

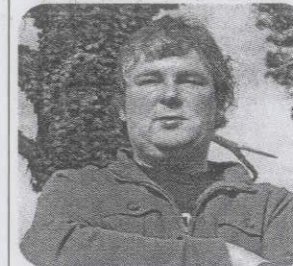
Leader

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2009

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Reverence at the racecourse

It's 30 years this Thursday since more than 300,000 people turned out in Greenpark racecourse in Limerick to see their spiritual leader, Pope John Paul II. The Leader looks back at an historic occasion for Limerick with people who were there on the day and those who helped to make the preparations for the pontiff's visit

Gerard Fitzgibbon

FATHER Frank Moriarty stepped out of the caravan that was, for today at least, going to shelter St Peter's heir. He scanned the wide sea of heads and banners before him, and did a quiet sum. There were at least 300,000 voices, he thought, but the only ones he could hear were those of the Pope's handlers, chewing his ear, spinning that one word around in his head. Boston, Boston, Boston.

"I spent the afternoon in a mobile home, which was the sacristy, with the Archbishop of London. He was a lovely man, a very holy man. But at that stage, all the Pope's people could

think about was Boston. He had been to Dublin, Knock, Galway and Clonmacnoise, and the next step had to be Boston. They said that the plane was waiting. But we still kept him for a few hours."

Thirty years on from the visit of Pope John Paul II to Greenpark racecourse, Fr Moriarty, who was one of the day's key organisers, still remembers how one of the most significant events in our local history was really a collection of a thousand thoughts, hopes and worries.

It took the arrival of the Pope, a man who could bind millions with a glance, for everyone to realise that minutiae didn't matter. Details means nothing in the face of reverence.

"We didn't know he was

coming until the 24th of July, and we only had August and September to prepare. There were some serious questions," admits Fr Moriarty, who is a former parish priest in Adare.

"At first Loughmore out by Mungret College was mentioned. Even when we got permission to use the racecourse, we knew a lot of work would have to be done. The ground was very swampy, so we had to put down sand, and then we had to open up the entrance from the Dock Road.

"When you think about it, there were a million people in the Phoenix Park, 450,000 in Galway and something like 300,000 in Limerick, all after only a few weeks' work. It was remarkable."

The Papal visit to Ireland in 1979 mobilised a nation. As Eamon de Valera built a system of government that revolved around himself, he similarly made the Church the spiritual head of State.

De Valera did not live to see the Pope come to Ireland, but the desired effect was there. It was, in every sense, a royal visit. "When did you ever see 300,000 people in Limerick before?" asks Fr Moriarty.

Today, he keeps an 8in x 6in picture of himself with John Paul II next to his telephone.

That picture, he says, typifies the connection that individual people made with the Pope, whether they had sought to or not.

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As the banner says, residents of Dernish Avenue in Foynes await the Pope's arrival in Greenpark Racecourse, 30 years ago this week

PICTURE: OWEN SOUTH

Reverence at the racecourse

The biggest event that ever took place in Limerick

>>FROM PAGE 1

"I had met him before in Rome and Newcastle and said Mass with him. You could ask what impression he made on me and the rest of us, but I think you get the answer to that when you look at the impression he made on the people in Poland and Russia.

"We were up and down to Dublin a lot for meetings back then when we were organising, and I remember watching footage of him going past the lines of soldiers in Poland. Every single one of them followed him with their eyes as he passed. Every one. It was remarkable to see."

