

FEATURE

Basilian banterer to marshal St. Patrick's parade

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Irish writers have certain tendencies, noted Father John R. Cavanaugh, CSB, retired English professor and current assistant to the president of St. John Fisher College.

"There are certain topics that seem to obsess the Irish mentality," he said. "Religion, politics, sex, death. Now that doesn't leave much to be overlooked, does it?"

A fan of such Irish scribes as story-writer Frank O'Connor and poet Seamus Heaney, Father Cavanaugh was chiefly responsible for helping Fisher's library assemble more than 1,000 books on Irish history, literature and culture. The priest has taught at Fisher almost continually since 1955, and served as chairman of the English department in the 1960s and '70s.

He played a key role in helping the college obtain a facsimile of the Book of Kells, the famed decorative Irish version of the Gospels. He also worked with the college to erect a memorial to those Irish who died in the country's famine in the 1840s. From 1984-85 he went on sabbatical at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland's capital, after which he returned to Fisher to teach a course on Irish literature.

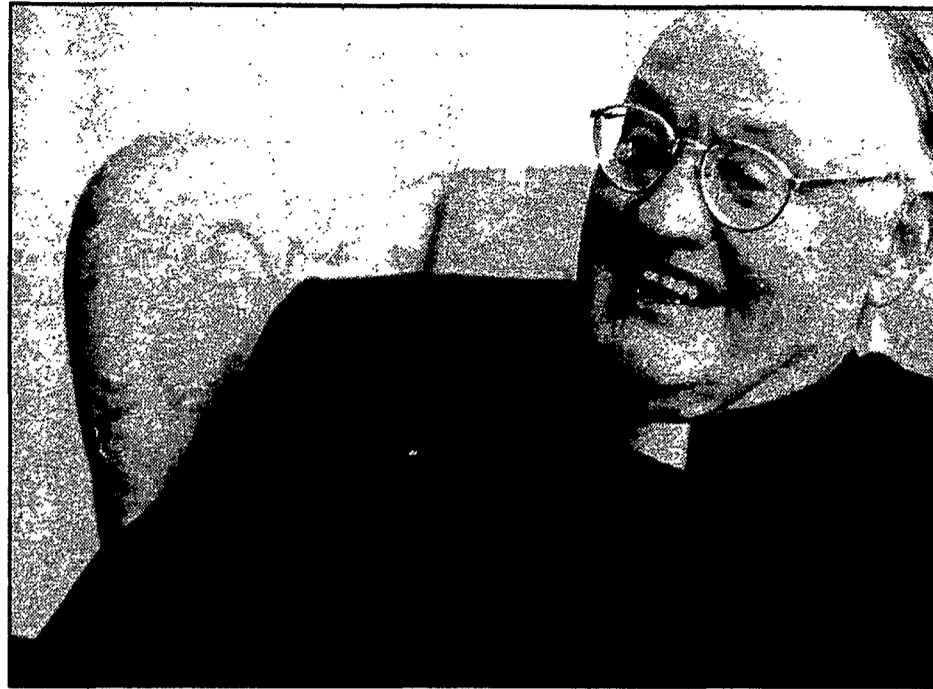
All these efforts came home last June when Father Cavanaugh was named "Distinguished Irish-American of the Millennium Year" at the sixth-annual Rochester Irish Festival. Hence, it comes as a surprise when the Basilian priest, 71, tells the listener his family wasn't all that concerned with the fact that they were Irish.

"There was no professional Irishness in the situation," he said. "I'd think you would be very hard-pressed to find a picture of St. Patrick in my house."

The Rochester native, however, will symbolize the best of the Irish on Saturday, March 17, when he serves as grand marshal of the St. Patrick's Day Parade through downtown Rochester. Father Cavanaugh will concelebrate a 9 a.m. Mass at St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester on St. Patrick's Day to begin the events. Bishop Matthew H. Clark will preside, and Fathers Kevin McKenna, Bernard Dollen and William Donnelly also will concelebrate. The parade begins at 12:30 p.m. at East Avenue and Alexander Street. (Call 716/234-5167 for information.)

"It's a great honor to be grand marshal in your own town," said Father Cavanaugh, who grew up attending Corpus Christi Church. Deeply interested in the welfare of his hometown, he is a member of the board of trustees at both Fisher and his high school alma mater, Aquinas Institute, in Rochester. The priest was both humble and humorous about taking center stage in this year's parade.

"I can think of 30,000 people in town who could be equally worthy of the job,"



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

he said. "But they're going to have to wait until after this year."

The priest was the unanimous selection of the parade's committee for many reasons, according to Tom Fitzpatrick, parade committee chairman. In addition to his aforementioned contributions, Father Cavanaugh was a founder of the local chapter of the Irish American Cultural Institute. Founded in 1987, the chapter promotes Irish music, art, dance, literature, folklore history and archaeology through various events and programs.

"(Father Cavanaugh) has been at the metaphysical and material center of Irish-American culture in this community for years," said Fitzpatrick, who attends both Sacred Heart Cathedral and St. John of Rochester in Perinton.

