



They Died In Korea

Korean War Martyrs

By Deacon Pat Flanagan

From information and research supplied
by Stef McNamara, Niece of Fr Tommie Cusack,
following her trip to Korea in 2013

Seven Columban Priest Martyrs

Five Irish, Two Irish/Americans

For The Glory of God

Their Catholic Heritage

Their Love for Their Korean People

On the 25th June, 1950 the North Korean Army crossed the 38th Parallel into South Korea.

It was first assumed that this was another incursion that would last just a few days.

However it was to go on for over three years with a loss of nearly five million lives.

These included seven Columban Priest/Martyrs.

Five Irish and Two Irish Americans.

This booklet is dedicated to their lives and death.



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Introduction

When I visited Ireland in September 2018, I had little or no knowledge of Fr. Tommie Cusack, an ex-pupil at our school in Ballycotton, Liscannor, Co. Clare. I had no information whatsoever about him, neither had I ever met or spoken to him or to any of his family. I knew nothing about his life or death, and certainly never heard of the other six Priest Martyrs whose life story have somehow now taken over my life.

Visiting my old school for the first time in almost seventy years and hearing Fr. Dennis Crosby, Parish Priest in Liscannor, speaking about Tommie Cusack as a Martyr and a Saint, and seeing a plaque on the headstone of the family grave in St. Bridget's Well Cemetery commemorating his Martyrdom roused my interest, especially as my two uncles were buried in an adjoining grave.

My involvement has been fostered and nourished by a series of messages and meetings, all from unconnected and previously unknown sources, unplanned and unconnected with each other. All were totally unsolicited and unforeseen, which compels me to continue my involvement to wherever it leads.

There are millions all over the world, proud of their Irish heritage and the achievements of its people, who I am confident, will want to know, and who will be inspired by the lives of these Martyrs.

This is how the story began for me.

It was in September 2018 my Granddaughter and her friend asked me to be their guide for a five-day trip to the Ireland I grew up in. This is the type of invitation that does not happen very often. So I was delighted to take up their offer especially as they said they would book the accommodation. A few days later they arrived beaming to show me the house they had booked. They were delighted to have found a real traditional house in Ballycotton, Co. Clare. The last time I had any real business in Ballycotton was when I left school there in 1948. To put it mildly it would not be my first choice of destination for a holiday in late October. But, as has frequently happened to me in my life, I got things wrong - everything was first class - we had a marvelous holiday and as it has turned out for me, one with life changing information and challenges.

To begin, I got inside my old school, built in 1890 replacing a hedge school that existed in the area. It was a stone built two room structure. It had no electricity or piped water and an open turf fire in each room was the only source of heat. Turf for the fires was supplied by the parents of the scholars. Our school may not have enjoyed any modern facilities but the teachers from the beginning, created an excellent standard of teaching and learning that was to survive until the school closed in the late 1950s. They taught the three Rs plus history and geography and of course RE to an excellent standard. Fifty years later when I was studying to become a Permanent Deacon I found that the program of study was almost completely covered in our three years preparation for confirmation all those years before.

I had passed the school many times over the years, but it was always locked up and deserted. It was a great joy therefore to see ladders on the roof and the front door open. We were welcomed by the owner, who bought the property some years ago as a holiday home and has made only some minor alterations, adding on a bathroom and kitchen facilities that only became possible with the arrival of electricity in the 1960s. Walking down the path to the front door brought back memories - especially realising that the two classrooms were not nearly as big as I remembered them to be.

