

Fr Neil Farren's Ministry in Priesthood.

In November 1978 forty two years ago Fr John Farren, from Malin and myself were notified by Bishop Daly, that we were to be called out of our Maynooth Seminary training early because of the shortage of priests in the Derry Diocese. Our ordination dates were set for the weekend of 31st March/ 1st April 1979. I think, the bishop, had in mind a good date for my ordination.

Since, I was all of 22yrs when ordained early. The President of St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Mgr Olden, whilst in Rome that Spring of 79 was tasked to seek necessary Dispensation from Pope John Paul 2 for me, to get ordained due to my being underage. A year later, the necessary age for ordination became 25yrs. I heard from some of our Diocesan clergy, in their more humorous moments that, 'the new ruling came into effect, due to the Pope's shock at hearing of my application for underage ordination'.

I was Ordained in my home parish of Buncrana. Bishop Daly had asked that the maximum number to attend was 100 guests. (That at a time of no pandemic). Amongst those attending was my mother and father, Brian and Breid Farren, my sisters and brothers, Mary, John, Patrick, Brian and Margaret. Bishop Daly had asked Bishop Farren, if he would like to perform the ceremony, but Bishop Farren felt in his retirement years he would not be as able as in his earlier days so left the Ordination to Bishop Daly.

My First Mass on 2nd April 1979 was Bishop Farren's last public Mass to attend. He got a stroke two weeks later. For that reason it was good to have been ordained early.

I still remember arriving at my First Appointment in the Waterside Parochial Hse, Derry, with my father, Brian Farren and being welcomed by the then P.P. Fr Austin Duffy. My first days there was the beginning of the then great May fortnight Retreats in each parish in Derry. Those memorable 2 week retreat periods when the city parishes and Waterside were in a Spiritual High with overflowing congregations, three times a day. The retreats were directed by various religious orders. Waterside parish normally had three retreat priests arrive each year. One was

normally elderly, the other middle age and the other middle age but looked young, to keep everyone happy. In my 9 years in the Waterside, those 2 retreat weeks at the beginning of May each year were the highlight of the Parish Year. Those retreats had the powerful effect, I remember of bringing back many lapsed to Catholic faith once again.

It was great to be ordained priest in that era. In that era there seemed to be a great spiritual energy in the Church, derived from Vatican 2 and Pope's visit to Ireland in 79. many in parish life, especially the youth, wanting to take an active role in the life of the Parish Community. There were many very active lay movements on the go. Parish Renewal, Parish Councils, Charismatic Renewal, Marriage Encounter, Youth Encounter, Parish Youth Groups, St Vincent De Paul, Legion of Mary, The Church Choirs and Folk Groups were bursting at the seams with membership. The positive spiritual effects of that generation, I do believe is still visible in Parish Life today. Priesthood too had its own spiritual help with priests meeting monthly to pray together and have a sense of fraternity, as with the Charles de Foucauld movement.

As a young priest, from Donegal, I soon began to experience at first hand the tensions of the Northern Troubles. The Waterside Parish did not escape the tensions, the riots, raids, funerals of that era. In that era annually visiting the H block and the Maze prison which was appreciated by their Waterside families. Parish life was certainly different from today's parish scene, A more challenging time it was, but also there was a great spirit amongst the people as Phil Coulter's song has it. 'Their spirits been bruised, never broken.

Bishop Daly's made a vast contribution as Bishop in leadership role in that era. At a time of great conflict and pain, he along with other notable people were instrumental in bringing about justice and reconciliation, as is enjoyed today,

The 1980s Waterside Parish saw also much in the way of Church Building and improvements with the Opening of the Church of Immaculate Conception in 1981. The complete restoration of St Columb's Church in 1985 and New Buildings new Church in 1988.

The Good Shepherd Sisters were also active performing invaluable work for the people in the Top of the Hill area with the Family Centre operating there.

