

A Life Less Ordinary Father Donal O'Mahony



"His career path reads like the CV of a high-flying international diplomat" said the Irish Times epitaph of Fr Donal O' Mahony, the Corkman and Capuchin Friar who passed away on the 22nd of August 2010. Originally a sports writer for the Irish Independent, Fr O' Mahony joined the Capuchin order in 1958. In his lifetime he was an intermediary in high-profile kidnapping cases, acted as a conciliator during the Troubles and successfully negotiated the release of 106 Nicaraguan students who were unlawfully imprisoned. Outside of the international arena, his biggest contribution in Ireland was the establishment of Threshold in 1978.

Fr O' Mahony became aware of the poor conditions in which many Dublin residents lived during his tenure as chaplain to flat-dwellers in the city. There were many provincial young people, as well as returned emigrants who were living in sub-standard accommodation with no protection of tenancy. Fr O' Mahony, sympathetic to their plight, was far ahead of his time in his definition of homelessness. He believed that just because someone had a roof over their head did not mean that they necessarily had a home.

A significant legacy was left on the housing sector in Ireland. Threshold has continued with the work and pioneering ethos of Fr O' Mahony, and has offices in Dublin, Cork and Galway. Its fundamental work is advising people on their housing rights which continues to this day, where the charity helps 20,000 people across Ireland each year with housing problems.

Fr O' Mahony's pursuit of justice, social and political, expanded beyond solving homelessness, and he won acclaim as an excellent negotiator. He mediated in the kidnapping case of businessman Tiede Herrema by an IRA splinter group, which eventually led to his release after a 35 day siege in Kildare. He worked with paramilitaries on both sides in Northern Ireland promoting dialogue as an alternative to violence in the 1980's. He was one of three who negotiated the release of 106 Nicaraguan student prisoners who were taken by the authorities in Honduras. He set up workshops in Eritrea and Ethiopia on alternatives to violence.

His actions did not go unrecognized, and in 2008, he received a Peace Award from the Interfaith Foundation of South Africa. The announcement of his death two years ago was met with golden tributes. People spoke of his modesty and his dedication, giving song to an "unsung hero". The fruits of his work in the pursuit of peace and social justice both at home and abroad are tangible today. Threshold, one of Fr O' Mahony's many philanthropic projects, continues to implement his vision of better housing for all.