

150TH ANNIVERSARY OF SACRED HEART PARISH AND CHURCH, EDINBURGH

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

CHURCH OF THE SACRED HEART, LAURISTON

FRIDAY 31ST JULY 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It is, indeed, a great privilege for me being with you this evening as we begin our year of celebrations, marking the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of your Parish and Church.

We begin this year of celebrations today, Friday 31st July 2009 – the 150th anniversary of the first Mass being celebrated in the area in Hunter's Close, off the Grassmarket and of the laying of the foundation stone of this present Church here in Lauriston Street. Our year of celebrations end on Saturday 31st July 2010 – as we commemorate then the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the first Mass celebrated here in this Church, dedicated to the Sacred Heart. Like my predecessors in this great Archdiocese, I am happy to have been closely associated with the Church of the Sacred Heart over my past twenty five years as Archbishop. It is fascinating to read in the Centenary Souvenir Booklet produced in 1960 that the opening photograph of my predecessor, the then Archbishop Gordon Joseph Gray has the caption: "This month, the Silver Jubilee of the Ordination to the Priesthood of our beloved Cardinal coincides with our Centenary". In the year, 2010, I celebrate the Silver Jubilee, not of my Ordination to the Priesthood, but of my Ordination as a Bishop in 1985 by that same predecessor, Cardinal Gray.

EARLY BEGINNINGS:

As I am sure you know, the return of the Jesuit Fathers to Scotland was for the first time seriously considered by the Superiors in 1857. Both Bishop Murdoch of the Western District of Scotland and Bishop Gillis of the Eastern District of Scotland, were simultaneously in communication with the then Provincial of the English Province, Father Joseph Johnson, in 1858 – leading to Father Johnson, along with Father Seed and Brother Foley, coming to Edinburgh to discuss with Bishop Gillis the possibility of the project.

This led to the area of the west or Grassmarket end of the Old Town, including the whole of the Old Town from the east end of the Grassmarket, being given to the Jesuits for their ministry.

Father Johnson purchased the premises of a maltster in Hunter's Close, Grassmarket and he converted a portion into a temporary Chapel, capable of accommodating four hundred people – which later became an excellent school room. We commemorate the opening of this temporary Chapel on the 31st July, the Feast of St Ignatius, in 1859 – one hundred and fifty years ago today.

It did not take long for Father Johnson to purchase a house and garden in Lauriston Street which was to be the site of this present Lauriston Church. Owing to the hopes of Bishop Gillis to one day build a magnificent Cathedral nearby, the Bishop required that the building of this Church should not be in any fine "church-like" style but rather one that could be sold one day for a public hall. The foundation stone of this building was laid on the very same day, one hundred and fifty years ago – with the building being ready for opening as a Church on the 8th July 1860.

Consequently, it is seen that the Catholics of this area of Edinburgh soon had a magnificent building to serve their needs as a worshipping Catholic community – and the openness and plainness of the new Church were soon relieved in various ways – especially by the much admired magnificent paintings of the Station of the Cross, the handsome high altar of white marble, the richly carved marble pulpit, and so many other wonderful additions to the building aiding the devotion of all the people. Over the years, various other buildings were added to the “complex” at Lauriston – including the magnificent suite of halls and the presbytery for the priests; and in addition, the Glen Street School as well as, we might add, the Convent of the Sisters of Mercy in Lauriston Gardens.

LAURISTON – PEOPLE NOT BUILDINGS:

Central to the mission of the **Jesuit Fathers and Brothers** in the Parish of the Sacred Heart, Lauriston over the past one hundred and fifty years has been the preaching of the Gospel, both to parishioners and non-Catholics alike, as well as an outstanding vision of social care for all of the people of the City of Edinburgh.

Jesuit Fathers did not confine the preaching of the Gospel to within the walls of their magnificent Church – they rather took to the streets and regularly were to be found both visiting and preaching in all of the areas of the Grassmarket, where people often lived in abject dire poverty.

They were aided in their task of preaching and education by the nearby **Sisters of Mercy of St Catharine’s Convent**. These Sisters came to Edinburgh in 1858 and in an earlier booklet it is stated: “No greater good fortune could have fallen to the new Parish than to have the zealous, loyal and efficient help of the Sisters from the start. The value of their work for the Parish down to the present day is incalculable.”

As is well known, all of Edinburgh owes the Sisters of Mercy an immense debt of gratitude for their work in the schools, in home and hospital visitation and for their work in instructing converts. One can say that from the establishment of the Parish, the Sisters of St Catharine’s Convent and its works have been an integral part of Lauriston life.

We are told that in February 1861, so very soon after the opening of the Parish and the Church, the **congregation** gave proof of its vitality by sending a Petition to Parliament for the relief of the hardships of the Catholic poor in the Edinburgh Workhouses. The Society of St Vincent de Paul, which was established in the Parish in 1859, pleaded hard about this time for funds to combat the proselytising that went on in other institutions, including instructions to lead Catholic parishioners and children away from their faith.

We can realise just how the needs of the poor have been a vitally important part of the apostleship of Sacred Heart Parish, Lauriston, along with the Sisters of Mercy in the establishment some years ago now of the magnificent Mercy Project at St Catharine’s Convent where innumerable homeless people and those in need are fed daily.

Priests and Brothers, Religious Sisters and the lay faithful have for the past one hundred and fifty years been continuing a Christ-like apostolate in this area of central Edinburgh – and as a successor of Bishop Gillis, I thank them and congratulate them most sincerely.

There is a very moving comment published in the Centenary Booklet, in a way apologising for lack of name of individuals apart from absolutely necessary. The item goes on to state that: “no Parish can have been more loyally and generously aided by its laity. In a brochure such as this, clearly, to mention all their names would be impossible. Also, to mention some rather than others would be unjustified”.

However, the article refers to a simple legend found in the Church Notice Book for Sunday 7th August 1859, the first Sunday after the opening of the Parish. It simply states: “Application for seats today at 2.00 pm to Mr Shand, who will attend in the Chapel”. The **name of Mr Shand** from one hundred and fifty years ago stands out – he is the prototype and representative of all of the people, especially those of the lay faithful of his successors in the laity of Lauriston who have been “attending” in the Chapel and to the Chapel, and its needs, ever since!

CONCLUSION:

My words are to mark the beginning of this year of celebration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the establishment of your Parish and Church. I thank and congratulate you all, along with your predecessors, for the magnificent building which we have, still proudly standing in our midst, so beautifully refurbished throughout this past one hundred and fifty years.

However, I think today we thank God in a special way for those Priests and Brothers, Religious Sisters and the lay faithful who have served one another in this Parish over the past one hundred and fifty years, having a magnificent outreach throughout our City of Edinburgh.

The Church, along with its associated buildings, has been a focal point throughout those one hundred and fifty years. It has been a focal point because central to all the activity in the Parish during the years since its opening has been prayer and praise to Almighty God, Our Father in Heaven – that prayer and praise culminating in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the reception of the Sacraments and in the silent prayer of so many hundreds of thousands of people before the Blessed Sacrament.

May that prayer and praise which has inspired so many down through the years continue within these walls for many years to come – and may this Parish and its people continue into the future to give, as our Jesuit Fathers and Brothers would say, “the greater glory to Almighty God”, as we celebrate this Jubilee Year and look confidently to the future.