After 9 years in the Waterside, I was Coleraine bound for the following 11 years, from 1988-99. The main thrust there was building up the sense of Parish Community. I have often heard it said, that a parish in dept is a parish that pulls together. That was true for the Waterside Parish I had just left and also for the parish I was bound for, Coleraine. Their Parish Church was then to be completely restored in 1993. It was a great time of gelling the Parish community together. The restoration committee organised many fund raising events, that in the main were community bonding projects, with Parish Outings, Picnic Days, Barn Dances, Gymkhana Events, Treasure Hunts, Rickety Wheels Events, We had also good outreach with the ministers of the other religious denominations especially through the Ulster Delaware Project, that brought youth of both denominations from the Parish to USA host families in Delaware, helping toward respect.

It was whilst in Coleraine Parish, that the paedophile scandals came to light. It was difficult time hearing of abuse of young people especially by priests. This indeed was the low point of my time as priest. But then, the victims, was the real story of pain.

Omagh Parish was my third appointment, where I was for the next 8 years. On my arrival in the last Saturday of August 1999, the townsfolk had just marked two weeks earlier the 1st anniversary of the Omagh Bomb. The Saturday evening I arrived saw a large candle lit procession passing solemnly through the darkened Omagh streets in memory of the dead and injured. I knew I was coming to a town full of painful grief. I got to know many of those lovely people tragically maimed or bereaved by that awful Omagh Bomb. I was also with those same family members in their other days such as time of wedding or family events. These people were and still are an inspiration.

One of the highlights in the life of the Omagh Parish Community, was at the Christmas Liturgy when ministers of the other Religious denominations in the vicinity of Omagh came at the end of the Mass and gave our congregation a Christmas greeting. A scene that gave hope for the harmony of its people as a true Christian community. This good practice should be carried out in every parish where possible.

Also what gave me great joy in Omagh was seeing the number of parishioners taking an active part in the life of the Parish Community. It was always wonderful to see people offering their services for the good of the Parish Community such as the powerful witness of the Prayer Guides Charismatic renewal, and the leadership teams that assisted with their para liturgies and bringing various speakers to share their faith witness.

Bishop Hegarty appointed me in 2007 to be Parish Priest of Ardmore Parish. I was greeted on my arrival by Mgr McQuillan and Sr Teresa. Both were very valued members of the Parish team in Ardmore for many years. Sr Teresa retired in the weeks I arrived and Fr McQuillan was soon to retire also, but never did. He is still keeping well in the retirement home and often talks about his love for the Ardmore People and his desire to say one more Mass at Ardmore Chapel. We have been and hopefully are fortunate to have a vibrant Folk Group and Choir in Ardmore, but they have been one of the casualties of the Pandemic, and how the liturgy and the congregation as well as I miss their input big time.

There have been many highlights in Ardmore, especially the Year of Faith that brought Parishioners to many a 'Turas' Pilgrimage journeying. From Slemish to Croagh Patrick and From the Hill of the Slane to Lough Derg. The many turas' to various Patrician foundations along the Faughan were well journeyed but great memories. The Pastoral Council was active hosting many events and speakers throughout. We are fortunate in Ardmore Parish to have a Pastoral Centre that up to the Pandemic was well used. Still it is available if there is an overflow of people attending Mass that needs to be accommodated.

The Parish is in dept to some very fine lay people that assist at various levels from the Pastoral Council to the Finance Committee. In this time of Pandemic the Pastoral Council assisted in bringing more people to be involved be it in the liturgy or assisting in the church at other areas at time of lockdown and especially since the re opening of the Church at the end of June and keeping it a safe place. The finance committee has also been invaluable assisting in various projects as upgrading the Church and the Church car park as well as other areas of Parish maintenance. My thanks to the parishioners for their support given to the parish religious faith over the years They are indeed an inspiration and shining light of

faith witness to many of our younger generation families in the parish. Lets hope and pray that the younger generation will appreciate the religious faith handed down to them from previous generations often at a price which the Ardmore Mass rock testifies too and the faith witness of generations gone before them.

In my years at Ardmore Parish, I have also been Hospital Chaplain in Altnagelvin Area Hospitals. Working alongside, in the earlier years, Fr Chris Ferguson, with Sr Carmel and Sr Breda assisting. In more recent years working alongside Fr Sean O Donnell, Sr Jo and Sr Myriam. Also in the past number of months, Fr Canny and Fr Gallagher also involved.

