



Words from Bishop Colm O'Reilly

"A house is not just four walls and a roof. While this expression is a cliché it is also very true. For families houses are homes. St Mel's Cathedral is not just four walls and a roof (a temporary roof) either. It is Home to the entire Parish community. Since it was ruined by fire last Christmas I believe we never wanted to think of it as it is but how it will be. A friend wrote to me after the fire to offer his sympathy. He said in reference to my words to the media on Christmas Day that he was glad that I could say it would be restored "even", as he put it, "before the fire had finished its work". I would have found it unthinkable to say anything other than what I said.

As I look at the outside of the Cathedral now, I begin to think of its interior not as it is but as it will look when splendidly restored. When planning work begins, it will not initially get much publicity but will, nonetheless, be a giant step on the journey back to full restoration. I feel personally excited by this and I hope that this prospect will lift the hearts of Longford people in advance of Christmas.

I know that many people become anxious and tense when they have to wait for something greatly desired. The same applies to a community. But both individuals and communities can wait in a different frame of mind. Waiting in patience can help us to appreciate what we wait for all the more. The great artist, Michelangelo, who created magnificent frescoes in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican painted the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ. On faces from different periods in history he showed growth in awareness of the wonder of what was to come as the centuries passed. The Advent Season in which we await the coming of Christ is the Church's invitation to wait in hope and wonder for Him. I hope that some of that Advent spirit can also continue as we await the restoration of our Cathedral.

The year coming to its end began as if it would be a

real annus horribilis, a dreadful year, because of the fire that had happened on Christmas Day. We were more apprehensive than we wanted to admit. But the first year of waiting has gone well. Forced to face adversity we have learned to make the most of what we have. We have warm and welcoming places for Sunday and weekday masses at St Mel's College. We have a warm welcome too in the neighbouring Parish of Newtownforbes for liturgies such as weddings and funerals.

It is now quite inevitable that, with the coming of Christmas, the first anniversary of the horrendous destroying fire, we will be gripped by a painful nostalgia for what has been lost last Christmas in Longford. Human life knows tears and laughter, nights of fear and dawns of hope. Psalm 29 says "tears come with the night but joy comes with the dawn". It is my hope and prayer that all of us will experience the dawn of new hope at Christmas.

+Colm O'Reilly.

Meet the parish team of St. Mel's Cathedral

A year to remember Fr. Thomas Healy, Adm.

As I write these few lines we have just come through a very turbulent week in our country. The economic situation is causing much hardship and bringing real anxiety for many people about their futures. The end of 2010 will go down in history as the time of the IMF and a time when a new realisation of the perilous state of the nation's finances dawned upon us.

Similarly for Longford people the end of 2009 and start of 2010 will forever be remembered as a time of huge upheaval with the Cathedral fire and its fallout. Obviously elsewhere in this publication much has been recorded about the aftermath of the fire at St. Mel's last Christmas Day.

Inevitably our world was torn asunder at that time. To see the beautiful Cathedral which had been at heart of the parish community for 170 years succumb to flames was a tremendous shock to the people of this community and far beyond.

However, as I look back on the year it strikes me that while our beautiful centre of worship has been greatly damaged and we are faced with a huge restoration project the parish community is perhaps united more than ever. And the privilege and challenges of trying to live the Gospel in our time and place continued.

Again at the risk of repeating words written elsewhere in this paper I will never forget the outpouring of goodwill and support in the wake of the Cathedral fire. I recall endless letters phone calls, texts and emails from people expressing their sympathies and also offering their assistance. When it came to arranging the alternative facilities at the College there was a great outpouring of generosity of time and talent - for all of that we are very grateful.

The usual cycle of parish life took place and some particular memories stand out:

- The very moving Easter ceremonies especially the Passion Drama played out by young people from our secondary schools.
- The warm prayerfulness of the chapel at St. Mel's College inviting us to pause and pray in the midst of our busy lives.
- Our privilege as priests to be part of people lives on the joyful days of Baptisms and Weddings as well as the sad days of laying loved ones to rest.
- The constant welcome and hospitality afforded to us on our visits to the homes of the parish.
- Cemetery Sunday, Corpus Christi, and the recent Bereavement Ceremony at the Cathedral Centre.
- The Sacramental days of joy as our young people celebrated their First Holy Communion and Confirmations.
- The welcome afforded to and the involvement of Fr. Paul Kangkai on his summer stint with us and to student Tong Gilhooley on his year of placement in our parish.
- The generous involvement of Pastoral Team Members on our frequent meetings as we try to respond to the pastoral needs of our community.

As this year draws to a close we are very aware of people's fears and anxieties. We pray that our celebration of the Christmas season may bring some joy and restore our faith that in the coming of God among us as a little baby we are assured of God's love and care for us and that we are held always safe in the palm of His hands.

