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Portrait of the principal

SOCIETY has experienced dramatic alterations in this century, particularly in the latter half as morals, philosophies and expectations changed with each passing decade.

The Catholic Church worldwide, and particularly in Ireland, did not pass unscathed through this 100 year voyage.

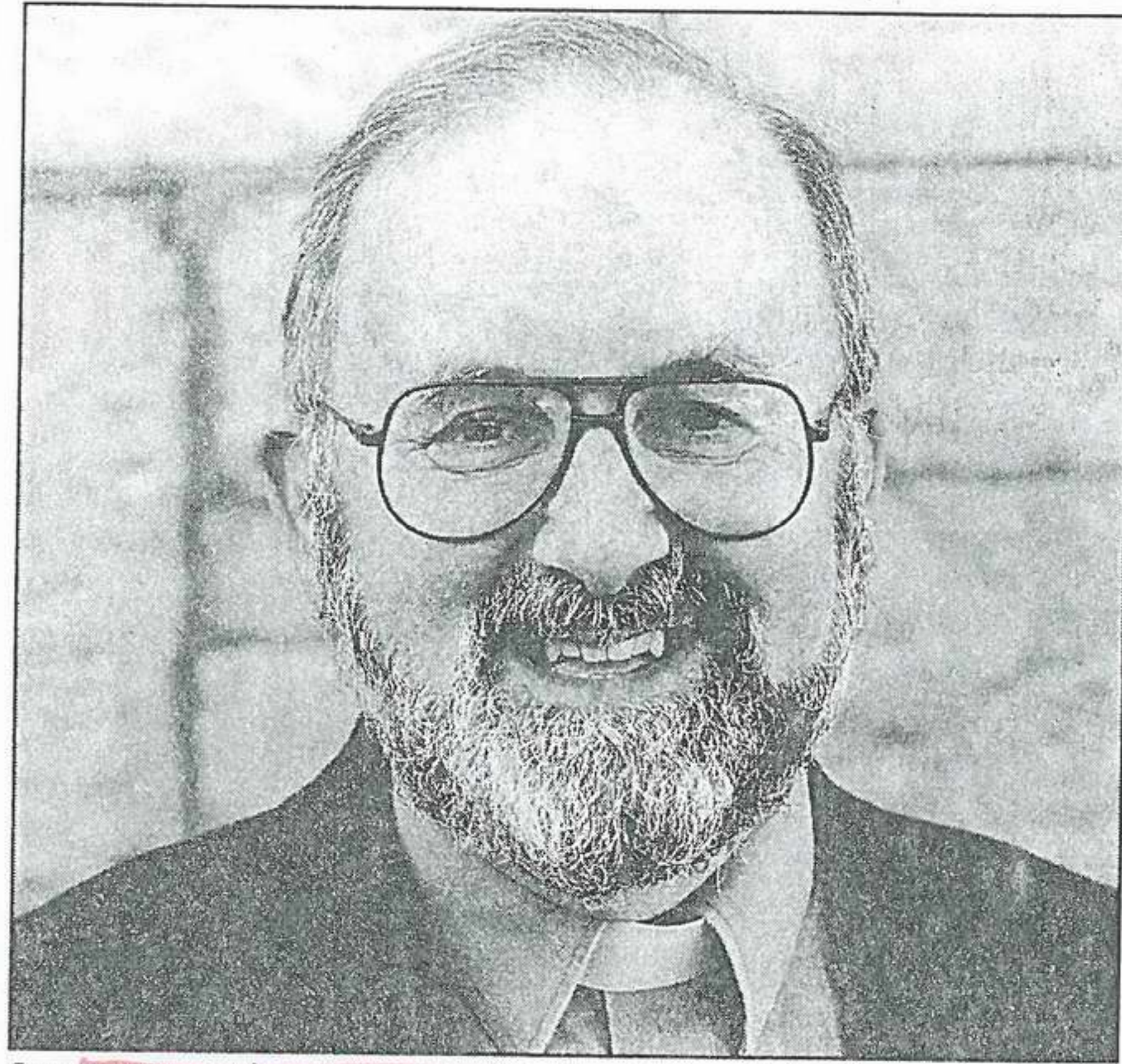
Yet even the most acute cynics would have to acknowledge that any negative effects are counterbalanced by the achievements of the Church in educating each and every one of us.