The hospital ministry involved much support from many Eucharistic Ministers from different nearby parishes, invaluable assisting with bringing the eucharist to patients in hospital wards. Ministry also involved collaborating with ministers of other religious denominations, hosting various annual religious services.

At this November time, I think and pray for all those I have attended over the 12 years of service there as well as in the Parish community. Some in the hospital setting have made good recoveries, others have still to live with the side effects of their ill health, whilst others have gone to their rest. Keeping healthy is hard today, especially when covid 19 can be so easily got, not always the fault of those getting it. This pandemic time of course is a much more difficult time for all the front line staff in our Hospitals as well as for the patients and family members who are unable to visit or be visited.

By acting together to prevent the spread of Covid 19, we by our actions can increase our care for the safety, wellbeing and health of all NHS/HSE and Care Workers as well as the patients in hospitals and Nursing Homes.

In this time of Pandemic, we are fortunate to have in the North our churches open. The reason they have been kept open I believe is that they are safe places to be. Much effort has been put in by Parish volunteers as well as a great financial cost re sanitizing to keep the Church a safe place to enter and pray in.

The pastoral aspect of priestly ministry has dramatically changed re Parishioner contact. With the exception of the Mass/evening rosary, there is no other community gathering, meeting place, even sick visitation and

every visitation has been halted due to people shielding and to prevent the spread of Covid 19. Zoom meetings more the order of the day these days.

Bishop McKeown, still keeps the priests occupied with Deanery Zoom Meetings, that has priests at different deaneries be it, Derry City, Inishowen, Co Derry, Co Tyrone deaneries meeting together through Zoom to assist through listening and responding with various means and resources in this Pandemic time. This year 2020 was to be a high point in the Derry Diocese with the Diocesan/Parish Renewal planned for this year and next, leading up to the 1500th anniversary of the death of St Columba in 2021. The pandemic has put paid to that high point.

Bishop McKeown will be coming to Ardmore to celebrate the 7.30pm Mass in Ardmore on Monday 2nd November, the 90th anniversary of the opening of the Church of St Mary's Ardmore.

Priesthood has its varied demands, be it as Celebrant, Confessor, Counsellor, Liturgist, Homilist, Consoler, Chaplain, Visitor, Chairperson, committee Member, Healer, Listener, etc, etc. It is not easy being all to all people all the time. It is good to be priest. The daily high point for me is the celebration of the weekday/Sunday mass. It is this spiritual and communal experience that gives the day purpose and meaning. The priests life needs to be nourished as well by time spent in the presence of the Divine Master in those other moments, so that the priest, himself is alive to the Spirits promptings in the course of his priestly ministry.

Through the 40+ years of ministry there has been high points and low points. Hopefully in the years to come more high points than low points. But then again, tis the low points that brings us to our knees.

The Catholic Schools, over the 41 years of my priesthood have excelled themselves in fostering a high level of learning to the youth and have been a great assistance in imparting religious faith to the children in their care. These schools are invaluable in imparting a religious faith to the children of the parish community and beyond. Without them, the religious faith of our youth would be in a much poorer state. I would like also to thank those parents who assist in handing on the faith to our youth through their faith practice in this era when religious faith development is not always appreciated nor culturally encouraged. If I was to live life over again, I would still opt to be priest. Indeed, it is a better time to be priest today, than it was forty years ago even though the same vitality is not there as used to be, but still it is a better time to be priest today. *Christ*

continues to invite us to be builders in his kingdom and inspires us to bring his love and his message, the Good News to all we meet.

We need more youths to consider this call to ordination. This call must be spiritually nurtured by youth themselves as well as faith supported by others around if it is to be responded to. It is also important that we should all pray that the Lord of the harvest will send labourers to his harvest, for the harvest is rich but the labourers are few.

To conclude. I have ministered for over 41 **years** in 4 parishes alongside 7 Parish Priests and with 13 curates in that space of time in the above various parishes I have ministered in. Also in that space of time with 4 bishops.