Swooning

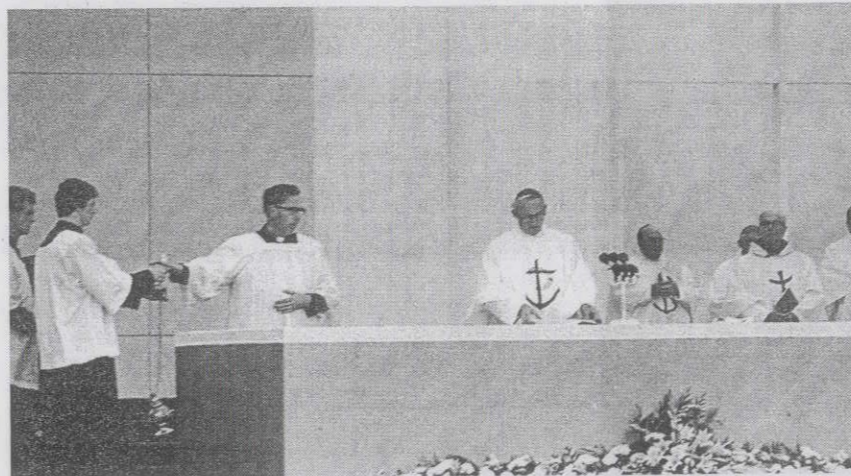
Sixteen years earlier, President John F Kennedy had also stood on a stage in Greenpark, swooning a crowd with chat of women and horses. But just months later, he was assassinated in Dallas. For many, the memory of Kennedy's visit to Limerick is bound with the hurt of his death, and his legacy here becomes tragic.

What legacy, in Fr Moriarty's opinion, did John

Paul II leave? "You have to ask, what did he say? He spoke about youth in Galway, he spoke about violence in the North and he spoke about family life in Limerick. It was a very telling message about how we should be living in 2009. Family and community is so important, and that is true in all things. Look at the GAA. Why is it that Kerry are so good at football compared to Dublin? They have strong parishes and a strong sense of community. Dublin has a million and a quarter people, but no community. The Limerick diocese isn't very big of course, but what you saw that day was tremendous co-operation within a community."

Clockwise from above left:
 ■ Bishop Jeremiah Newman celebrates the mass, which had to begin without the Pope
 ■ Pilgrims waiting for the Pope's arrival
 ■ Many people brought their sleeping bags with them for the long wait
 ■ This group of nuns arrived in the middle of the night to ensure a good vantage point for the event

PICTURES: OWEN SOUTH/JOHN WRIGHT



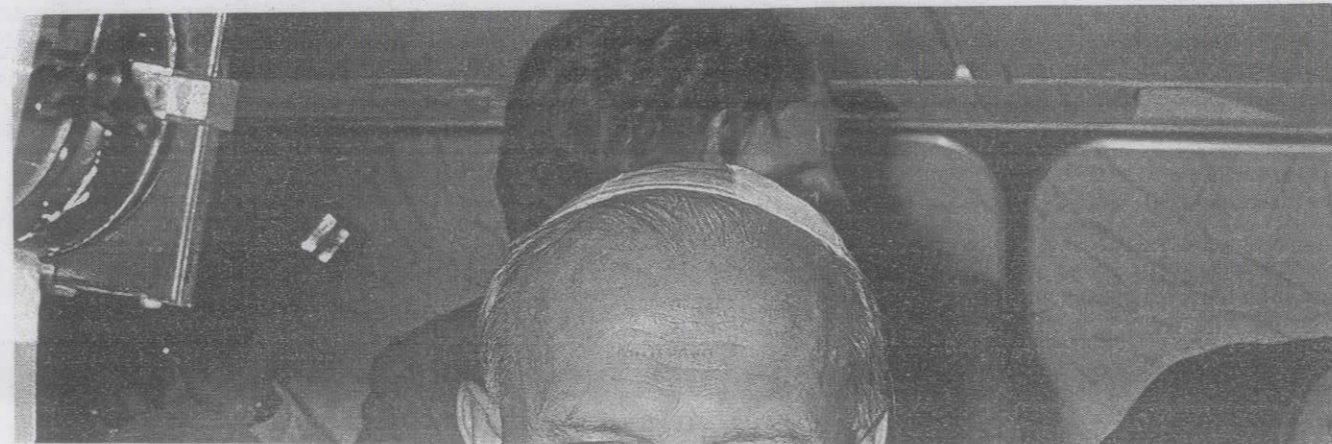
Papal visit gave country a shot in the arm

Kevin Corbett

LOOKING at some of the coverage of the Pope's visit in 1979 and its aftermath, it's hard not to conclude that the past is indeed a different country.

