

Corpus Christi Processions

50 years ago - An Altar Server remembers

HUGH DOLAN

For Mass servers in St. Mel's Cathedral Holy Week was the busiest period of the year. It was a mixture of palm, chrism, baptismal water, shrouded statues, Tenebrae, a darkened building, silenced bells, indoor processions, incense, candles. UNTIL ...

"The Corpus Christi procession will take place this year on Sunday June...." We were all attention as from the marble pulpit Fr Wall read out the route. It varied from year to year and must have caused consternation for the residents affected. It was the signal for "major tidy ups" as each area sought to look spic and span for the great occasion. It was down to Mick Hanawins, Matt Farrells or Providers to buy paint, distemper, whitewash or whatever was required to have houses and premises gleaming.

A frantic search took place for flags and bunting which had not seen the light of day since the last time the procession passed. Unprofessional language may have been used as it was discovered that the flag poles had been cut up to make goal posts and were "not fit for purpose". National and Papal flags were eventually located. The Eucharistic Congress flag evoked the most memories for older people but puzzled their children. "What's the blue flag for Mummy?" was a common question.

On the Sunday prior to the procession the assembly points for the various groups were announced...again the pulpit. Men's sodality was to assemble at the Temperance Hall, children at St. Mary's Terrace, Women's sodality at St. Patrick's Terrace. I was always intrigued by the instruction that "the children of Mary in their cloaks and veils" were to assemble on Convent Road.

The morning of the procession always dawned bright and sunny. Perhaps there were wet and windy days but the years have filtered them out.

The front of the Cathedral was decked out in a "brand new suit" and Jimmy Reilly was the tailor. Flags fluttered from the top of the portico. Lines of yellow and white bunting connected the same portico with the Cathedral railings. Tall flags flanked the entrance gates. St. Mel himself must have been impressed as he gazed down.

One year we were surprised to see loudspeakers being attached to ESB poles along the route and cable connecting them. Tony and Jack Farrell had devised a system whereby the prayers and hymns could be relayed from the Cathedral. To our ears it was like having our own *Radio Longford*. We lived opposite the Cathedral and my Mother sent over her record of Fr. Sydney Mc Ewan singing "Flowers of the May" to enable sound checks to be carried out. Be it in Teffia Park, St. Michael's Road, St. Mel's Road or Harbour Row the sound of that hymn booming out meant there was not much time left for preparations.

At 3pm the procession moved off led by the men of the Parish, rosary beads dangling from their hands. In lines of ten, old and young were an amazing sight as they made their way under a warm June sun. The children who had recently received their First Communion were particularly conspicuous- the boys in their new suits, rosettes in their lapels, hair recently cut. The girls were like brides, their white dresses and veils providing a contrast to the darker garb of the adults.



The Sacred Host in a golden monstrance was borne by Dr. Mc Namee, Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois. The canopy under which he walked was carried by members of the Urban District Council and St. Vincent de Paul. The Mass servers flanked it on either side. The thurifer walked in front, turning at intervals to incense the Blessed Sacrament. Torch bearers provided a guard of honour. The awe and reverence was palpable.

Joyful mysteries of the Rosary were followed by the sorrowful and glorious. Thousands of voices answered the responses as Fr. O'Rourke's voice carried from the Cathedral via the loudspeakers. The Farrell brothers had done an excellent job again. Hymns interspersed the prayers "Sweet Heart of Jesus", "Holy God we Praise Thy Name", "Soul of my Saviour". The voices of the Cathedral Choir under Tommy Devine back at base filled the streets and the choir of men and women on the move joined in.

The route itself bore testimony to the hours of hard work put in by the residents. What a transformation. Altars and shrines had sprung up in every vacant space. Holy pictures from the miniature to the enormous were placed in every location. St. Patrick, the Sacred Heart, the Transfiguration, Pope Pius XII - a shop in Knock could not match the selection. In every doorway candles, night lights and small oil lamps burned before statues positioned on white cloth-covered tables. Lilies, Lilac, peony roses, flowers of every hue filled vases, jugs and any container available. Sparkling windows, spotless curtains, scrubbed paths-the passing of the Blessed Sacrament in front of your house was taken very seriously.

After about an hour and a half the first lines of the procession were within sight of the Cathedral. A temporary altar had been erected in front of the main door. Gradually the courtyard filled. Babes-in-arms, babes in prams, women with their heads covered, the weary and the cheerful packed in as the evening sun spread its rays. Latin hymns we associated with Benediction added to the solemnity: *Tantum Ergo*, *O Salutaris*. The Bishop raised the monstrance as the congregation knelt in adoration; the cold hard ground marking our knees. A final hymn-possibly "Faith of our Fathers"- and it was time to disperse.



Some of the scenes at this year's Corpus Christi Procession at Demesne / Lisbrack area of the Parish.

Hunger pangs reminded us it was tea time.

At 6 o'clock the joyful chimes rang out over Longford. Flags and bunting were being packed away for another

year. Religious pictures, candles, statues were back in their usual positions. Tony and Jack were dismantling the public address system. My mother had Fr. Sydney Mc Ewan safe again

in the record cabinet. Thursdays Longford Leader would feature some photographs to remind us of the Corpus Christi procession. Each of us had our own memory.