

DIAMOND JUBILEE REMINISCING

Fr Patrick J Flanagan reminisces on sixty years as a priest:

I had been a priest of the Ballarat Diocese for about ten years when Fr Dan Boylan, one of our great Irish priests, said to me, 'I knew you were going to be a priest when you were a little kid at St Patrick's College'. Looking back after sixty years as a priest, I can't actually remember a time when I didn't want to be a priest. I won't go into how I came to be a boarder at SPC Ballarat when I hadn't yet turned eight, or how I came to be a priest of the Ballarat Diocese when I came from Melbourne, but I can say that St Patrick's College encouraged in me a deep devotional life, centred on the Mass. Brother Jack Healy, early on, encouraged my aspiration to be a priest. I was a pretty clever kid, dux of my class, most years. My teacher in grade six was a Brother McCarthy - one we called 'Chips'. He told me once that, with the gifts God had given me, I had to be a priest. I accepted that, and not reluctantly.

I was ordained on July 24, 1960 and in December that year I was posted to Casterton as curate to Fr Bill McGrath. The Casterton parishioners were very, very good to me. A priest's first appointment is very important. It can make or break him. I could not have asked for better. I was there only fifteen months when I was transferred to Hamilton. I was appointed to Hamilton twice as an assistant and later I became their pastor.

The leadership among Hamilton parishioners was extraordinary. I think that some of that leadership was due to Fr Tom Linane. He established a very workable form of Adult Education which included not only the Hamilton parish but also parishioners from Penshurst, Coleraine and Balmoral. Hamilton had outstanding converts, too, again great leaders in the parish. As well, there was a large sprinkling of Dutch migrants - some among them formed a Catholic Scouts group in Hamilton, and then Catholic Girl Guides. A choir led by a Dutch immigrant Bill Schlagecke, with some other Dutch and Australians, used to sing a Gregorian Chant Mass on the first Sunday of each month. They sang the Chant beautifully. There were Ukrainians and Poles, too, enough Ukrainians for a Ukrainian chaplain to come to Hamilton two or three times each year to preach a short Mission and celebrate Mass in the Ukrainian Rite. My parish priest there was Fr Bob Dunworth, a great character. I got on well with him. There was also a senior curate, Frank McKenzie. He had been a priest seventeen years at that stage, with no prospect of having his own parish. This was very frustrating for him and for all who had to endure such a long wait - some were curates for more than twenty-five years - before they would have their feet under their own table. Later, Frank would be my Parish Priest in Camperdown for a year and we got on quite well.

I spent the winter of 1964 in Bungaree. I had forgotten the existence of chilblains, from which most of us suffered in St Patrick's winters. The winter at Bungaree brought them back. In 2011, when Bishop Connors asked me if I'd like to retire to Ballarat, I said to him, 'Peter, look me in the eye',



and then I just said, 'Chilblains'. He remembered suffering chilblains in his winters at Assumption College, Kilmore.

From Bungaree I was sent to Fr Bill McMahon at Camperdown. I would be there nearly four years and when I was moved, I cried my eyes out. There was a concern in the junior secondary part of St Patrick's School as science was not taught. The Sisters used to tell parents that the children didn't need to do General Science. They were correct in that, because Physics, Chemistry and those subjects in year 11 started from scratch, wisely presuming that the pupils had forgotten anything they had learnt. However, some parents were transferring their boys to Camperdown High, where the curriculum included General Science. I was quite disturbed about Catholic boys not going to the Catholic school, so I asked Fr McMahon if I might take on teaching General Science at St Patrick's. He consented. I began to teach General Science and I came to love it and the love of astronomy, geology, chemistry, physics, cosmology and biology is still with me.

When Bishop Mulkearns came to Ballarat as co-adjutor bishop (an auxiliary bishop is a helper, whereas a co-adjutor will be taking over as bishop of the diocese when it becomes vacant), the implementation of Vatican II was under way. At this time, the diocese was implementing new ways, one of which was the priest's council. I was elected as one of the two priests representing the Southern Zone. From my experience with Catholic Secondary Education in Camperdown, I was able to advance arguments for amalgamating the junior secondary schooling in the area. Bishop O'Collins acted reasonably quickly to put Catholic education on a new footing and appointed Peter Teggelove, a teacher at Donald High School, as Director of Catholic education. The Bishop asked me where I thought the Regional College should be situated. I answered promptly, 'At Cobden. Cobden now has a Technical school and there are school buses running to Cobden from all over the place'. It was also, importantly, neutral territory. This sound piece of advice was not acted upon and I guess that was because there was no way of paying for it. State Aid to Catholic schools was still in its infancy. As Archbishop Daniel Mannix lay dying, Bob Menzies, Prime Minister at the time, communicated to him that he had decided that the government would build a science block in every secondary school in Australia. Unless you count allowing Catholic kids on the school buses as State Aid, the science blocks were the first state funding for Catholic schools since education in the Australian states had become free, compulsory and secular back in the 1870s.

Starting May 1968, I had another stint in Hamilton of nearly five years and that was great, especially when

Fr Peter Murphy arrived as my fellow curate. A rift had developed in the parish, and, to heal that rift and bring the parish together again, we held a Redemptorist Parish Mission that lasted the whole of Lent in 1969, which was successful.