A time of great hope and joy Sr. Angela Clarkson

Advent 2009 was a time of great hope and joy. I rejoiced in the publication of The Parish Review after

a long absence. Christmas Eve Midnight Mass never seemed so wonderful. As I welcomed people at the door their enthusiasm and faith was palpable. The Cathedral itself, ablaze with lights, flowers and ringing with organ tones and the singing of the choir, seemed alive. All this turned to ashes on Christmas morning as we looked at the skeleton of what was in the words of one parishioner "our pride and joy." For me it was devastation. The reality soon hit home. My workplace, the Family Centre, was unsafe to use. When would Rainbows, ACCORD and the many other groups be able to meet, not to mention having a suitable place of worship? Never again will I doubt that the Church is the people of God. People were energised, and a wealth of generosity, ingenuity and sheer genius sprung into life. On the 8th February the Family Centre reopened much to the relief of many people especially the parents and participants of the Rainbows Programme.

March 31st saw the birth of a long-held dream with the introduction of the Children's Mass. Life for me in Parish and Family Ministry is varied and wonderfully life-giving: from the joy of visiting parents and their new-born children, to sharing the grief of the bereaved, to the camaraderie of the Friday Coffee Mornings and much more.

Thanks to all who have helped with accommodation when we needed it, to the staffs in the Presbytery and Family Centre and to the many volunteers with whom I am privileged to work.

Silent Night, Holy Night Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan C.C.

The echoes of last Christmas will be etched in my memory forever. From the beauty of an Advent preparation for the birth of Jesus in the crib space of our hearts, captured very well in the beautiful celebration of our Christmas Vigil on Christmas Eve. This was a time of family, a time of joy, a time of community. Leaving the Cathedral that night with the warmth of Christmas wishes, little did I ever think it would be my last time in St. Mel's Cathedral that was.

The expectancy of a normal Christmas morning changed in the early hours. I was called first by the Garda. I called Fr. Healy on the internal phone we had no idea what was facing us. As we made our way to the back of the cathedral it was too much to take in. The fire took control of our beautiful Cathedral. We watched the prayer room and museum fall, rafter after rafter into ashes. Suddenly our beautiful St. Mel's Cathedral was lit up from inside. The stain glass windows illuminated in the most beautiful colours that sparkled in the snow. Then the beautiful coloured glass shattered before our eyes. Could this possibly be happening? All that we held as beautiful, precious, historic, vanishing before our eyes. Happy Christmas!!!

Yet it was Christmas morning and Mass is the focus of our Christmas celebration so alternative arrangements had to be made quickly. I went to the Convent where we were warmly and kindly welcomed by the sisters, with my brother, Michael and friend Darren. We filled a box with what I thought we needed for Christmas morning Mass. We set up a table in our Temperance Hall. The cathedral choir sang carols as the people gathered, our Cathedral continued to smoulder. From that moment the birth of Christ came into our hearts and the sharing of prayer continued into the spirit and life of our community. Now we realised that church is more than the building. It is the spirit of love and prayer that emerged from the people in our community. All ages participated. Thank you to all for sharing the journey with us and allowing us to grow and continue our ministry in support and love. As we continue the



Pictured are the Parish team, back row, left to right, Fr. Merlyn Kenny, C.C.; Fr. Padraig Kelliher, C.C.; and Fr. Nigel Charles. Front row, Sr. Angela Clarkson, Parish Sister; Fr. Thomas Healy, Adm. and Fr. Brendan O'Sullivan, C.C.

work in our parish under the guidance of St. Mel... as soon as I walked into the college chapel I saw it as a place where we could pray and have a good reflective space for adoration. It has been an eventful, busy but joyful year... our Holy Hour has grown from strength with our young adults, we have been greatly supported by many in our community, we have just launched a new CD with our folk group. Cathedral Echoes. Life continues... and a wealth of generosity, ingenuity and sheer genius sprung into life. On the 8th February the Family Centre reopened much to the relief of many people especially the parents and participants of the Rainbows Programme.

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Life of faith in the parish Fr. Padraig Kelliher

As you look at the skyline of the town four spires pierce the horizon: the Cathedral bell tower, the spires of the Convent Chapel and St. John's Church, and lastly the most recent addition which rises desolately from the empty Shopping Centre running along the Camlin River. In many ways the latter stands testament to the times of economic crisis which have defined 2010 for people here in Longford and all across Ireland. Amidst the backdrop of public redundancies and hidden personal struggles the life of faith in the parish carries us all forward and provides a refuge in turbulent times. The great ingenuity of the many people who came together from all disciplines to prepare our two new places of worship at St. Mel's College was a great sign of what people united with purpose can achieve.

