

# One lone, unarmed man had the courage to stand up...

■ A campaign is underway to canonise Fr Timothy Leonard, who was martyred in China

Eugene Phelan

**M**OVES have begun to make a martyred Limerick priest, who was beheaded in China, a saint, almost 60 years to the day that his life was taken on July 17, 1929.

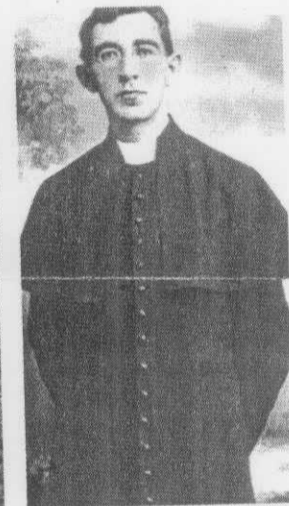
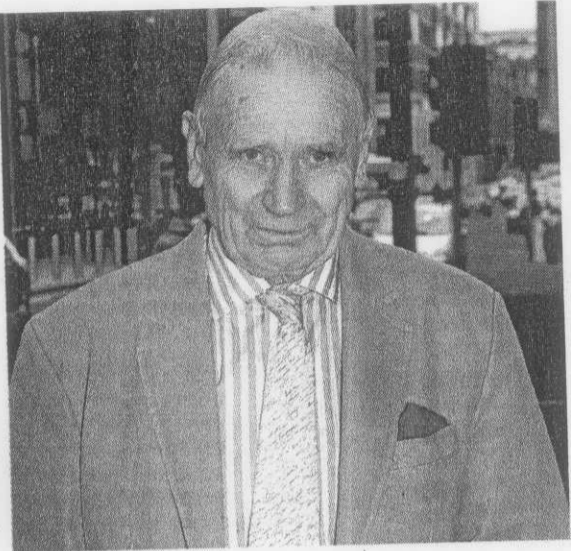
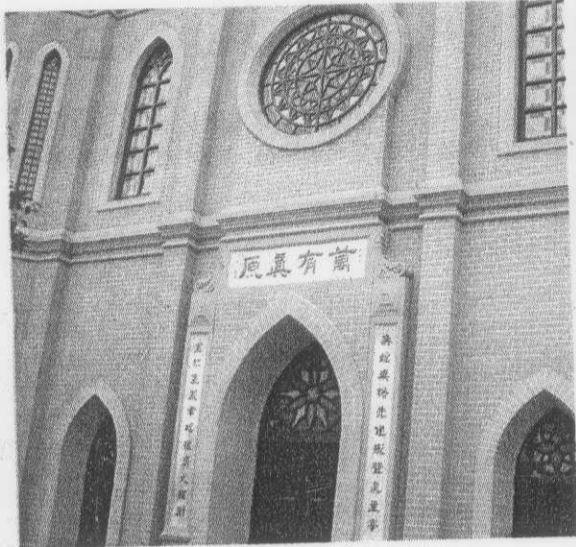
The family of Father Timothy Leonard, who hailed from Ballysimon on the outskirts of the city, believe that he should be beatified following his efforts to bring the Catholic faith to China, efforts that ultimately cost him his life.

Father Leonard was one of the first band of Columban priests to go to China in 1920, when he and some colleagues sailed from San Francisco through the Golden Gate Bridge.

One of three brothers who entered the priesthood, Fr Timothy was ordained out of Limerick Diocese but always had a longing to travel to China and work with its people.

"He is the icon in our family. We feel he should be honoured and we believe the church should beatify him," said his cousin John Leonard, who lives in Corbally, Limerick. Son of farmers William and Mary Leonard, Fr Timothy had two other brothers who were priests. Fr William Leonard held a doctorate in sacred sculpture while Fr Joe was parish priest in Athlaccia.

"I now think that it is time to open a diocesan inquiry into the life and holiness of Fr Leonard, his extraordinary love of the Eucharist, his adherence to the doctrine of the church, his work ethic for his flock, his humility, his lack of



Clockwise from above: John Leonard believes that the church should canonise his cousin

Fr Leonard sailed to China in 1920

John Leonard at his murdered cousin's grave in China

The church where Fr. Leonard was taken from and murdered

fear of death in the course of his ministry among the pagan people of China and his extreme suffering and death at the end," said John Leonard.

John has been totally fascinated by the life of his cousin and has travelled the world to find out more about him.

He met up with Fr Dermody, the priest who buried his Fr Leonard after the Ballysimon priest had been partially beheaded

after being accused of practicing religion.

"It is time," says his cousin "for the Limerick diocese in conjunction with the local bishop in the Jiangxi province and the Columban congregation to seriously open the cause of Fr Leonard. He proved to be an exemplary martyr having lived the Christian virtues in an heroic way."

In 1928 the Columbans took over the mission of Nanfeng from the Vincentians and the area of Nan-

feng is where Fr Leonard worked as parish priest.