Three Redemptorists, Fathers Mick Timbs, Peter O'Donnell and John Murray, aided by Fr Frank O'Farrell and myself, had activities going, involving every part of the parish, right through Lent of 1969. It concluded with a Palm Sunday march from the City Oval to Botanical Gardens where we celebrated the Mass. Many of the activities the Mission initiated were on-going. I began writing a weekly column for the Hamilton Spectator. I also became part of a Methodist-Catholic dialogue, which was my initiation into ecumenism.

To my mind, looking back, the heart of St Mary's Parish during my second stint there was St Mary's Football Club. Under 13s, under 15s and under 18s all played on Saturday. Most of us went to watch them all. The bonding between the families of those children became the heart and soul of the parish. My deepest disappointment when I returned to Hamilton as Parish Priest twelve years later was to find that had all stopped.

I went to Maryborough as assistant to a delightful Irish priest, Fr Tom Scanlan, at the start of 1973. When he retired after Easter in 1974, I became his successor. The Brigidine



sisters taught at St Augustine's Primary School, and as well, had a very well-staffed co-ed Secondary College, with very low fees but few students, only 34 in 1973. The

Brigidine Sisters were of the opinion that they could no longer staff the Secondary College with so few pupils. Fr Peter Claridge, my predecessor there as assistant, and Wendy Leaver, the wife of the Anglican Canon John Leaver, were discussing this over coffee one morning when Wendy came up with a new idea. Why not several churches combine to run an Ecumenical Secondary College. Canon Leaver ran with the idea. When I arrived in Maryborough, the Bishop, with agreement from Fr Scanlan, appointed me to help the Catholic parish think through the Ecumenical College proposal, to decide whether they as a Parish would support the venture. I actually spent homily time over four Sundays presenting to the parishioners the pros and cons of the proposal, with lots of take-home notes. Eventually the parish said yes, as did also the Anglican, Methodist and Church of Christ Parishes. Thus was born, commencing in 1974, the first Ecumenical School in the world.

Once Fr Tom Scanlan retired back to Ireland, I received an assistant priest and the first of these, Fr Charlie Fiscalini, a Redemptorist, was the hardest working priest I have ever known. This included hard physical work to keep his weight down. He and I worked together on building concrete paths. He had, as his responsibility, St Augustine's Primary School, Avoca and Amphitheatre. His work in

Avoca meant that eventually the existing St Kevin's Church was too small. The Parish agreed to build a new church at Avoca. Charlie didn't live to see the new St Kevin's. He became Parish Priest at Birregurra in 1977 and died from a brain tumour a year later. His successor, Kevin Arundell, organised the building of the new St Kevin's, Avoca. Kevin was also the diocesan director of in-service training and brought to our diocese a number of top scripture scholars. Late in 1979, I read in *Annals Australia* three articles by Cyril Connolly MSC on John's Gospel. They showed how John built his Gospel around the great Jewish feasts. John's Gospel came alive for me and that awakened in me a desire to know all the Gospels more. The opportunity to teach myself the scriptures came when I was transferred in July 1982 from Maryborough to the much easier parish of Edenhope. While fulfilling my responsibilities to the Edenhope parishioners I also did a power of study. I was in Edenhope only two years and three months. I did more study in that time than in the previous twenty years.

In later years, when Fr John McKinnon was director of in-service training, he asked me, over three years, to have a day with the priests in each of the zones taking them through the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John. Eventually I wrote a book on Mark's Gospel, which aimed to help people see that inspired writing as a whole story, rather than as a lot of unconnected bits and pieces. I might mention here also that the Editor of *Light*, the then Diocesan Magazine, invited me to write articles for it. So I became the 'Back Page' of *Light* until, after a few years as Parish Priest of Hamilton, I surrendered that job. It was taken over by Fr Michael Linehan.

AND FINALLY I gained a reputation for making parishes come alive. As an instance of this, I made a trip from Hamilton to Coragulac to visit Fr Paddy King, who was dying from cancer. He told me, 'You should not have gone back to Hamilton. You have a gift that other parishes should benefit from'. I don't know what this gift is. Sr Pius Fiscalini RSM told me when I was leaving Edenhope that my enthusiasm guaranteed that I'd be appreciated anywhere. Perhaps that's part of it. I don't know. Before I took up my appointment Bishop O'Collins gave three instructions: 1. Visit all of your parishioners. 2. Don't prepare your sermons. 3. Play Golf.

Instruction number 2 I never followed. I always have prepared my sermons and the older I've got, the more preparation I have undertaken. Has that contributed to making parishes come alive? *Instruction 3* I tried to follow, but eventually gave it up as a bad job. I've always lacked coordination and believed I was no good at most sports, and that I have felt was a deprivation. *Instruction 1* though, until about half-way through my time in Donald, I have fulfilled assiduously. It helped that my mother impressed on me the importance of visiting all parishioners. My aim was to visit every home at least once a year. For me, it is imitating what Jesus said about the Good Shepherd, 'I know my own, and my own know me'. Perhaps that helped parishes come alive. The Anglicans used to have a saying, 'A house-going priest means a church-going people'. Such is the shortage of priests that visiting parishioners in their homes is not listed now among a priest's duties.

(Full article can be read in the diocesan e-News (Edition 93 October 8 2020)
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