The Crescent Comprehensive in Dooradoyle, with a student population of over 940, has been one such education provider. The management of one of the largest schools in Ireland, with a staff of 58, demands leadership, self-belief and a futuristic mindset that could only be stimulated by a deep spirituality coupled with a thorough knowledge of our boundless educational system.

Such a leader is principal, Fr Liam O'Connell. Changing school for any adolescent is never easy but when this happened to Liam O'Connell after his Inter Cert exams he accepted it with notable maturity. Liam's father worked in the Civil Service and was based in Limerick for his children's earliest years.

Liam's primary education was catered for by the Salesians and Sr Mary Gillan, in particular, who died just last year.

The Crescent provided the first three years of his secondary education before he got the "transfer" to Dublin. Entering the hallowed halls of Belvedere College was intimidating initially but when he met two of his ex-Crescent col-



Crescent Comprehensive principal, Fr Liam O'Connell: leading and managing almost 1,000 people daily (LL)

leagues—Terry Wogan, and his brother Brian—the fear dissipated somewhat and the "craic" started at a ferocious pace.

Amazingly, Fr McLoughlin, who had been principal in the Crescent, had also been transferred and was one of the first to greet him in Belvedere.

Despite the enjoyment and repeated humorous encounters which school life entailed Liam still felt a call to the religious life. While he would have been happy if this recurring feeling had gone away he was "equally content to fulfil what he saw as his destiny in life".

After his Leaving Certificate, Liam and three Belvedere classmates joined the Jesuits. This

commitment to the religious life commenced in Emo, Laois, with a two-year period of what he describes as "a very enclosed monastic life". It involved an early morning rise of 5.30 and a lifestyle, which he cannot equate to anything he experienced before or since. This was seen as preparation for Jesuit life.

When the noviceship finished, his new abode became Rathfarnham Castle, the residence of all Jesuits students attending UCD. He completed a BA specialising in English, maths and history.

In fulfilling the Jesuit stipulation of completing two years full-time teaching, Liam spent the initial year in Mungret where

he taught for the 68/69 academic year and the subsequent year at Clongowes.

He highlights the next three years when he came back as a full time student, from 1970-73, as being extremely influential.

Theology was his chosen field but it was a subject matter that was experiencing exhilarating transformations in thought processes including an invigorating outlook and understanding of the human person.

In 1973 Liam O'Connell was ordained. Keen to develop his language skills, he then ventured to Paris where he studied for his final year of theology before returning to Clongowes to teach for a further two years. In 1978

the past pupil returned to his alma mater, the Crescent Comprehensive, where he taught for 11 years—"the happiest of my life".

While it may have been 100 years later, Fr Liam O'Connell has followed in the footsteps of the widely-acclaimed Jesuit, Fr Daly, as documented in James Joyce's novel Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man by returning to Clongowes from the Crescent as headmaster in 1989.

It is now eight years since he was appointed principal and during that time has witnessed and supervised many changes.

Asked if he sees himself as possibly the last Jesuit to be principal of the Crescent, Fr Liam highlights a strategy which the Holy Ghosts currently have in operation whereby they appoint management companies to run their schools.

However, the Irish Jesuit Education Office has been forward looking in this regard and consequently have been running a number of workshops, seminars, and discussion sessions involving teachers from all five Jesuit schools nationwide to discuss Jesuit education and Jesuit ways of teaching. This initiative has been broadly welcomed and is viewed as being immensely successful.

For this Dublin-born Limerick man the next four weeks may be a time for reflection.

Both personally and professionally he has seen life in Ireland alter so dramatically that the ways of the world in the 60s and 70s when Liam O'Connell was growing up now seem almost unimaginable. Leading and managing almost 1,000 people daily is an onerous task but his own personal skills allied to an unquenchable spirituality makes this Jesuit priest a little different and unique.