At the time in the Jiangxi province communist guerrillas were fighting against the Nationalist Government and succeeded in establishing an independent Soviet style government under Communist party control.

One morning in July 1929, a group of guerrillas entered the church as Fr Leonard was saying mass and sensing danger he took the hosts from the

tabernacle to consume them, but the bandits took them and scattered them on the floor of the church and deliberately trampled on them.

They led him away with a rope around his neck and then put him on trial and charged him with being a foreign spy and promoting religion. Immediately after the trial he was killed.

Today his grave is in a peaceful organic grove near Nanfeng, which as been visited by his cousin

John, who erected a cross of green marble.

The church, where Fr Leonard said his last mass was eventually closed down, turned into a kindergarten, until recently when it was handed back to the Catholic Church.

"Relations between the Catholic Church and the Chinese have improved greatly and the Jiangxi chapel has been returned to the Catholic Church

Fr Timothy was the first of many Columban fathers to lose their lives in China. His colleague Fr E.J. McCarthy says that, in China, Fr Leonard became noted for his earnestness and self sacrifice.

"No journey was too long for him, no discomfort or danger could daunt him where there was missionary work to be done. He was a logical follower of Christ and could suffer no compromise either in his own soul or in others," said Fr McCarthy.

The Superior General of the Columbans, Fr Michael O'Dwyer saw Fr Leonard just months before he was arrested and killed.

"He was the happiest man in China. He was as lighthearted as a school-boy," he recalled.

His colleague Father Dermody, said that Fr Leonard made desperate attempts to save the Blessed Sacrament from the bandits.

"The bandits were furious that one lone, unarmed man and he a foreign devil should have the courage to stand up to them. Their pride was wounded, they had lost face and I am convinced that Fr Leonard's seal for the Blessed Sacrament was the primary cause of his death; may we call it martyrdom?" he asked.



Above and below: Limerick artist Nu opens in Limerick Printmakers this

## Artist Nuala O'Sullivan opens in Limerick Printmakers this week

ALL Fall Down is the name of an exhibition of new work by Limerick artist Nuala O'Sullivan, which goes on display this week at Limerick Printmakers Studio and Gallery.

The exhibition will be officially opened at 8pm this Thursday, July 16, and all are welcome.

Nuala's work explores themes relating to identity and self-image through painting and photography. In this exhibition she uses the Financial Times Newspaper and its supplement, the 'How to Spend It' magazine, as source material.

Through painting, print and installation, the work examines mass media influence on our self-image, and also considers the background and unseen financial forces that often manipulate both how we see ourselves and how we spend our money.

It raises the question: has the recent economic crisis set many people adrift searching for a new self-image because they can no longer afford to express themselves through expensive designer labels?



## The last days Fr Leonard's final communication from China before his death



An illustration provided by Fr Leonard's family imagining the circumstances in which the priest was tackled by Communist rebels in his own church

### FATHER LEONARD'S LAST LETTER

The following letter, written six days before his capture and addressed to his uncle, a priest, was apparently the last letter Father Leonard wrote:

NAN FENG, KIANGSI, July 9, 1929.

MY DEAR UNCLE,

Your letter dated April 23rd reached me only two weeks ago. I am very grateful for it, as I know how busy you have been with the repairs to your church.

At the moment I am having a little rest here in Nan Feng. I don't know to what extent I have earned it, to what extent I have given satisfaction to my Master. At all events, during the year He chose to work much good in souls that had shown no regard for Him. The outlook was as black as one could imagine a year ago. And yet it has been a rather fruitful year. One may call those events that brought baptism to old man Chow and Extreme Unction to Mary Li coincidences, but they were coincidences that God in His mercy arranged. And it was a further proof of God's infinite mercy that old Anna Cheh, who perverted over twenty years ago, came back to the faith just a week before she died.

God sent us a goodly number of well-disposed catechumens, some of whom have already received baptism and a few of whom seem to have been physically transformed by becoming children of God.

God has worked a bigger miracle in some of them in six months than others have permitted Him to work in them in twenty years.

One of the greatest consolations I had during the year was when the little flock insisted, if you please, on making a seven-days' Retreat under my direction. The spirit with which they entered into it! It is simply marvelous what purity of intention and purity of life you find in the midst of so much filth; I think there are few things that express so well God's goodness to us.

These are only a few little notes about our year's work. But there are other little notes I could write to you which would show the power of all the prayers that are said for us day after day. That's all I have to say about our work except to ask you to keep it before the minds of your devout parishioners. We had no very big results here during the year, but there were ever so many little things—if one can so designate them—for which we can never thank God sufficiently.

Your affectionate nephew,  
T. P. LEONARD.

A letter from Fr Leonard to his uncle written in the days before his death in China. The letter was later reprinted in the Catholic Far East magazine