

Mass to Celebrate 90th Anniversary of Opening of St Mary's Church, Ardmore
November 2nd 2020

Today it is exactly 90 years since this fine church was formally opened and dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Help of Christians. At that stage, it was a country chapel, well away from the city and the parish church in Chapel Road. The Master of Ceremonies on November 2nd 1930 was the President of St Columb's College, Fr Neil Farren. It is fitting that your current PP is from the same distinguished family.

In the last nine decades, the urban area has continued to expand in this direction – and the parish community has had to adapt to the events of the Second World War, the Troubles and now a pandemic. About halfway through its history - 46 years ago, on the feast of Our Lady's birthday - the daughter left the mother church and became a parish in its own right.

The Feast of All Souls – like the Feast of All Saints yesterday – are not just an invitation to remember saints and all the departed. It is also based on the belief that we are part of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. In a world that emphasises living for me and living in the moment, our understanding of Church tells us that we are not alone in space or time. In Jesus, we are joined horizontally with other members of the universal church and vertically with the generations who went before us. We are not floating in a lonely bubble.

The Church is made up, not merely of institutions, teachings and structure but of disciples of Jesus in each time and place. And today we give thanks for those people, clergy and sisters who have made up the praying Body of Christ in the parish of Ardmore. We are grateful for the work of God's grace in all of them and we commend them all to God's mercy. For we are all ordinary people, known by name to the Lord. It is people who gather to worship. It is people who support parish events and the parish school. It is people who finance and participate in the outreach of the St Vincent DePaul society. And it was people that Jesus came to engage with. He did not come to create an organisation. The Body of Christ is a living organism, not merely a human organisation. It exists not merely to enforce laws and practices but to make Jesus known and loved. We heard just over a week ago that, without love of God and love of neighbour, the rest of the commandments are hollow.

They say that you know the health of an organisation by how well it copes with a crisis. I know that the parish response to the pandemic has shown the passion that you have to continue your mission. You have sought to make use of the various means of communication as well as being clear about what measures need to be taken in order to keep parishioners safe in church. You have worked hard to share the Gospel and to be a living community for whom the sacraments are not just an additional extra but a core way in which we welcome Jesus into our midst. The next months will be a real challenge to you. Winter will put extra strains on everybody's

mental and physical health. And many families will need extra financial support. The focus for all our parishes over the next months will be to reach out from here to engage with parishioners – and encourage families to learn, or perhaps relearn, the practice of praying together in the home. We are hoping to have fresh resources available for each month or season, material that can be downloaded from the diocesan website. That is intended to help families grow in faith together and support parents who have children who are preparing for First Holy Communion or Confirmation.

There is another lesson that we learn from the Bible. The People of God believed that God was present in whatever was happening to them. During the 40 years of Exodus in the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land, they had tough times. But their main question was not “Why is God doing this to us?”, but rather “What is God teaching us through this?” Often, they could not answer the question at the time. But they always journeyed on, knowing that even difficult times were times of grace. Jesus on the Cross had not been abandoned but was carrying out the most important part of his work. So it is good that all of our parish communities are asking themselves, not just what new skills we can learn at this stage, but what lessons we have to learn about how best to be Church as you move forward to your centenary. That may well mean accepting that certain practices are no longer working in the way that they were appropriate in 1950. A healthy church always adapts but keeps its focus on the mission that does not change – Go, make disciples of all nations. We learn from the past, not merely to walk down memory lane, but to face the future with trust in God’s grace.

The patron of this Church is Our Lady. Her plans were turned upside down by the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation. But she was told not to be afraid. She had to walk on, not understanding Bethlehem, the Flight into Egypt, the Finding in the Temple or Calvary. But she knew that God’s grace was at work, even in the most painful and difficult of times. We ask her to accompany us as we journey together through this challenging time. We ask for her support so that we can walk forward and not merely look back. This is our time and our place to minister in Jesus’ name.

Yesterday we remembered All Saints and today we remember All Souls. As we celebrate 90 years of this Church, we do so with gratitude. We pledge to work especially for those most in need of God’s mercy. And we trust that, in decades to come, when others look back at the parishioners of this generation, they will be grateful for the little unknown saints among you and still pray in the graveyard for the sinner that was in all of us. And they too will look back in love and walk on in trust because of the faithful people of the generation that built this church and the ordinary people who have worshipped here since. May the souls of the faithful....