But more important than visiting the school, I met up again with Fr Dennis Crosby, present PP in Liscannor, who was himself a Missionary Priest in Africa, and had no hesitation in proclaiming that Fr Tommy Cusack, an old pupil of the school should be regarded as a Martyr and a Saint. He obviously had access to the information put together by Fr. Tommie's niece, Stef McNamara, when she visited Korea in 2013, information that is perhaps not as well known as it should be outside the Liscannor Parish community, despite Fr. Dennis' regular prayers and promotions on the subject. To coincide with Stef's report in 2013 Seoul Diocese in Korea forwarded the names of a group of eighty-one, which included Seven Columban Priests, among them Fr. Tommie Cusack and his two priest companions, to the authorities in Rome for investigation as martyrs and future saints. All eighty one, martyred during the Communist invasion of South Korea in 1950, have now happily received the Nulla Osta (no obstacles) from the Congregation of the Causes of Saints. To avoid any confusion, it is necessary to remind ourselves that three individual groups of Korean martyrs were honoured by the church in recent years.

In 1984 St Andrew Kim Taegon plus one hundred and two companions were canonized by Pope John Paul II.

In 2014 one hundred and twenty-three were beatified by Pope Francis.

Now eighty-one including our seven Columban martyrs have passed the first stage on their way to canonization.



Ballycotton National School 1890-1955

Rural Ireland

Michael and Delia Cusack, Fr. Tommie's parents, took over as teachers in Ballycotton school in the early 1900's. All their family had their basic education at the school. Tommie was to go on to join the Columban Missionary Society and was ordained priest in 1934.

He was sent to Korea in 1935 but visited our school again when he returned in 1948.

Unfortunately I was not at school on the day he visited and I have never had the pleasure of meeting him or any of his family as I write this.

One very important bit of news that

Fr Tommie was reluctant

to talk about was that he had spent

three and a half years under house

arrest in Korea, for the final year

surviving on three

fistfuls of rice each day. Korea was occupied

by Japan for forty years and all non-nationals

there were interned after the bombing of

Pearl Harbour by Japan in December 1941.

The treatment of prisoners

during this time is well documented.



Both my parents' families, lived in Luogh in adjacent farms, fourteen on my mother's side, nine on my father's side and all went to Ballycotton school during the era when Mr. and Mrs. Cusack were teachers. They took the shortcut across the mountain barefoot during the Summer. In the winter, the mountain was often impassable even when wearing shoes and having to follow the road added another half a mile to their journey. Wellies were not available in those days.

Our village, Luogh South, Doolin, Co. Clare in my time, boasted of seven houses midway along the four mile coastline as it rises from sea level in Doolin to seven hundred feet at its highest point, O'Brien's Tower, now known worldwide as the famous Cliffs of Moher. To the north, we looked out over Galway Bay on to the Aran Islands and the Connemara Mountains. To the south we are overlooked by a steep mountain ridge that cuts out completely any view of even the nearest village to the south, Knockeven.

A mile further on, the now famous Wild Atlantic Way leads us to St. Bridget's Well. This is an ancient pilgrimage site with a statue of St Bridget that attracts huge numbers of pilgrims on the 2nd February and 14/15th August. There is a cave type building leading to the Holy Well where the walls are covered with thousands of prayers of petition and thanks for favours received over hundreds of years. The site also includes our local cemetery Michael Cusack, father of Fr. Tommie was buried there in in 1938.

Up to the 1950's, every 14th of August, scores of people from the Aran Islands walked through our village on their way to St. Bridget's Well for an overnight vigil. They crossed from the Islands to Doolin docks by currachs (canvas boats operated by two rowers with perhaps six passengers per boat) and walked the five miles to St Bridget's Well. Most were elderly ladies, who spent their night in prayer round St. Bridget's statue. They returned next morning after dawn by the same route.

It takes just two left hand turns off the Wild Atlantic Way at the end of our village to get us to Knockeven, over-looking Liscannor Bay and Lahinch at the south side of the mountain. About half a mile farther on is the village of Ballycotton again with just seven or eight houses. Ballycotton is in Liscannor parish. The first building as we entered Ballycotton was the school, which catered for a maximum of perhaps forty children. The catchment area was perhaps a radius of two/three miles covering both Liscannor and Tuath Clae (Doolin) parishes.

All the children born in our village from the opening of the school in 1890 until the 1950's attended the school, and the youngest of my mother's family would have been classmates of Tommie Cusack.