Christopher Brennan, former chairman of the local chapter of the Irish American Cultural Institute, was among those who nominated Father Cavanaugh for grand marshal. He noted that the priest had helped to enlarge the Rochester community's vision of Irishness to encompass more than shamrocks and shillelaghs.

"Father Cavanaugh has been instrumental in helping to overcome the stereotypical view of the Irish in our local community and bringing an informed view of Irish culture," Brennan said. He added that the IACI's local chapter "would not exist were it not for Father Cavanaugh."

In his letter to the parade committee nominating Father Cavanaugh for the position of grand marshal, Brennan wrote glowingly of the Basilian academic. He pointed out, for example, that the priest insisted that all IACI events be free and open to the public in order to reach as wide an audience as possible.

"Besides his great love for Irish culture

and the local Irish community, Father Cavanaugh is a scholar who wears his learning and many accomplishments lightly," Brennan wrote. "He is a personable individual who has had a positive impact on others regardless of ethnicity."

The youngest of five children born to William Cavanaugh of Palmyra and Helen Cavanaugh of Clyde, Father Cavanaugh pointed out that his parents definitely were not related despite having the same surname.

"We may be crazy, but it's not because of that," he joked.

His father had a keen sense of social justice honed by his Catholicism, Father Cavanaugh said. He also recalled his mother regularly said the rosary, but he didn't remember his parents as too overtly religious.

"They were not demonstrative, but they were devout."

His upbringing instilled in him a love for reading, he said, recalling how his father particularly enjoyed certain authors.

"He would sit and howl when he read

O. Henry," Father Cavanaugh said.

His priestly vocation grew more slowly than his love of literature, he recalled. In fact, he said he didn't really consider becoming a priest until a Basilian at Aquinas talked to him about it late in his high school career.

He noted that his vocation may not have been realized had he not been compelled to take a bus to school each day that got him there in time for morning Mass before classes started during Lent. He smiled as he remembered that this particular priest had seen him at morning Mass.

"He may have thought that was something of piety," Father Cavanaugh said.

Indeed, for a man who has devoted his life to serving Christ through the priesthood, Father Cavanaugh is remarkably understated when asked what drove him to put on the collar.

"I was curious to see what's it all going to work out to be," he said, gently resisting any attempts to analyze his choice. It was almost as if a simple sense of playful curiosity compelled him to become a priest and never consider another path. He likened the ups and downs of his vocation to the trials and triumphs of a married couple who jokingly say of each other: "We'd never consider divorce. Murder, yes, but never divorce."

As the years have gone by, Father Cavanaugh said he's slowed down a bit in his intake of novels and poetry, preferring now to read such Catholic periodicals as *Commonweal* and *America*.

"I've guess I've reached the land of ecclesiastical gossip-mongering," he joked.

However, he still counts among his favorite books to read those penned by the English martyr and Catholic layman St. Thomas More who was killed the same year that St. John Fisher, an English bishop, was murdered. Without intending to, the priest may have perfectly described himself when asked why he enjoyed More so much.

"What appealed to me was the sense that one could be serious, and holy, yet not heavy."

Older than 54? You may get job through Green Thumb

If you're a lower-income citizen 55 years or older and need work, Green Thumb Inc., may be able to provide you with training and job opportunities.

Green Thumb was founded by the National Farmers Union in the mid-1960s to utilize the skills of retired farmers to work on improving the nation's parks and highways. Today Green Thumb claims to be the nation's leading organization that operates the federally funded Senior Community Service Employment Program. The program is operated by 10 national organizations, including Green Thumb. Participants must be 55 or older and meet certain income eligibility requirements.

Through Green Thumb, they are assigned to local nonprofit or public agencies for an average of 20 hours per week and paid the minimum wage.

Green Thumb participants do a wide variety of tasks, from reading to children at libraries to working at blood banks. Some teach skilled trades and crafts while others prepare and deliver meals for homebound people.

For information, call Bert Matlatt at 716/392-9730 or 266-7760, or call 800-562-2776 for information on Green Thumb throughout New York state. The program's Web site is at www.greenthumb.org.

One bedroom garden apartments for Senior Citizens

1 bedroom second floor apartments now available \$550.00 per month

- Security
- Independence
- Convenient Location

Currently Accepting Applications

Please call Mr. LeChase at (716) 467-4544

North Village Apartments

2515 Culver Road
(located near the Shire at Culverton)

The Ideal Alternative To Home Ownership

For Independent Senior Living

Owned by Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation, Bloomfield Meadows features one and two bedroom apartments all on one floor. Each apartment has a full kitchen and bath, living room and dining area with individually controlled heat and air conditioning. A convenient community space and laundry facilities are also available. Rent ranges from \$550.00 to 700.00 per month and includes utilities. This exceptional opportunity is available to seniors 62 or older who meet income guidelines.

RESERVE YOUR APARTMENT NOW AND WE WILL MOVE YOU FOR FREE!



BLOOMFIELD MEADOWS

For information call 716-657-4680
P.O. BOX 70 • 25 BLOOMFIELD MEADOWS, BLOOMFIELD, NY 14469