

NICK RYAN

Good heart in Africa

Fr Kieran Creagh narrowly escaped death in Northern Ireland during the Troubles and more recently in South Africa where he founded a hospice. In the last of our articles to mark the Year for Priests we meet a man who for many epitomises the essence of priesthood and its sacrifices

It wasn't unusual to be summoned late at night so Fr Kieran Creagh didn't hesitate when he heard visitors at the gate of the hospice.

"They just rang the bell outside in the courtyard and I thought, 'Oh, something must have happened in one of the wards'. I didn't realise these guys were inside. I opened the door ... and that's when they grabbed me."

Fr Creagh was stripped, beaten and shot three times at point-blank range by a criminal gang looking for drugs and money.

"The third shot was like a fist going right up into my body," says the mild-mannered Belfast priest with a shudder, recalling that night in February two years ago. He was left outside calling for help; his nursing staff had locked themselves inside the wards with the terrified patients.

When the police arrived they prevented him leaving for treatment while they investigated the "crime scene". Even the ambulance had no oxygen and by the time he got to hospital his left lung had collapsed, his heart had stopped and he was resuscitated on the operating table. By some miracle he survived.

Even before the shooting Fr Creagh was known in Ireland and in South Africa for his work with victims of HIV/Aids. In Ireland he was named International Personality of the Year in 2004 when he volunteered to take part in a trial for an HIV vaccine. The same year he had sent up Leratong near Pretoria, in a single-minded effort to help tackle the massive HIV/Aids crisis crushing the country. With its hospice beds, drug clinic and crèche, plus a new church, it became the physical and spiritual heart of the local community.

A member of the Passionist order, Fr Creagh had spent more than a decade seeing his congregation succumb to illnesses caused by the virus. He felt passionately about bringing dignity to the dying: it was his vision and determination – despite funding problems, political obstructions and the South African Government's refusal to provide antiretroviral drugs – that had led to Leratong's birth.

Kieran Creagh was born during a troubled time in Ireland's history. His father was a leading newspaperman who had covered the various towns of the North, then went on to become a senior manager at Ulster TV. But it was to the priesthood that young Kieran felt drawn.

"It was something I just felt in my bones since I was four years old. I was going to be



Fr Kieran Creagh has no plans to leave the hospice he set up: 'Too much love has gone into it,' he says. Photo: Marc Shoull

a priest one day," says the 46-year-old. "I'd seen so much pain, so much violence during the Troubles, that I just wanted to do something to heal those divisions."

At 14 he'd witnessed an IRA gunman murder a taxi driver and passenger outside his house (his sister had cradled one of the dying men in her arms); despite being proud "Irish" stock and longing for a united Ireland, his family abhorred violence. Two years later he narrowly avoided being killed when his local petrol station was bombed. By his late teens he was enrolled in a business studies course at his local college, had a girlfriend and was spending most of his free time helping disabled youngsters and the Scouting movement.

His path into the priesthood took several more tortuous years, while spent time at his local Passionist church and monastery in Ardoyne and at the Tobar Mhuire Monastery in Crossgar, County Down. "I didn't want a wife," he admits, when describing breaking the news to his girlfriend. "But I don't have a problem with those that do." (He later explains that he does not believe priests should be obliged to be celibate.)

It was the time Fr Creagh spent volunteering at a Dublin hospice that had perhaps the greatest impact for the future Leratong. He also spent a year in Botswana before he was ordained a priest in 1993. When the call came to replace a sick priest in the parish covering the township of Atteridgeville in South Africa, he jumped at the chance. He has come to know and love the people but it has not been easy.

Early on his tenure as parish priest, a member of the African National Congress infiltrated his parish council and caused tremendous problems for a time, accusing him of racism and fraud. Perhaps the ANC man was upset at Fr Creagh's determination to bring change. Then one of his own priests, a fellow Passionist, later died of Aids. And there was the never-ending series of funerals for the pauper

Aids victims, and stories of people trudging home to their villages to die. But after he was shot, Leratong was suddenly on the map.

On the day I visit Leratong, Fr Creagh "sings out" another body, a lung-cancer victim who has just died in one of the two rooms used for a patient's final moments. His staff joins hands and also sings, and a prayer is repeated in English and the local tongue. When we sit down to talk it's clear he still gets angry with what he sees, sometimes, as a highly sexualised society and media in South Africa; in particular, the behaviour of men with multiple partners is something he thinks is slow to change. However, he agrees with the Pope's recent comments that condoms are not necessarily the answer.

"Abstinence and faithfulness are the answers," he says. "But after experiencing the worst of HIV/Aids-related deaths I think anyone who cannot abstain or be faithful has a moral duty to wear a condom to protect their own life and the life of their partner."

Fr Creagh looks to his own future with both excitement and uncertainty. A further recent attack on one of his neighbouring priests, a 76-year-old Irishman, has left him "sickened" and he admits to feeling more vulnerable since his own shooting.

But Leratong is here to stay: "Too much love has gone into it; too much need remains," says the priest, looking out over the crowded valley as the sun dips to the horizon. With that he smiles, and the man everyone here calls simply "The Father" stands and heads out for his evening rounds once again.

■ Nick Ryan is a journalist, author and producer. www.nickryan.net