The eldest on both sides of my family emigrated to the US when they reached teenage years - the McMahaons to Chicago area, the Flanagans to Boston. My uncle John Flanagan married a girl from near Liscannor in Boston and they had four daughters. He did not for whatever reason become a citizen and was deported back to Ireland in 1938 when he contracted TB. He died on my fourth birthday and is buried at St Bridget's Well in the next grave to his old teacher, who was buried there just a year before. This certainly did not have any significance at the time, but now eighty years afterwards it is impossible to ignore the sequence of events that have presented themselves over the past few months.



Cusack Family Grave, St Bridget's Well Cemetery

In 1976 after a long illness, my Uncle Thomas also passed away and also rests in the same grave as his brother John next to the Cusack family grave. Both my uncles, but especially Thomas, were very important in my life and I always visited their grave on my trips to Ireland.

Over recent years I noticed that an inscription plaque was added to the Cusack family head stone commemorating Fr. Tommie's martyrdom at the massacre of prisoners at Tae Jon Korea in 1950. In the absence of any definite information I presumed that some of his mortal remains must be at rest in the grave.

Luogh is in the parish of Doolin, where we attended Mass. In this era of instant communication it is hard to visualise now what life was like in our village without electricity, motor cars or telephones in 1950.

Meeting people at Mass was the main source of information concerning happenings outside the family and village and as a result of not attending Mass at Liscannor we soon lost contact with happenings both in the school and parish.

I was never aware that Fr. Tommie Cusack had died in Korea or heard anything about his life or knew that a Mass was celebrated in his honour and for the repose of his soul in Liscannor in the late 1950's although I clearly remember various happenings that year. News of his life and death were simply not in the public domain until very recent years.

Emigration

I moved to England in 1952 and with the exception of regular visits and having a holiday home there for ten years, I had no substantial contact with Ireland. As I approached retirement, I was ordained as a Permanent Deacon in the Church. This included among other things, arranging funeral receptions and burials.

In October 2016, I was detailed to arrange a funeral for a Donie O'Connor whose wife Lena had passed away. As is usual practice I visited his house, where he reminded me that we had already met in 1955, some sixty years before, when he joined his Uncle Paul Doyle in a flat in Leamington Spa. We lived in a flat in the same block but left a few months later when we moved to Coventry. We were never to meet for sixty odd years. We had a pleasant chat going back over old times. For the next two October anniversaries, he asked me to bless his wife's grave which I was very pleased to do.

As we drove back from blessing his wife's grave last October, in 2018, Donie mentioned that he was going back to Co. Clare the next week and that he would visit the Cliffs of Moher with his brother in law and wife. He also mentioned that they liked visiting holy places, so I suggested that they should visit St. Bridget's Well. I also mentioned that there was a plaque on a grave there, venerating the memory of Fr. Tommy Cusack, an old pupil of our school, who was killed in the Korean war and who was regarded as a Martyr and a Saint in the parish of Liscannor.

Some six weeks later when I again met up with Donie, he told me how much he enjoyed the trip to Clare and gave me a large envelope that his brother in law asked him to give me. This was an extensive report compiled by Fr Tommie's niece, Stef McNamara when she visited Korea in 2013. Her account not only covered Fr Tommie's life and death but also that of two other priests who were martyred with him. It was obvious from their life stories that we were dealing with real heroes and martyrs and I couldn't believe that almost seventy years after their martyrdom it was still so little known.

I didn't sleep very well that night and the next morning, I was knocking at Donie O'Connor's door to find out what he knew about the whole affair. He was surprised to see me and told me that he had never heard of the people involved and as he had never opened the envelope or read the book he really had no idea whatsoever. He said his brother in law Thomas Haugh who lived in Killmihil, in West Clare about forty miles from where I was born, gave him the book and said he should give it to me.