The reverence accorded the pope in these pages and others would be somewhat tempered by the Catholic Church's troubles in the intervening years, that is for sure.

What is even more noteworthy perhaps was just how badly the country felt about itself in those days, a low self-esteem fed by others' perception of us as



collogher to make not just a chalice for the Pope, but a replica chalice for each of the priests concelebrating the mass with him. The bishop was keeping an eye on the Dromcollogher angle!"

Communications were not what they are today of course and in this respect Ireland was a backwater, said Dermot.

"If you applied for a phone in those days, it could take you a year to get one. But when they heard the Pope was coming, no problem. They put a whole bank of phones in to the back of the stand in Greenpark along the wall. All direct lines for the

Eugene Phelan

IT was 30 years ago and it was the biggest event that ever took place in Limerick during my time in the Limerick Leader - certainly in relation to the number of people who attended and the worldwide media attention it received.

I was a young journalist with the Leader and like everyone else was excited at the prospect of Pope John Paul coming to Limerick racecourse at Greenpark on South Circular Road. Predictions before hand were that around 250,000 were expected from all over Munster.

In the aftermath the Gardaí and press reckoned the figure was over 300,000 had attended. The official figure in the Limerick Leader was 300,000, though some media outlets reckoned as many as 400,000 attended. I wonder how many would turn up today if the Pope decided to come to Limerick? Nothing near that figure, I would venture.

This was a time when the Catholic Church was king, a time when Bishop of Limerick Dr Jeremiah Newman ruled. It was a time when the vast majority of people attended Mass at least once a week.

I remember that the visit was early on a Monday morning with the gates of Greenpark Racecourse opened at around 3am. We were like ants. There were people everywhere, but despite the huge crowds everyone was in good spirits.

As a young reporter I arrived at Greenpark at around 1am and was with others who included the late Paddy Moroney, Billy Kelly, John O'Shaughnessy, Vince Moran and Jimmy Woulfe, to name just a few

of the reporters working on the story.

I am not sure where Cormac Liddy was when the Pope's helicopter arrived at around 10am because he got the best gig. Along with photographer John Wright they flew on the same plane into Ireland for the Pope's visit.

Cormac, I remember, did not wash his right hand for days after it was shaken by the Pope before they spoke at their leisure on the plane. Needless to say, I got the not-so-glamorous jobs. I walked from my home on Fr Russell Road and all along the way people were selling sandwiches, drinks and fish and chips. Busloads of people came from every part of Munster. Everyone was happy, many with prayer books and rosary beads.

My first task was to go down and meet those who had queued up for hours to get the best viewing places. From my memory a few young lads from Ballinacurra Weston managed to make their way to the front. Later we had to talk to anyone who took part in the Mass, and meet the Bishop and other priests who greeted the Pope.

After that I do not remember a lot other than the fantastic greeting the Pope got when he stepped off his helicopter and when he waved from his Pope-mobile. He was infectious: his accent, his message. Everyone loved him and loved the occasion.

After he headed off, most people hit for home - or for the pub. But for the Limerick Leader journalists it was a walk back to the office and we wrote up a number of different stories, as we were bringing out a special supplement to mark the occasion.

The reverence accorded the pope in these pages and others would be somewhat tempered by the Catholic Church's troubles in the intervening years, that is for sure.

What is even more noteworthy perhaps was just how badly the country felt about itself in those days, a low self-esteem fed by others' perception of us as lazy, inefficient drunks.

One piece published in these pages quoted the Reuter's correspondent Leslie Dowd as saying "As Pope John Paul leaves Ireland today, the myth of the inefficiency of the Irish must surely lie dead. The pontiff presented the Irish with a challenge in organising his historic visit. The result has been a tremendous boost in Irish self-confidence - almost a final test of nationhood."

