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Saint John Fisher Is Irish

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Saint John Fisher Is Irish

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"St. John Fisher College has just launched an Irish Studies Program, of which I have been named the first Director. In conjunction with this, I have endeavored to find out as many Irish-related connections that already exist (such as courses presently being offered relating to Irish culture, history and literature), and also what future projects might be feasible for the program, including study abroad possibilities for students and faculty exchanges. Imagine my joy when I learned that the namesake of our college is himself a good Irishman!"



Tim Madigan
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Saint John Fisher Is Irish

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Strictly speaking that's not quite true. The actual John Fisher, executed under the orders of King Henry VIII in 1535 for opposing his efforts to divorce his wife, Queen Catherine, and for assuming the role of head of the Church of England, was 100% English, being born in Yorkshire, serving for many years as Chancellor of Cambridge University and as Bishop of Rochester, England. But there *is* an Irish connection nonetheless.

A few years ago Father Leo Hetzler, CSB, alerted me to a television series called "The Tudors" which was playing on the *Showtime* network. According to Father Leo (a man with an encyclopedic knowledge of Sixteenth Century England), the show gave a very accurate depiction of the life and travails of Bishop Fisher and his friend and fellow martyr Sir Thomas More. Even though it was also noted for its rather salacious depiction of King Henry's more earthly appetites, Father Leo gave me his dispensation and I dutifully watched the entire series. I was quite impressed by its erudition and by the excellent acting abilities of its cast members. In particular, I was pleased to see that Bishop Fisher was given such a prominent presence in the first and second seasons of the show, and I was very impressed by the actor who portrayed him, Bosco Hogan. I was even more impressed when, in researching Mr. Hogan, I discovered that he was Irish! In fact, I then recalled that I had seen another great performance of his, in the

1977 film version of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which he played the iconic role of Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's alter ego.

I began an e-mail correspondence with Bosco, whose website (www.bosco.ie) shows the great range of roles he has played in films, and on television, radio and stage. I told him that I was incorporating his scenes as John Fisher into my Introduction to Philosophy class, as a way of letting students know something about the life of the man for whom their school is named. In particular, I make it a point to show them the very moving execution scene, where Fisher asks the assembled crowd to pray for him as he is about to be beheaded, and is greeted with cries of "God bless you, Cardinal Fisher" in return, even though such words would have been considered treasonous at the time. (The story goes that Pope Paul III, upon learning of Bishop Fisher's imprisonment, had tried to save his life by elevating him the College of Cardinals, upon which Henry VIII is said to have exclaimed: "By the time the cardinal's hat arrives he won't have a head to put it on.") While a harrowing scene, it allows the students to see how courageous and steadfast Fisher was even in the face of imminent death. Like his friend Thomas More, he was truly a man for all seasons, and Bosco's depiction of him brings this out in a memorable way.

Last December, while visiting Dublin on Irish Studies-related matters, I had the chance to get together with Bosco himself, at a famous watering hole in Dublin called McDaid's Pub, where the notorious Irish writer Brendan Behan is said to have spent far too many evenings. Bosco gave his best wishes to the new Irish Studies Program and also to the students, faculty and staff at the school named after the person he so ably played in "The Tudors." I asked him to write up his memories of appearing in the show, especially filming the harrowing death scene. "When offered the role of John Fisher in 'The Tudors,'" he writes, "I knew next to nothing about him. A little research revealed that I was being asked to portray a man of great compassion, integrity and immense physical courage. Thankfully the writer of the series – the wonderfully talented Michael Hirst – made the task a great deal easier than it might have been by, in many instances, using the actual words of the great man, particularly in the execution scene. Filming that scene was an emotional experience. Standing before a large crowd, many baying for Fisher's blood, many more praying and shouting words of encouragement, was both frightening and exhilarating. I cannot begin to imagine what it must have been like to face the axe in reality! Fisher went with incredible bravery to his martyrdom. Such faith is truly humbling."

There is an interesting – and rather gruesome – coda to the story. After Fisher’s execution, his head, as well as that of Thomas More’s, was displayed on the Tower Bridge in London, as a warning to all not to go against the wishes of King Henry. Bosco continues: “Because Fisher’s head was displayed on Tower Bridge, I had to endure the process of having *my* head replicated in plaster. This involved having my head and shoulders encased in rubber solution which was then shrouded in plaster-of-paris. One can’t see or hear, and breathing is facilitated through straws up the nostrils. For someone mildly claustrophobic it is a nightmare! It is not, however, as bad as having the head removed by an axe. I survived!” That is indeed taking one’s commitment to acting to levels close to martyrdom. “I kept my extra head as a memento,” he continues. “The production company wanted to keep it but relinquished it to me when I – reasonably – pointed out that as it looks like me and nobody else they could hardly use it again. It is fun to have around at Halloween!”

I take it a good omen that the new Irish Studies Program is being launched with words of encouragement from an Irish actor who so memorably played the role of John Fisher, and I encourage everyone who has not yet done so to watch Bosco Hogan’s performance in “The Tudors.” I’m hoping I can reciprocate the courtesy he showed me in Dublin by hosting him here at the college named for the man he so masterfully portrayed. I’ll leave it up to him whether or not he brings his extra head with him!

{Tim Madigan teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Classical Studies and is the first director of the new Irish Studies Program.}



Bosco Hogan with the head of Cardinal Fisher



Bosco Hogan and Tim Madigan