That's all he knew, but he gave me Thomas Haugh's number in Clare, which I called right away. I have never met Thomas Haugh or even heard of him before, but we had a pleasant chat. He knew very little about the Martyrs, he had read the book which Stef, Fr Tommie's niece had given to his wife, because she had heard that Mrs Hough liked visiting holy places. He had never heard of any of them before and sent me the book because he just felt I should have it. I thanked him very much and was now getting confused by the whole business.

I contacted Stef McNamara whose number was contained in the details Thomas Hough had sent me. She was very glad to hear from me as she obviously has devoted her life to making known the life and death of her famous uncle. She was very grateful for the assistance she had received from former President Mary McAlesse and the Irish Embassy in Korea in making possible her fact finding trip to Korea, and to the Clergy and the various publications that have helped to bring this great story into the public domain. She is very determined to make the lives and deaths of the New Korean Martyrs as widely known as possible, and in the world we live in, are we not in desperate need of their example and inspiration?

She sent me two parcels containing all the relevant information she had gathered on her grandparents, Michael and Delia Cusack and on Fr. Tommie's life and death. Now I was convinced that I was given all this information for a reason but what was the reason?

As I have mentioned earlier, five of my Aunts lived and raised families in the US, mostly in Chicago. I have a great number of cousins there, most of whom I have never heard from. However I thought that someone over there might be interested in the story of Mgr. Patrick Brennan. I was right. Very soon I had an email from Dave Duncan, a grandson of my Aunt Mary - the eldest of the Mc Mahon family, whom I previously had never heard of. Dave and his wife Peggy and the family are Irish America Catholics and proud of it. I hope they will be interested in the life and death of Chicago born Mgr. Patrick Brennan.

He was born in Chicago of Irish parents and became an ordained priest there in 1927.

He joined the Columbans and was sent to Korea in 1937. I think it's worth reflecting on the difference of being a young Irish American Priest in the Chicago of 1937 and giving it up to be

a Missionary in a poor third world country, dominated by a harsh anti-Christian foreign power, with probably the most difficult language in the world for a foreigner to learn. Some sacrifice; some vocation.

In life, as in death, the story of Mgr.

Brennan and Fr. Cusack is so very similar.

Both were sent as missionaries to Korea,

occupied for forty years by neighbouring Japan. Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 all non nationals in the country were placed under house arrest. Fr Brennan, a US citizen was repatriated to the US after about six months. He then volunteered as a Chaplain to the American Forces and was sent to Europe. He was part of the D Day Landings in Normandy, France and continued with the US forces to the end of the war right into Berlin. He was given the highest honour for bravery awarded to non-combatants by the US Army.



Fr Cusack spent three and a half years under house arrest, the last year isolated under a strict prison camp regime up in the mountains where inadequate food and medical treatment was life threatening. On his release he returned to his parish and came home on holiday to Ireland at the end of 1947.

Both were back in South Korea by 1949 in the South/Western port city of Mokpo.

On the 25th June 1950 North Korea, with over 100,000 well trained troops, and more than 100 tanks and with Russian air support crossed the 38th Parallel, the border into South Korea. All the South had to offer was a poorly trained army without tanks or air support. It was an uneven battle resulting in the North making huge progress in the early weeks of the war.

Fr. Tony Collier was the first Columban priest to lose his life on the 27th June, with Frs. Jim Maginn and Paddy Reilly following in the next few weeks.

Fr Canavan was to die later in the year from hunger and ill-treatment. All were encouraged and had opportunity to get out and save their lives but decided to stay with their people.

On July 17th 1950, the US Army sent an envoy three hundred miles south to Mokpo to warn Mgr. Brennan that their position could not be defended, and that they should vacate the country immediately. Mgr. Brennan now in charge of the missionary operation in Mokpo, arranged an exit by boat that same night for some fifteen Columban priests and seminarians, mostly all were there preparing for future ministry.

Mgr. Brennan himself announced that he was staying as that was part of the job; Fr Cusack followed on saying that he could never again have a good night's sleep if he were to abandon his people in their hour of need.

