knew the derivation of every Irish name and delighted in telling Australians of Irish descent from what kings or poets or warriors they were descended from. Once when a Sydney Catholic layman received a Papal Knighthood he greeted him in Latin "Care

Jacobe Eques" (Dear Knight James) because he said, it was thus that Horace addressed Maecenas in an Ode which recalls applause echoed by the Vatican Hill:

Dear Knight Maecenas
Recall again
How your paternal river's banks
and Vatican in sportive strain
did echo thanks.

The translation of the ode was slightly adapted by the fine old scholar who would

take humorous liberties with the works of pagan classical writers, but never with the sacred scriptures, to the understanding of which he devoted his life.

His letters home to my mother in Peafield were masterpieces written in his uniquely distinguished hand – they were peppered with biblical quotations interspersed with Latin, Greek or Hebrew words which he fully explained. Nostalgically there was always a mention of his beloved Groody river which flowed by Ballycraheen farm and under Peafield bridge to meander towards the mighty Shannon. He loved the Groody river.

The Bible was Dr. Leonard's life ... his *raison d'être*. He wanted to make the Bible better known and loved by both clergy and laity. "The older I grow", he wrote a few years ago, 'the more intimately I realise that the Bible is a great, great book and that the world requires a tremendous infusion of biblical thought to keep it from the naturalism with which 'mere' science or 'mere' humanism is deluging us'.

The Crypt

Another of his achievements is the design of the terrazzo mosaic floor in the crypt of St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. The design of the floor was created in collaboration with Dr. Leonard. Inspired by the Book of Kells he drew up a design of a Celtic Cross depicting the six days of creation from the *Book of Genesis* ... in five large medallions. It is a "must" for visitors to the Cathedral. The crypt itself is a popular venue for weddings, book launches, etc. and within its walls are the graves of former Bishops and Archbishops of Sydney. The work was completed by the Melocco Brothers in 1958 for which Dr. Leonard is credited as the guiding genius.

Two years before his death His Holiness the Pope conferred the honour of a Domestic Prelacy upon Doctor Leonard earning him the title Right Reverend Monsignor William Leonard, D.S.S., D.D., D.Ph., D.P. But to all his family and relatives back home in Limerick he was known simply as 'Doctor Willie'.

He is buried in Rookwood Cemetery on the Western suburbs of Sydney, in the Catholic Priests section behind the St. Michael The Archangel Chapel, along side two Manly colleagues.

In conclusion, a tribute to the great Irish Churchman and Scriptural scholar from a colleague at Manly is appropriate:-

Hail, gentle scholar,
Not farewell
Thy vast bequest
of knowledge
Earns a salute
More lasting than the rifles roll
Over a hero's grave
Hail humble priest,
Remain with us
Let thy example
Of service to truth
Light up the path of priests
And scripturists
As yet unborn.



Depiction of the *Bread from Heaven*, from the Crypt floor of St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney