

The death of Seamus Begley, West Kerry farmer, musician and singer, a few short weeks ago, led to a lot of tributes and reflection on his life and his music and the joy he brought into the lives of many. I was impressed by an article in the Farming Independent, with the Irish Independent, last Tuesday 24th January, written by regular columnist, Jim O'Brien. The headline to the article was **'Seamus Begley's profound connection to land and lore shows us what we could have had'**. A small photograph, with the article, taken in 2004, showed Seamus holding a fist of hay, while a tractor and baler are seen in the background. The piece accompanying the photograph says, 'As well as being a renowned musician, Seamus Begley was a farmer and silage maker'.

Jim O'Brien wrote, "I envy Seamus that connection in language (native Irish speaker) he had with his home place, with the place-names, the people and their stories. He was as deeply rooted in his locality as a man could be and, as a singer and musician, he had the artistry, the talent and the craft to give expression to that truth. **In epitomising what we have, he was a walking custodian of a lot of what goes to make us up – the beauty, breadth and devilment of our music, the heart and soul of our song and the joy of living, that bursts through us.....**

Every locality has its Seamus Begleys: men and women who know the lore and lilt of the place, who know the rogues and the rascals, the sound people and those who are *"inclined to be airy"* They know the townlands, the land that was got for a song, the land that was lost over a game of cards or swallowed with a barrel of porter.....When I look at the life of Seamus Begley, I can't help thinking of what we have lost. Above all, I think of what might have been, had we matured into a truly bilingual country. **Like Seamus, we could be deeply in touch with the earth, stones, words and wisdom that made us, and able to whisper, shout, sing, sell, buy, curse and love in the two languages that have a share in the articulation of who we are."**

1st February: Feast of St. Brigid: She was born about 454, renowned for her hospitality, almsgiving and care of the sick. She founded a double monastery in Kildare, with the help of Bishop Conleth. She died in 524 and her cult is widespread, not only in Ireland but in Europe. **(Fr. Denis O'Mahony)**

What was the contribution of religious sisters to his diocese? In the Prelacy of Miracema, religious sisters were protagonists in implementing the Second Vatican Council's decisions at a time when patriarchy was the order of the day. **Sisters ran parishes with liturgy, catechesis, baptism and marriage preparation teams, bible groups, and Basic Christian Communities, and celebrated the Sunday Liturgy of the Word with communion.** They took over parishes based on Canon Law 1112, which states that *"where there is a lack of priests and deacons, the diocesan bishop ... can delegate lay people to preside at marriages."* On Holy Thursdays, parishes run by sisters received the Holy Oils just like the priest-led parishes. When asked about sisters administering the Sacrament of the Sick, Bishop Collins replied: *"You have the oils!"* The sisters took him at his word and were able to bring the comfort of the Sacrament of the Sick to many parishioners. **In 1981, the prelacy was elevated to the status of diocese. By 1983, it had six diocesan priests, four Redemptorists, and six congregations of sisters, and consisted of 15 parishes, eight run by priests and seven by sisters.** Before sisters were appointed as extraordinary ministers, all parishes depended on the priests' visits to administer the sacraments. For marriages, they had to travel long distances to a priest-run parish, incurring great expense. **The new arrangement facilitated the people's lives, brought the church closer to them, and was readily accepted by the faithful, who felt that the feminine touch considerably enhanced their wedding celebrations.** Sisters in charge of parishes have always affirmed that their experience was a very significant moment in their lives as they felt they were making an important contribution to the life of the diocese. Most were from the south and southeast of Brazil. The one exception were the St Louis Sisters from California and Ireland, who ran two of the parishes.

Name some highlights of Bishop Collins' time as bishop. Basic Christian Communities (BCC) were a landmark in the history of the Catholic Church in

Brazil, as they were a space for the participation of the poor. Through them, poor lay people acquired a new sense of self and mission and assumed their role as Christians in the struggle for common interests, such as health, education, and political representation. BCCs provided a space for the poor to grow as a community empowered by their faith to

transform unjust political and social structures. *In 1979, the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Puebla underlined God's preferential option for the poor and insisted that the BCCs helped the church discover 'the evangelising potential of the poor.'* In Miracema, from 1975 onwards, a small BCC team helped organise the annual assembly of these communities, always attended by Bishop Collins. The Redemptorist diocesan missionary team also visited these communities throughout the diocese and helped to animate and encourage them. While sectors of the Church had supported the 1964 military coup, within nine years, the attitude had changed. Nineteen bishops, in northeastern Brazil and six in the Amazonian region, denounced the military dictatorship as acting contrary to the Church's social teaching. In the early seventies, the state of Goias handed over the title deeds to huge tracts of land, occupied for generations by squatter farmers, to powerful politicians and outside land grabbers. **When these land 'owners' arrived to evict those living on the land, using violence when they met resistance, the cry of the poor inevitably provoked a response from the church.**

A Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) team was formed in each diocese, including Miracema, which tried to respond to evictions with solidarity and legal support. **Bishop Collins was aware of the power of the people and always tried to collect signatures for letters to draw attention to their plight.** One example was a letter signed by Bishop Collins and hundreds of others in 1985, denouncing: i) the expulsion of 37 tenants from their land in Colmeia and two beaten by police and forced to renounce their right to their land, and 35 imprisoned by a force of 100 police; ii) the invasion by a local rancher and the police of a chapel in Lizarda, when people had gathered for prayer. They had come from the squatters' houses, picked up all their meagre belongings, and then deposited them at the chapel door; iii) conflicts in Miracema, where tension was high because of evictions and the presence of armed hitmen. On the feast of Corpus Christi 1987, in the parish run by Fr Martin Murray, C.Ss.R., Bishop Collins called for land reform and protection against land grabbers. Later he was accused of backing Fr Martin and Frei Henrique of the CPT in their support for squatters who supposedly had 'invaded private land.' The bishop challenged these lies, and in 1988 with growing publicity and severe pressure from the National Bishops' Conference, the Supreme Court ordered the cancelation of the false land titles in favour of the squatters. This was one of the few victories the people of that region were able to celebrate. **(Continued on back page.)**

CPT also argued for the formation of Rural Workers' Unions and Associations of Small Landholders in each municipality. Many of these were formed and live on today, helping organise farmers and squatters. The associations established cooperatives to help improve members living conditions. Jose Edgar, a former director of the Agricultural College, saw Bishop Collins as **"a missionary who loved action. He didn't just talk; he practiced what he preached. He was obsessed with getting things done."** He supported the CPTs as a new way of being church. **In defending smallholders, he revealed his own origins as a small farmer and felt deeply the injustices heaped upon them by the state and judicial system.** Above all, he was committed to the formation of his pastoral agents and, in his later years, could see the fruits of his labours in the fine team of highly dedicated priests, sisters, and laity.

(The first part of this article in last weekend's 'Dear Parishioner' stated that Brazilian historian, Luciene Ribeiro, had studied the life and ministry of Bishop Collins in Brazil, South America. Additional information in the Intercom article was that Anne Staunton, a Mayo native, and Pat O'Sullivan from Limerick, both retired teachers, translators and former missionaries in Brazil had interviewed Luciene Riberio, which resulted in the two-part article that was in Dear Parishioner last weekend and this weekend. (D. O'M.))

Seeing your life through the lens of the Gospel. (John Byrne, Intercom)

1. are told that Jesus fixed his eyes on the disciples before speaking. It suggests that he was about to say something that he really wanted them to take in. Surprisingly, he tells them it is no bad thing for us to be poor or hungry. Perhaps, you have recognised the truth in what St. Augustine said, **"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."**

2. Blessed are you who weep is not an encouragement to be miserable. Rather, it is an affirmation of the importance of loving relationships in life. We are blessed to have such people in our lives, but here may also be pain. Yet, is it not true that the blessing of loving and being loved is worth the price you pay?

3. Jesus said that his followers would be open to opposition and ridicule, because of him – and they are blessed, when this happens. Unpleasant it may be, but have you not been grateful, on those occasions, when you had the courage to stand by something that you believed in?