My own year as a priest in Longford parish was one made fulfilling by the warmth and sincerity of the people whom I met at various moments in the course of the year. In May I travelled to Milan with parishioners from the Parish Cell prayer group to whom

I provide a reflection on CD related to the following Sunday's Gospel for their fortnightly meetings. Over the last year I helped with giving a course on the Gospel of St. Luke to people in parishes in Longford and Leitrim. I enjoy the friendship of the members of Longford Prayer Group at St. Joseph's Hospital at our monthly Mass and on retreat days away together. With the help of dedicated local people the beautiful St. Anne's Church at Curry was further enhanced by an upgrading of the heating and lighting systems in recent months. Developments this year in the infrastructure at Stonepark NS are good news for pupils, parents and staff and a fitting addition to the long tradition of great education there. I always appreciate the warmth of welcome and seeing the great talents of the children and adults at St. Christopher's on the Battery Road.

I help out in the preparation for the monthly Children's Mass which began last March and is an important step in assisting the participation of families with young children at our Sunday Masses. Currently I also meet weekly with two people who are interested in being baptised into the Catholic Church. I try to keep developments at the Cathedral updated on the parish website along with the most recent photographs of work inside and outside St. Mel's. The faithful people who serve us so well as Readers and Eucharistic Ministers in the parish hear from me throughout the year with updated rotas and special requests. When time allows I head south to recharge the batteries with my family on the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry. And so a word of thanks to all at the presbytery and in the parish and diocese for your goodness and kindness, and may I wish the people of Longford and Killashee & Clondra God's blessing this Christmas and hope undimmed for 2011.

A Thought on the year just ending Fr. Meryln Kenny

Eleven months after the great fire, the one topic of conversation still sure to arise on pastoral visitation is "the Cathedral". I have never experienced anywhere else so much affection for what could be termed a mere building. And surely that's precisely the point - St. Mel's Cathedral is so much more than just a construction of stone. This grand old edifice resonates with emotions, memories, stories, histories. In effect,

it is as if it has stored in its very bricks and mortar precious remembrances of key life moments for so many people from town and diocese over the past 150 years. I have listened to treasured personal histories of Baptisms, Weddings, First Communion, Funerals, Missions and Midnight Masses. Just as fondly remembered are anecdotes of fevered petitions offered by means of a short visit and a lighted candle for departed loved ones, incurable conditions and generally "all hope lost except for the Lord" situations. A constant refrain remains, "It's a terrible loss to us, Father", and so surely it is.

As "bricks and mortar" of a more recent kind have collapsed in spectacular fashion, exposing a flirtation with a rather soul-less if extravagant existence, perhaps, St. Mel's Cathedral, even in ruins, has become a rather poignant sermon in action for us. Is it not a case of that old adage, "One never misses something precious till it's gone"? What is that "something precious" if not the living soul of a people - a tradition of profound significance stretching back well into the century before last. Dare I say that the "great loss" I hear mentioned over and over again is referring not merely to the grandeur of the building with its ornate intricacies and regal atmosphere, but rather to the recollection by its people, in the shock of its demise, of a much neglected spiritual realm. Though darkly veiled by the coarseness of our modern frenetic escapism, the beating heart of the soul of our community has been shown to be still very much alive. A sign of the times, a prophetic message the Cathedral may be. As it rises from the ashes in the years ahead may it be accompanied by a similar restoration and renewal of the eternal temple of the soul of its people.

A privilege to be with families Fr. Nigel Charles

This time last year none of us thought that in the New Year our parish would have to find a new place to worship. In the early of 2010 that is what dominated parish life. The generosity, commitment and time that were given by so many lifted all our spirits. The end result is that we have a beautiful college chapel where we celebrate weekday Mass and the cathedral centre for weekend Masses. It gives an intimacy and Pray fullness that is different from the cathedral. During the day as people pray before the Blessed Sacrament, I get a strong feeling that Jesus is looking down on us with great love and care during these challenging times.

Parish life is about relationship, our relationship to God, to each other and to ourselves. The key to all these relationship is giving time to them. Our time in prayer will always bless those we meet. Trying to get to know people is always a challenge. I find house to house visitation can give you a valuable introduction to people in our parish. Caring for the sick and house-bound is a beautiful ministry and our first Friday calls give us the opportunity to bring Jesus Christ to others.

It's always a privilege to be with families at times of Baptism, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation. These are grace filled moments as much for the Priest as anyone else. Working with our Teachers as they help the children prepare for the Sacraments are a great privilege. We also try and encourage more family involvement in these Sacrament through programs like "Do this in memory"

During the year the people of our community responded with great generosity to the suffering of the people of Haiti and Pakistan. Now that we have settled into our new place of worship, it is very clear that God continue to do great thing for us.