

## FROM THE HUMBLEST OF BEGINNINGS: VISITING JOHN IRELAND'S BIRTHPLACE

“Will anyone here recall his name?” “Will they appreciate his significance to the Church in America?” “Are we bothering a busy pastor on a Saturday morning in order for our group to be able to celebrate a private Mass?” These are just three questions that ruminated in my mind. I felt a tinge of guilt because we arrived at least 20 minutes later than anticipated, having just toured the ruins of the 12th century Cistercian Jerpoint Abbey. When our bus pulled up to St. Michael's Church in **Danesfort**, (County Kilkenny), the pastor and several members of the parish were outside waiting for us. But as soon as I saw their smiles, I knew that everything was just fine. Our pilgrimage group was comprised mainly of Board members from our two seminaries. Everyone on the bus was warmly greeted by the welcoming crew as we headed into the church.

The president of St. Michael's parish council formally welcomed us, noting a gentleman in attendance whose father had chaired the welcoming committee for the **1966** visit from Saint Paul. **Hospitality** runs in the family! If there was any concern in my own mind whether John Ireland was remembered in Danesfort, our visit itself **melted all doubt!** He was and always will be their “hometown hero.” In front of the altar was placed the baptismal register from 1838. The congenial pastor, **Fr. Daniel Carroll**, had the page opened to the baptism of some of the Ireland children. He acknowledged that some pages had been lost during a re-binding project many years earlier, and so was unable to locate the exact page that included John Ireland's name. Still, there is little doubt that this was the family parish. Most likely, John Ireland was baptized here on the very same day that he was born—September 11, 1838. (see photo above)



After Mass, we boarded the bus and followed behind a car that led us on the backroads to the Ireland family home, 4 km away in **Burnchurch**. In his seminal biography entitled *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church*, Fr. Marvin O'Connell describes the family home in comparison to others in the town: “Ireland's house, by contrast, was built of stone, with a wall around it and a **pretentious iron gate** leading into the foreyard, and in that house Judith Ireland bore her first child on September 11, 1838.” The “pretentious” iron gate remains, though it is covered with rust. The home is wide, though not deep. We were particularly delighted to meet the mid-20's young man who purchased the home recently. As he spoke, his passion for Archbishop Ireland's home was palpable; he clearly had done his research. He is a man on a mission—namely to **restore the home**, well versed in its provenance. I did not venture upstairs, as I suspect there may be some structural issues as well needing attention. Its restoration would make a great HGTV episode! (see photo in sidebar)

Just on the other side of the home off the country road stands the memorial that was erected in 1966 by members of the Saint Paul delegation. It consists of a large 10-foot Celtic Cross, set back a bit from the road but enclosed within a railed area and encircled by a cut stone wall. The inscription on the plaque reads: “John Ireland 1838-1918, Patriot, Statesman, Priest of Christ. His sound has gone out into all lands and his fame until the ends of the earth. *Suaimbneas siorai da anam!*” (Eternal Peace to his Soul). This Celtic Cross is a replica of the memorial placed over the Archbishop's grave in St Paul and was locally made in St Paul and shipped to Ireland. It was formally unveiled at Burnchurch on 18th September 1966.

John Ireland's family left County Kilkenny in 1851, living first in Burlington VT, then Chicago, IL before arriving at the levee at the foot of Jackson Street in Saint Paul, MN on May 19, 1852. He was barely a teenager when he left Ireland, and yet he is **fondly remembered** in this small town. When I saw first-hand the simple roots from which he came, it is truly an example of the American dream. When just 14, he was sent to France in 1853 for eight years of seminary study in yet another foreign land, and yet he persevered

and returned eight years later to begin his priestly ministry here. We all know what a legacy he left this Archdiocese. Clearly, the good folks in Danesfort also knew and it was a singular privilege to re-connect our Archdiocese with the Diocese of Ossory. Most especially, we expressed our profound gratitude for the gift of John Ireland to the Catholic Church.

- This year, **481** men **will be ordained** to the priesthood in the United States. The typical candidate is 33 years old, was born in the U.S. and received a college degree **before entering** the seminary. This is radically different from my experience of entering a seminary at 18. That appears as the exception, not the rule these days. One of the men being ordained here on Saturday May 25 at 10:00 a.m. (N.B. no 8:00 a.m. Mass on Saturday) has a Cathedral connection– **Deacon Joseph Connelly** will offer his **Mass of Thanksgiving** here on Sunday May 26 at the **12:00 Noon** Mass. All are invited to the ordination.
- The Holy Father recently told a group of athletes and coaches that **participation in sports** provides “a great school, provided that you live it with self-control and respect for others.” An essential aspect of that is sportsmanship which is based on “healthy competition, which always sees the opponent as a friend and a brother.” Couldn’t. Agree. More! The specter of constantly being “in the face” of an opponent is tiresome and we can do better.
- Pope Francis issued *motu proprio* new universal norms for responding to sexual abuse, both of minors and vulnerable adults (with its expanded definition). This is a step forward, especially considering that some countries still lack definitive protocols for handling cases. The norms establish **easily accessible reporting systems**. Since the USA is significantly ahead of the curve, it remains to be seen just how much involvement lay experts would have in any investigative process. I suspect that the U.S. Bishops will advocate for as much as allowable by this new document.
- It briefly crossed my mind to **smuggle** something in my carry-on luggage! With 3.4 million sheep in Ireland, I figured they wouldn’t miss one little **4-week-old lamb**. Cute beyond description! But since one of our pilgrimage group members holds a senior position with Delta Airlines, I figured that might be bad form!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector



Childhood Home of Archbishop John Ireland  
Burnchurch, Ireland