



Couples who celebrated their 25th and 50th Wedding Jubilees.



Margaret and Jimmy McLoughlin who celebrate 50 years of marriage are photographed here with family members and Bishop Colm.

25th and 50th Wedding Jubilee Celebrations



Bernadette and Michael Wall pictured with their son Micheal and Sharon McDermott and Bishop Colm.

My Fond Memories of Longford Parish

Fr Paul Kangkai from Jalingo Diocese in Nigeria spent three summers with us in Longford Parish – 2006, 2008 and 2010. The following are some of his musings on this time among us.

■ **FR. PAUL KANGKAI**

There is a saying in Nigeria made popular by one of our best known playwrights Ola Rotimi that "until the rotten tooth is pulled out, the mouth must chew with caution." I have not lived long enough in Longford to qualify to capture the heart and soul of the community. However, my brief visits to St. Mel's Cathedral since 2006 have given me a glimpse of what it entails, hence my reason for taking the cautious path.

Let me begin by stating that the year 2006 was my first ever visit to Ireland. But it was not my first time meeting Irish people. As a matter of fact, I first encountered Irish people at my infancy, at baptism. Coming from the north eastern part of Nigeria, Taraba State, it is fairly easy to know why I encountered Irish people early in life.

In the first place, the north eastern part of Nigeria is the most backward part of the country, that is, if economic and sociological indices are factors to be considered. It is equally a vast geographical area with complex terrain of rivers, streams, hills, forests in good proportions. Nigeria has the geographical space of 923,768 square kilometres with the north occupying quite a sizable part of it. The country covers the distance of 1,040 kilometres straight from the coast to the northern limits. The sheer size of the area to be evangelized was so big that the SMA ceded the north eastern part of Nigeria to the Augustinian Order.

Thus, by dint of their Christian faith, courage, hard work, perseverance and determination, the Augustinian fathers and later sisters and

their collaborators went about the uphill task of implanting the faith in this virgin territory. Were it not for their doggedness in the face of crushing weather conditions and new cultural experiences, I would probably like many from that part of the world, remained illiterate or have become a Muslim since Islam had a longer presence in the northern part of Nigeria.

Fortunately for me, I benefited from the education the missionaries offered in the schools they ran. Consequently, quite early in life I heard names of cities like Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford, Galway etc.

It turned out that 2006 was at the height of the golden age of Ireland in recent history, the "Celtic Tiger" years. I was moved by the infrastructural developments taking place. One got the feeling that the entire country was being rebuilt. The mood was upbeat. Occasionally, figures were released about the latest number of millionaires in the land. I recall reading somewhere that the Irish were the second richest people in Europe. On top of this, the summer of 2006 was magnificent with long dry and sunny days than any I have experienced since then. It was as if the "gods" conspired in my favour or as they say here, I brought the sunshine with me.

How did I find my way to Longford? It was quite simple. I was introduced to Fr. Tom Cox through a mutual friend of ours Sr. Helena McEvilly FMDM who incidentally was working like myself in the city of Jos. We worked previously at a rural village called Yakoko between 2000 and 2001. The sisters ran a rural hospital while I was the parish priest and chaplain to the hospital. I was thrilled to be communicating with Fr. Tom Cox whom I first encountered from reading his column in the INTERCOM. I loved his style of writing because it was witty and down to earth.

Eventually he introduced me to Fr. Tom Healy and Bishop Colm O'Reilly who graciously invited me to the diocese. I arrived in June and was met by Fr. Tom Cox at the airport in Dublin. The re-

ception was out of this world. It felt like we had known each other for years. By the time we arrived in Longford he had hinted me on what to expect.

St. Mel's Cathedral was the first landmark that caught my attention coming into Longford town from Dublin. If the outside is beautiful the inside was truly magnificent. It was a building that one would naturally like to pray in. I marvelled at the expertise and careful attention to details in the Cathedral that was built over a century and a half ago. It was also well kept. However, the best asset of Longford town is its people. St. Mel's parish was the lens through which I was able to draw that conclusion. I was warmly received wherever I went.

Church participation and attendance was quite impressive. It was far better than what I had been reading in magazines and journals about the dwindling numbers of church attendance in the churches of the northern hemisphere. I was taken aback by the large number of young people attending Sunday mass. Similarly, I was captivated by the number of people turning up for private contemplation and prayers before the blessed Eucharist every day. It was one of the lasting memories I took home.

Those familiar with the Nigerian Church know how silence is difficult to come by. Thanks to our Pentecostal brethren who sometimes view silence as a manifestation of the lack of the presence of the Holy Spirit. One could not miss the strong sense of community. This came out visibly at christenings, funerals, weddings, sports and local festivals.

I observed that the summer liturgy of 2006 was generally quieter than normal. Nevertheless, in 2008 when I came for my second visit the summer liturgy was greatly improved upon. There was more music in the Sunday liturgies. It was apparent that the number of participants had increased. Many renovations had taken place in the Cathedral and there was a feeling of newness about it.

Unfortunately, the national mood had changed.

The economic meltdown had set in. The virus of corruption hitherto synonymous with developing countries like Nigeria had caught up with the industrialized world. We saw the globalization of corruption. The global financial crisis caused by the greed of politicians, bankers, and their associates was more severe than was initially anticipated. Interestingly, I found people in Ireland friendlier and more receptive than in previous years. Indeed, the depth of the human spirit is far ahead of what money can buy.

My visit in 2010 came after the tragic fire at St. Mel's Cathedral. The fire robbed the Presbytery of its life. Ironically, the Presbytery had been renovated a few months earlier. It was a deserted place with the occasional presence of construction workers.

Looking at the burnt building from outside was misleading. The destruction inside seemed to me like one that could only be caused by a huge explosion. It was a monumental loss of inexplicable proportions. Knowing how the people and priests zealously looked after the building it was unmistakable their collective sense of loss.

I was pleased that within a short time an alternative was found for the ruined Cathedral at the Cathedral Centre. The Cathedral Centre is beautifully conceived, especially the fact that the parishioners are seating round and close to the altar. Most significantly was that the bonding that the Cathedral gave the community would not be lost.

From a personal point of view, as impressive as the Cathedral Centre is, it does not feel the same way as in St. Mel's Cathedral. Having to celebrate mass at the Cathedral Centre gave me the opportunity to enjoy daily walks in and out of St. Mel's College, something I did not do in previous visits. It is a beautiful setting for private prayer especially for saying the Rosary.

Fr. Tom Healy updates me of the latest happenings at the Cathedral. I look forward to the day that the Cathedral would be reopened so that the bond it has always brought to the community in Longford would not be lost.