

A ministry of football, tea and sympathy

With his time at DCU drawing to a close, Rev John Gilligan talks to Dearbhail McDonald about the place he has called home for the past 15 years.



It's hard to believe, but it's true. After 15 years at Dublin City University, Rev John Gilligan, the tireless head chaplain and champion of student's rights, is on the move. The new Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Diarmuid Martin, is anxious that Fr Gilligan transfers to a new ministry this year, and the DCU stalwart has already been interviewed for a number of positions. Fear not: the gallons of free tea and coffee at the campus' Interfaith Centre will remain on tap, but a gaping hole will be left in the hearts and minds of thousands of students and staff who have befriended this feisty football fanatic during their time at DCU.

The prospect of leaving the university is a daunting one too for the Dublin priest, who first arrived on campus in 1991.

"It goes without saying that I will be devastated to leave here, I am really going to miss this place," says Fr Gilligan as his eyes pore thoughtfully over a small shrine in his campus office. The shrine in question is not a religious altar. Instead, Fr Gilligan's compact office is home to a montage of hundreds of thank you cards, photos and memorabilia that litter the desks and walls. One card reads 'Till Death Do Us Part' – not a proposal of marriage – but a greeting from a former DCU graduate whom he married in Los Angeles last year. Fr Gilligan had introduced the bride to the Golden State – and ultimately to her groom – after she graduated. He says the increase in the number of weddings he has presided over is one of the most striking indicators of the university's remarkable growth.

"I've seen a whole generation of students graduate now," he recalls, and says he knows no other priest who has as busy a social life.

"One of the most fascinating things is how I've become involved in student's lives, even after they've left. In my first year, I officiated at one wedding. Last year I had 28 DCU

nuptials, nearly all graduates and even some staff. That is the beauty of being here so long; you build fantastic links with people."

He still recalls the Monday evening that Dr Donal Murray, the current Bishop of Limerick, rang him to say that he had been appointed chaplain at DCU. At the time, Fr Gilligan was teaching English, religion and social studies at a secondary school in Arklow. There he also ran the local youth club, played football for Arklow, and was loath to leave the security of the sleepy Wicklow town. When the phone rang, he thought someone was calling to invite him out for a pint. Instead, the bishop dispatched him to Collins Avenue.

"All of a sudden I was drawn into a very different world," recalls Fr Gilligan, who first caught sight of NIHE, DCU's former incarnation, in the 1980s whilst playing football for Clonliffe College.

"All I remember is scraggy dressing rooms and a mucky old pitch. The NIHE was just like

a big school with nothing but prefabs. That was my first memory. Little did I know that I would end up here a couple of years later.”

Over the years he used his love of football to develop his unique ministry at DCU, which in 1991 had less than 2,000 students. “Football was how I survived here, getting onto the football pitch was vital, so I started training with the footballers here. That was my first link with the community,” he remembers. Indeed he ranks the historic win by DCU of the 2006 Sigerson Cup as one of the highlights of his tenure. Furthermore, DCU played host to the prestigious competition.

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“The Sigerson Cup, what can I say,” he says, beaming with pride. “If I was to sit in my office all day, I would be lost. You have to go out and meet people where they’re at. That means going to the bar at night, attending all the dinner dances, being on the sidelines, in the audience, whatever. Students appreciate it when staff members make the effort to become involved in their lives. In return, they trust you and feel comfortable coming to talk to you in times of need.”

The Interfaith Centre has always been a central part of campus life and Fr Gilligan says that despite the abuse scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church in recent years, DCU students have a strong social conscience and haven’t abandoned their spirituality. The centre’s hospitality, made famous by its legendary free tea and coffee, is home to ‘every faith and none’, he avows. Indeed he laughs at the seasonal peaks in Mass attendance in January and May when exams are in full swing. The centre is also home to a growing Islamic and Chinese community and is long overdue for expansion.

“I don’t know how much money we have spent on tea and coffee down through the years,” he says. “Apart from Communion hosts and altar wine, our entire budget goes on it. We literally pour all our money into

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the teapot, but as investments go, we have reaped the greatest return. When students leave, they say it was more than a free cup of tea when they were broke, it was a place to come and heal their brokenness.”

As well as the joys and triumphs, Fr Gilligan has guided students and staff through a series of heartbreaking tragedies. There have been 15 suicides in recent times, one for each year of his ministry, and he says one of his saddest observations is how difficult student life has become for young people.

“The suicides are so tough, seeing so many beautiful young people succumb to despair,” he admits.

“College life is such a serious venture nowadays; there is unbelievable pressure on staff and students. It is a rat race to complete assignments, get the necessary points or ‘that’ job or placement. That pressure, that busy life syndrome, needs to ease off somehow, especially on final year students.”

One of his greatest regrets is the destruction of a memorial garden that he set up in 1996 to commemorate deceased staff and students. The garden, where family members and friends planted trees and shrubs in memory of their loved ones, was removed to pave way for the building of the post-grad residence.

“If I had one regret, it’s that the garden hasn’t been reinstated. It is such an important feature, especially in light of recent deaths,” Fr Gilligan said.

As he awaits news of his new posting – he is trying to squeeze ‘one last year’ out of the diocese – he reflects that being a chaplain at DCU is like drinking from the fountain of youth.

“DCU has kept me young, it’s the lifestyle here. I don’t know where I’m going to go, but I know I will miss it here. Life is beautiful here and every student has a story to tell.” Time to put the kettle on...

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