Fr. O'Brien, who only arrived in Korea the year before, now a curate with Fr Cusack, quietly added that he would also stay. The room was in silence as everyone realised what this decision really meant. News had already reached them from the North of the country of the Columbans that had already lost their lives. Frs. Cusack and O'Brien said their goodbyes and went to bed, they were still sleeping when Mgr. Brennan said a casual good luck lads see you soon to those who were leaving the next morning.

The Communist forces arrived within days and at first, assured the Priests that they had no intention of interfering with their routine.

The next day however, they demanded the names of the Catholic population. Fr. Cusack refused even after being threatened with instant death and Mgr. Brennan also refused to disclose parishioner's details.

On July 24th they were taken into custody and transferred to Kwangju jail. On the 5th August three US soldiers who were taken prisoners joined them. One of these, a Capt. Makarounis who survived the war is responsible for the following details as supplied to a US board of enquiry.



The priests welcomed them and shared their food and blankets, and Mgr. Brennan encouraged everyone to trust in GOD, and all would be well. At a time when their food consisted of a rice ball morning and evening, and as VIP prisoners they were put on the roofs of buildings as human shields during air raids, the priests maintained an air of acceptance and encouragement, and a total lack of fear and concern. John O'Brien, who had a very good singing voice and knew Irish dancing, entertained everyone. Once when he sang "Far Away Places", which was popular at the time, the whole group finished up in floods of tears..

The Soldiers and Priests were among a group of thirty two prisoners transferred to Taejon at the end of August. They travelled for three consecutive nights in an open truck, handcuffed to each other over rough mountain roads. On the last night the truck broke-down seven miles from Taejon. They arrived exhausted from hunger and fatigue, Fr. Cusack helping Mgr. Brennan, and Fr. O'Brien assisting one of the soldiers. They had been told that anyone falling behind would be shot.

Next day the 5th September, the soldiers were transferred and did not see the Priests again.

By mid September the US Army had gained control on the ground and the North Koreans were being pushed back and realised they were facing defeat. With the general shortage of food and medicine, and an almost total lack of washing and toilet facilities the living conditions of the population, and especially the prisoners, can only be imagined.

Mons. Brennan, Frs. Cusack and O'Brien were still prisoners at Taejon when the massacre of prisoners began on the 24th September. This was confirmed by a Korean lady, a judge's wife, who shared their prison cell until she was released on the morning of the 24th. The bodies of the dead and alive were dumped into deep wells and caves and were recovered severely decomposed in 1952.

Very soon some more totally unexpected news was to reach me deepening my interest in the Korean War Martyrs. Fr. Eugene Nee, a retired US Airforce Chaplain died in Coventry. His funeral was arranged at Christ the King church, my Parish, and was attended by a number of priests. I was introduced to a retired Columban Priest who informed me when I mentioned my interest in the order, that another retired priest in residence at their house in Solihull is in fact, a nephew of one of the Korean Martyrs.

The next day I had a call from Fr. Ray Collier, telling me that his uncle Fr Tony Collier (37) Clogherhead, Co. Louth, who died June 1950, was the first of the seven Columban Priests, martyred in the Communist invasion of South Korea in 1950.

He was assigned to Korea in 1939, under house arrest 1941 to '45 then PP in Chuncheon city in 1949. He turned down opportunities to save himself, on the 27th June. Himself and parish worker Gabriel Kim were tied together and shot, Tony's body shielded Gabriel as he fell dead. Gabriel survived to give an account of Tony's death.

The others were:

Fr Jim Maginn (38)
(Born Bute, Montana, USA)
returned to Newcastle, Co Down.

Assigned to Korea 1936,
house arrest 1941 to 45,
1949 appointed PP Samcheok city.

As the war progressed his parishioners pleaded with him to flee but he declined, saying as pastor I am staying here in the church.

He shared the money in the safe with the people.