A reporter from the Daily Telegraph kindly deigned to abstain from making any more Irish jokes, so impressed was he that we managed not to screw the whole thing up.

As Dermot Walsh - then a reporter in Limerick for the Irish Press - recalled the reputation was perhaps not entirely unjustified, but if anything was going to get our act together, it was a visit from the pope.

Cathal O'Shannon was put in charge of PR and he organised a weekly press briefing to keep the hacks happy

"For about four to five weeks in advance of the Pope coming, they held press briefings each week and they did a drip feed



Pope John Paul II speaks to the media on board his flight from Italy to Ireland in 1979. Limerick Leader reporter Cormac Liddy was among the press corps, the only one from the provincial media, along with Leader photographer John F Wright

thing, telling us different things each week of what is going to happen, what chalice he was going to use, who was going to present the gifts, etc... Perfect!" said Dermot this week.

"We came to the last briefing, the last one before he arrived,

we're all assembled and this time Bishop Jeremiah Newman comes along to give his imprimatur to it all.

"So we asked could we just go through step by step what's going to happen and we started off with all the things we'd been

told. Starting with the first one. 'No, we won't be doing that', says Jeremiah. Then we came to the second bit. 'No, we won't be doing that', says Jeremiah.

"For example one of the diocesan treasures which is in the museum is a chalice that

is so valuable it's not even on display, and that was to be used by the Pope, but the bishop said, 'No, we won't be doing that'.

"Instead, the chalice was coming from Dromcollogher - his home place - and he was getting Irish Dresden in Drom-

Communications were not what they are today of course and in this respect Ireland was a backwater, said Dermot.

"If you applied for a phone in those days, it could take you a year to get one. But when they heard the Pope was coming - no problem. They put a whole bank of phones in to the back of the stand in Greenpark along the wall. All direct lines for the press."

Serious stuff. But Dermot was not above using the phones for a humorous purpose and recalled one incident concerning his photographer colleague Michael Cowhey, who had suffered a bad accident in Spain that year which had imparted a limp, that got progressively worse as he tired.

"I was up on the stand looking out and of course the Pope was late, so they started the Mass without him. If a Mass starts, you're not supposed to stop, but they stopped. Then they started again. Now, you're not supposed to do that either.

"Anyway, I saw Michael out in the crowd taking the pictures and he was limping and bent over with the pain. I rang the press office in Greenpark who were doing public address announcements.

"I asked them to put out a PA announcement, 'Would Quasimodo please come to the press office?' And they put it out without missing a beat and Cowhey went without delay. He knew it was him. It was like something out of Fr Ted!"

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The media await the Pope's arrival at Greenpark

Nuns show steel to help stage the momentous mass

GETTING 400,000 people in the one place to hear Mass said by their spiritual leader was a sight to fill the soul in Limerick in 1979. But the occasion also filled the pockets of city traders, whose tills were ringing long and loud from the massive crowd who had descended on the city from all directions from the early hours, writes Kevin Corbett.

The visit also provided an interesting logistical challenge for the local construction industry and the partnership of Thomas F Sheahan architects, Michael Punch engineers and Tom Hayes Building Contractor was set the task of building the pope's massive covered altar at Greenpark racecourse.

The problem, as ever, was one of time since the visit was only mooted in mid-August and confirmed in early September and quoted delivery times for large trusses and columns from structural steel fabricators in 1979 were as long as 20 weeks.

With just one month to get the huge stage built, that meant some lateral thinking had to be applied to the problem. If a structure could not be ordered and built, the designers would have to see what was already out there - and if they could borrow it.

As luck would have it a sports hall had been designed for a school in Newport and the roof structure was scheduled for erection in mid-October.

ber, a comfortable two weeks after the pope's departure.

Even more fortunately, the structure was being put up for the Sisters of Mercy, so when the request was made of the Reverend Mother for the lend of her hall to accommodate the pope, she could hardly refuse!

