

FATHER PATRICK COLLINS. SDB.

Fr. Patrick Collins died on the 28th March 1969, in the Richmond Hospital, Dublin, following a stroke which caused him to fall heavily against a concrete lampstandard in the grounds of our Agricultural College, Warrenstown. He was rushed to hospital but died on the operating table as they tried to save his life. His death at the age of 52 is a tragic loss to our agricultural work in Ireland. Not only to our own work of training future farmers and horticulturists, but also to Irish agriculture on a national scale. The 20 years of his priesthood were spent with one object only, that of bringing the benefits of modern technical and scientific developments to the service of those who sought their living from the land. The public press, reporting his death, gave great prominence to his achievements. Citing his notable record, especially in the last ten years, when he came before the public on television as a popular member of the Farming Brains Trust team. Among his many friends he counted the leaders in agricultural policy in the country. He inspired them as he did so many generations of students with his vision of great economic future for those who could grasp the importance of a radical change to modern methods, so that small-holdings and the larger farms alike could challenge the established providers in Europe, and earn for themselves a higher standard of living than their fathers before them had ever enjoyed.

Patrick Collins was a Kerryman, born and bred at Moyvane North Newtownsandes, of Michael Collins and his wife, Catherine O'Connor, on May 18th 1916. After his primary and some secondary education locally, he entered St. Michael's College, Listowel, and remained there from 1930 to 1933. He was 17 when he came to our Copsewood College at Pallaskenry to put what he thought was his vocation to the priesthood to the test. After one year in which he clearly demonstrated his outstanding gifts of mind and heart, he entered the Salesian College, Oxford. At that time it was the novitiate house and studentate of Philosophy and centre for those students attending the University. In 1935 he became a novice and he remained there, as was the custom, to finish the prescribed two years of Philosophy. There was no doubt about his future. He was obviously excellent University material; the need in Ireland for qualified staff, especially in Agriculture, urged the Superiors at the time to ask for dispensation from the three years practical training. In 1939 he entered the University of Dublin where he took a very good degree. (B. Sc. Agric.) Not only this but on the way he made a name for himself as a distinguished performer in debate, for which he received the annual reward.

He returned to Warrenstown for just one year, then he began his theology at Shrigley Park in the last year of World War 2. Whilst there and later at Blaisdon, Glos, he used his knowledge to build up the farms we then had to help war food production. He was ordained a priest on the 18th July 1948. Now a priest and fully qualified, he returned to Ireland and became immediately the principal in the Agricultural College, Pallaskenry, Limerick. He spent eight years re-organising the studies, teaching and directing farm policy and, in general, building on the pioneer work others had done before him with inadequate buildings, and suffering greatly from lack of means. Better times were coming and slowly the two Agricultural Colleges we have now began to take shape. The hopes and plans of the past were to be fulfilled in Fr. Collins' own lifetime. While he was to reap what others had sown, as is always the case in religious communities, he gave the present work the impress of his own farsighted thinking. He was single-minded in his advocacy for maximum production in every field, while in horticulture he had long foreseen the possibilities of professional market gardening to provide the ambitious students with a rewarding enterprise in new markets. He urged his superiors for more and more men to be qualified in agriculture, horticulture and the allied industries. He inspired his own boys, many the sons of farmers, to return home and make their land yield its hidden riches. He saw Catholic Ireland fulfilling the hopes of the social encyclicals. His work will continue to bear fruit.

We, who have lived with Fr. Collins, who have known him as a human person, will remember his bigness – this in every sense of the word. His faults, as his fine human qualities, flowed from this same source. There was nothing petty, trivial or mean about him, he was open-hearted and open-handed to a fault. He was a man, who, by painful experience, learned his own limitations and knew what he had to do. For this reason he was a truly humble man. There was no place in his life for scoffing or belittling other men. He was tolerant and very kind. No one who sought his help was left unbefriended – for that reason alone there will be many unknown to us who will deeply mourn his death. His memory will be kept alive especially at the Agricultural College at Warrenstown. It was there that he was headmaster and for six years Rector – and, immediately visible is the developed college and surroundings, barns and greenhouses, and mushroom sheds, engineering, and carpentry, poultry yards all serving the market. Fr. Collins himself helped to create.

Eternal rest give to him, O Lord And let perpetual light shine upon him May he rest in peace.