He was arrested and shot on the 4th July 1950



Fr Patrick Reilly (34)
Drumraney, Co Westmeath
Ordained 1940 because of the ongoing
WWII restrictions he worked in England
in the Clifton Diocese 1941 to 47.
He was the first pastor in new parish
of Mukho.
Refused to leave saying
“A pastor cannot desert his flock.”
His body was found 29th Aug. 1950
shot through the chest.



Fr Francis Canavan (35)
Headford, Co. Galway.
Ordained 1940 was a curate
Kinvara,
Galway until 1948.
He was posted to Korea preparing
for mission
at the beginning of the war.
He decided to stay despite
being advised to leave.
Arrested 2nd July-
involved in 100 mile
death march in freezing weather
without adequate food or clothing.
He died 6th Dec. 1950 from pneumonia
after remarking that he would have his
Christmas dinner in Heaven.



I visited Fr Ray the next day and he shared with me the information he had, all information supplied by the Columban Society but unfortunately not widely known in the wider world. All the general information he was able to share with me was mostly included in Stef McNamara's report. He was however very enthusiastic about the level of devotion to his uncle in their local parish at home in Ireland.

As I was wondering if this series of events had reached a conclusion another unexpected meeting brought new light to the scene.

Fr John Waters, a newly ordained priest who has studied in Rome, and has still a final year's study to do there, had joined our parish on a temporary basis. Interested in what I could find about the process of saint making I enquired if he had any knowledge on the subject. Part of Fr John's Canon Law License studies had included a course on saint making, taught by an official of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Fr John was also able to contact his professor to enquire as to the progress of the Korean War Martyrs cause. The professor kindly confirmed that the cause had received it's Nulla Osta (no obstacles) and was being handled by the Archdiocese of Seoul, Korea.

At last I was to meet a member of the Cusack family. My family had a long standing holiday reservation for the family in Dungarven, Co Waterford. Stef McNamara, who lives in West Clare made the five hour journey by car, bus and train to meet up with me. It was good at last to put a face to the phone calls and emails and we had a very pleasant and productive few hours together to discuss how we might spread the news that was now a big part of both our lives.

Again the guiding light that has been directing this operation took a hand. I was making my annual October pilgrimage to Medjugorje. As I was vesting for English Mass on the first morning, a priest, one of twenty con-celebrating, was vesting next to me.

He introduced himself as Fr Michael McNamara, whose ancestors came from Co. Clare and he is looking forward to visiting there next year for a family celebration. It transpired that he was also Chaplain to a college in Boston, a position that was also occupied by a priest cousin of mine, also named McNamara who died almost thirty years ago in Boston, whose ancestors also came from Co. Clare. As I mentioned my interest in The Korean War Martyrs he also expressed his interest and as Director of the Servants of Christ Ministries and associated with the Sisters of Saint Paul, felt he could be able to assist with spreading our good news.

All I can do now is await further revelation, and in the meantime try to make known as widely as possible the faith and courage of these glorious Martyrs. Martyrs of our own time, and country who gave all they had, their very lives, for the Glory of God – their Catholic Heritage and their love and care for their adopted Korean People.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you would like further information please contact us at:

Website: www.koreanmartyrs.com

Email: info@koreanmartyrs.com

Acknowledgement

Fr Dennis Crosby PP Liscannor for helping to kick start something that has become very important in my life.

I would like to congratulate Stef McNamara for her research and recording the life of her famous uncle and for her willingness to share family records, photos etc.

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Bibliography

Revision and information on Korean War

From the Korean War by Max Hastings, Pan Military Classics Series

The Korean War by Peter Lowe

All information, visuals, photographs etc. are from material published by Stef McNamara following her visit to Korea in 2013.

**AS THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOKLET IS THE DISSIMINATION OF
INFORMATION INTENDED TO LEAD TO THE BEATIFICATION
AND CANONIZATION OF THE KOREAN WAR MARTYRS**

**INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS ARE WELCOME TO
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St Bridget's Well
Liscannor Co. Clare

Place of Pilgrimage
Holy Well
From the Sixth Century



St Bridget

“Mary of the Gael”

Pray for us