The visit to Limerick was confirmed on September 3 and by midday on the 4th, Tom Hayes had poured mass concrete foundations for the six steel columns and so begun a busy month for all concerned.

The judges' box at the finishing post on the track was incorporated into the design as a backdrop to the altar and to support the cross overhead, which required its raising by four metres.

It wasn't until the Sunday, September 30, one day before the visit that the final touches of carpets, altar linens and flowers were made, just in time for the big event.

Not that the stage's trimmings survived too long after the event. When the mass was over there was, according to one report, a rush on the stage from priests and nuns tearing up pieces of the carpet and altar linen as keepsakes of the great day.

The altar itself was disassembled the day after the pope's visit and the structure soon began its intended life as the Sisters of Mercy's sports hall. Job done.

SNIPPETS FROM LIMERICK LEADER PAPAL EDITION OF OCTOBER 6, 1979

■ THE most disappointed people at Greenpark on Monday must have been the 100 people from all over Munster who were to have received Holy Communion from the Pope. Unfortunately for them, the Pontiff did not concelebrate the Mass as planned and so did not distribute Holy Communion.

■ Limerick City on last Sunday evening resembled Munster Hurling final day as hawkers and travelling people displayed souvenirs of Pope John Paul II outside main stores. And there was a brisk demand for their wares. It is normal on such occasions for such people to sell their goods to the public at inflated prices, but no so on this occasion. Indeed their prices compared more than favourably with those charged in city shops. They were also doing business after the pope's departure as people sought a memento of the great occasion.

■ There were queues everywhere at Greenpark on Monday and perhaps the people with the most grim-looking faces were the scores of women who waited to go into the toilets.

■ A reporter from the Daily Telegraph was highly complimentary of the organisation and press facilities available at Greenpark. He had been to Poland with the pope and said that the reception given to the visiting press in Ireland was superior. "Everybody has been very kind to us...there can be no Irish jokes after this."

■ People living in housing estates on the city's suburbs had their sleep disturbed at an early hour on Monday morning as visitors sought parking spaces. The Milford Grange area in Castletroy for example was full of cars at 1am and there was a similar story on the Tipperary Road side. Many people preferred to walk to Greenpark rather than avail of public transport

The mayor who might not have been there

Kevin Corbett

FOR LIMERICK in 1979, Pope John Paul was the visiting dignitary to beat all others and there was one councillor who could count himself lucky to be among those who welcomed the pontiff in person.

Having served a term as mayor in 1978, Cllr Bobby Byrne was due to hand over the chain of office to a successor in mid-1979 - before, incidentally, news of the Pope's impending visit had broken.

Labour's Cllr Michael Lipper, the man who had driven the train that brought Limerick's hurlers to Dublin for their last All-Ireland win in 1973, had been nominated to take the post, but he pulled out at the 11th hour.

And so it fell to the incumbent to continue for a second consecutive term as Limerick's first citizen - a distinction not repeated since.

Mr Byrne, whose daughter Maria now sits on the City Council, remembers the occasion fondly. "It was a great day for Limerick, no doubt about it. We stayed in Summerville Avenue the night before and walked up to Greenpark at 8.30 and arrived in plenty time.

Of course he was delayed



Cllr Bobby Byrne was surprised to be Mayor of Limerick in 1979 for a second successive term when his proposed successor Mick Lipper pulled out at the last minute, allowing Cllr Byrne a momentous experience

because of something else down the line in Maynooth, so they started the Mass without him."

Mayor Byrne and his colleagues conferred the freedom of the city on the Pope - a motion that was unanimously passed, of course.

The picture you see here was

taken by the Pope's official photographer after he had received the scroll from Mayor Byrne

"I got five copies and sent them off to the Vatican and asked the Pope to sign them, which he did and sent them back," said Mr Byrne this week.

The former mayor added he is pleased that the three great events at Greenpark - JFK's visit, the Pope's visit and John Treacy's world cross country championship victory - are to be memorialised at the greyhound track which is due to open in Greenpark next year.