

# Judge spares life of dog on North's banned list

By Lesley-Anne McKeown

THE owners of a family pet broke down in court as a judge in the North ruled the pit bull-type dog could be returned home.

Leonard Collins and Joanne Meadows also vowed to continue their high-profile campaign to change the law after securing the release of their beloved Hank, who had been seized by Belfast City Council around three weeks ago.

In Northern Ireland, the pit bull terrier is one of four dog breeds banned by law. However, the courts can spare a dog if it is believed the animal would not be a danger to the public if kept under certain conditions.

During a hearing which lasted less than five minutes, it was



Owner: Ms Meadows with dog

revealed that Hank had come to the council's attention as a result of a complaint from a member of the public about alleged mistreatment.

When officers attended the property, Hank's owners were

not present and the dog was displaying 'agitated behaviour', it was claimed.

The animal was seized when a warrant was executed.

However, at Belfast Magistrates' Court, Judge Ken Nixon confirmed he would sign an order placing the dog on the council's exemption register - prompting applause from animal rights campaigners who had packed into the public gallery.

Outside court, Mr Collins and Ms Meadows spoke of their relief that Hank had been placed on the exemption register, sparing him from destruction.

Mr Collins, a 33-year-old student, said: 'We are glad that common sense has come through and that they recognise that Hank is a friendly dog.'

# Dr Mark Dooley



## MORAL MATTERS

# Father Hamel's final moments were his finest

**H**IS name was hardly known before he was slain. Now, Fr Jacques Hamel is the most famous priest in the world. From obscurity to international renown, this gentle pastor was laid to rest yesterday with all the solemn rites a martyr deserves.

From the moment of his death, I have been in deep shock. The fact that a couple of teenagers could murder an elderly man, in such cold blood, vividly illustrates what we are dealing with in Isis. The fact that they could do so while he was celebrating Mass shows that they have scant regard for religion.

Even in the darkest days of the Middle Ages, you could find sanctuary in a church. Somehow, the barbarians always stopped short of invading sacred soil. The killing of Fr Hamel proves that the very idea of 'sanctuary' has been shattered.

The churches are empty, and yet they still stand as a reminder of our eternal longings. They are a refuge for saints and sinners, for those in search of peace and shelter. They are part of who we are.

Fr Hamel died re-enacting the great sacrifice of Calvary. As the Blood of his Saviour sat on the altar, they came to sacrifice an old and defenceless man. They smiled as they slit his throat, shedding his priestly blood as though he too were on the Cross.

Jacques Hamel was a kind and gentle servant to his flock. A priest since 1958, he had lived a life devoted to the broken-hearted, the wounded and the fallen. It was a life lived hidden from the world, and yet his trail of love spans the decades.

It is little consolation to his parishioners, his fellow priests and family, to say that Fr Hamel died doing what he loved most.

To perish at the altar is such an honour for any priest, for it is to die with Christ. It is to hear those beautiful words whispered in the midst of pain: 'This day you will be with me in paradise.'

Fr Hamel fell - and with him, so did the illusion that we can take our faith for granted.

The Mass is something that happens every day in every church in every country. It is a ceremony of love, a rite of compassion, a tender response to that sacred command: 'Do this in memory of me.'

It redeems us from violence, from anger and from our selfishness. That is why, when they came for him, poor Fr Hamel exclaimed: 'Stop! What are you doing?'

His last words were spoken in shock, with dismay that anyone could respond to love with such hate.

He died in a church dedicated to the first Christian martyr, St Stephen. He died doing something he did every day for the past 58 years. He died in the loving arms of his Saviour.

And yet, Fr Hamel's last moments were to be his finest.

In those terrifying seconds, as he was forced to his knees, he gave courageous witness to the faith he loved. He was a man of 85 who had dedicated his life to the Church, and now, as he drew his last breath, he offered himself on the altar.

Within hours, the name 'Fr Jacques Hamel' was known across the globe. His face had been seen by millions and his smile beamed from every television set. In life, he never sought fame, but in death he became a global symbol of saintly sacrifice.

May that name never be forgotten. May it always remind us of the gentle goodness that is at the heart of the Church, despite all its past sins and errors. May it always remind us of the depth of service which people like Fr Hamel provide every hour of every day.

Most especially, may it forever remind us of what we stand to lose through our apathy and religious indifference. The daily routines of the Church may be a far cry from those of 'Cyberia' and the city. And yet, where else but in the churches can widows, orphans and strangers take refuge?

People like Fr Hamel do not proclaim their message from the rooftops. They do not boast of their sacrifices in the name of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and imprisoned.

Such Good Samaritans labour quietly in the vineyard, for theirs is a labour of selfless love.

**I** WALKED into the church on a quiet afternoon. The old priest was sitting in a pew and beside him sat a young man in distress. The priest put his hand gently on the man's head and said a short prayer. The man stood up having been profoundly moved by that beautiful moment. In the silence of that church, and without any fanfare, a tortured young man had been saved by a healing hand.

Fr Jacques Hamel perished as he had lived: a man who showed in word and deed that a priest's true vocation is one of love.

He spilled his blood on the little Calvary of his church and, in that moment, something rose up from the soil. The people of France were reconciled to their Catholic past, to their saints and noble martyrs.

The Muslims of France held out a hand of solidarity to their Christian neighbours, attending Mass last Sunday in honour of a man whose name has become synonymous with saintliness.

Fr Hamel has become the face of the Church we rarely see because it never seeks the spotlight. It is, however, the true face of something that heals and helps, that loves and longs for the joy of all.

Fr Jacques Hamel: the face of love for an age in agony. The face of someone who died so that we might learn how to live again.

# Back to school costs really adding up?



\*Source: Barnardos 2015. Based on average for 1st year pupil



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