

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SACRED HEART PARISH HENLEY ON THAMES

Wednesday 11th May 2011
CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

This meeting marks the end of the second year of my three year term as Chair of the Parish Council. This year has confirmed and reinforced my views of my first year in office and some of what I write is not new.

There are a number of special responsibility groups within the Parish run by the laity. Some of these are stable and predictable continuing their input and commitment to their task in an ordered manner and indeed thriving. Some groups however do struggle or indeed have fallen away. One of the reasons for this is quite simply lack of volunteers, those who are willing to give the time and energy to engaging in the work of a particular group. This is a major problem across almost the whole spectrum. It is evidenced by Fr Anthony's appeals over the year for people to help with, for instance, the coffee rota or the children's liturgy. Response to these requests has been very limited. At this juncture it should be noted that there are a number of very active and committed parishioners whose dedication oils the wheels of the parish. But contrasting their small number with the numbers attending Mass, currently around 600, they are but a handful, the majority of whom have been serving the parish for a long time. This lack is also reflected by the number of vacancies for special responsibilities as outlined in the current constitution of the Parish Council. In addition there is no Vice-Chair and no nominations have been received during my time of office. This requirement has been removed from the proposed new constitution. It is partly for this reason that the constitution has been revised to be less prescriptive and hopefully more enabling. I do not propose to identify all the proposed changes and the reasoning behind them in this report as they will be dealt with as an agenda item.

The Parish Council

This year there have been just two meetings of the council 7th September and 31st January and the requirement in the current constitution for four meetings in the year has not been met. Attendance has been varied; it is always difficult to find days/times which suit all members. The proposed new constitution has not sought to reduce the number of meetings in the year, plus the AGM, but has added the word "endeavour" in respect of this. Members may wish to express a view on the number and purpose of such meetings before the new constitution is adopted.

Our Parish Priest

In September 2010 Fr Anthony took a well earned sabbatical in America. He left to spend three months at the Jesuit College of Theology in Berkeley, California enrolled in their New Direction Programme. He also took courses in Old Testament Studies and Spirituality returning

refreshed and renewed committed to serving the Parish for as long as he is able. During that period he was the guest of the Nativity Parish in Menlo Park and in return he helped out where and when he was needed. He sent us regular Alistair Cook style "Letters from America".

In the New Year Fr Anthony unfortunately had a problem connected to an earlier health matter and this needed to be dealt with urgently. This required his absence from the parish in order for surgery to take place and for him to rest and recover.

During Fr Anthony's sabbatical and during his absence for reasons of health we were no longer been able to call on the help and support of the Marian Fathers who last year re-located to Ealing. They have returned to help where possible. A number of priests, old friends to us now, were engaged to ensure that the sacramental life of the Parish continued. We are very fortunate to have had their help and commitment. In no particular order they were: Fr Andrew Gowkieski late of Fawley court, Fr Peter Burrows, Fr Gerry Egan from Watlington, Fr Frank Nolan (Fr Anthony's cousin), Fr Conlon from the Oratory at Woodcote, Fr Euan Henderson, Fr Paul Fitzpatrick, Fr Bob Reardon from Sonning Common and Fr Richard Ounsworth, Prior of Blackfriars in Oxford.

Fr Giles Goward from Caversham was on stand by for emergency cover but in the event was not needed. We are grateful to them all.

Practical matters were managed in an alliance between Morag Stewart, Geoff Fielding and myself. All events requiring the help and input of the laity continued as usual although with a higher degree of responsibility and accountability plus a lot of new learning. We are blessed in having such a committed band of people and the work of the Parish continued seamlessly. An unusual number of funerals took place during Fr Anthony's absence in California causing him to wonder if there would be any parishioners left on his return!

Visitors to the Parish

There have been other visiting priests; some to supply when Fr Anthony has had to be in Rome, or away on other duties, and some who came to preside over special events. This year we have been pleased to welcome Fr Chris Bester, late of Sonning Common Parish, Fr Anthony's cousin, Fr Frank Nolan, and Fr Peter Burrows (Advent and Lent Services of Reconciliation and also Lenten talks). In June 2010 Bishop Kenney visited the parish for confirmations. Fr Dennis O'Connell appealed on behalf of the Association for the Propagation of the Faith in the New Year. Sister Anne of the Salesians also made an appeal to which there was a gratifying response. In the New Year Bishop Arthur Roche came to award Papal honours, the Grand Cross of the Order of St Gregory, to two parishioners whilst at the same time Archbishop Bernard presented Fr Anthony with the scroll marking his appointment as Monsignor,

Some Highlights of the Year

June 2010

A large number of children, 18 in all, received their first holy communion. Thanks go to the catechists who so ably and thoroughly prepare these young children and who have done so for many years.

Bishop Kenney confirmed 12 children and young people. A reception was held and a presentation made to Frs Woytek and Andrew as thanks for the help and support they had given to the Parish and to Fr Anthony over the years that the Marian Fathers had been at Fawley Court.

July

A tea party planned to coincide with the Henley Festival was organised by the Social Group. Many parishioners, some of whom had limited social contacts or were unable to easily leave home unattended, came. The event was judged a huge success and a repeat was called for.

September

The Holy Father visited the UK for the first time and a number of parishioners travelled at an unconscionable hour to Cofton Park in Birmingham to join those from other parishes. They saw the Pope beatify Cardinal John Henry Newman.

Fr Anthony left for a 3 month sabbatical in California. We joined in the "Biggest Coffee Morning in the World" and £500 was raised for the McMillan Cancer Fund. This was organised by Mary Heath.

October

Metal fittings for the proposed Columbarium arrived from Fawley Court.

Parish walk to Marlow and back.

November

The annual Mass for deceased spouses was held on 12th November followed by an open house lunch. Thanks to Social Group for their hard work in organising this.

The end of the month saw a family wreath making day, preparation for advent. This event grows each year and is in the capable hands of Anne Sandars.

Eithne Rosenmeier started a children's choir – see report.

The annual cemetery visit took place on 14th November.

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Our choir, as part of Aliquando Choir, performed in aid of the Sabre Charitable Trust in St Mary's Church, Henley.

Thanks to dedicated sleuthing on the part of Geoff Fielding the missing Pugin candlestick was finally located and returned – much relief all round

December

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament weekly during Advent.

On Christmas Eve the Holy Father broadcast on Radio 4's "Thought for the Day".

The crib circulated amongst families with young children during advent and was very popular with only the snow getting in the way of a smooth passage from one family to the next.

Two new dishwashers were bought for the Parish hall.

The holy water stoop was installed in the narthex.

Gill Allen who, for many years has taken overall responsibility for the flowers arrangers' rota and connected matters, stepped down, and from the New Year Mary Heath offered to manage this. We are grateful to Gill for the time and energy she has devoted to ensuring the church is beautifully dressed with flowers.

Fr Anthony returned from his sabbatical much refreshed.

January 2011

A special Mass was held which was attended by Bishop Arthur Roche and Archbishop Bernard. The new holy water stoop was blessed and Papal honours were bestowed on parishioners Urs and Francesca Schwarzenbach. At the same time Fr Anthony was presented with a diploma designating his new title and rank of Monsignor and recognising his service to the church.

Agnes Boggis, ably supported by her husband, Les, after many years of undertaking the responsibility of Sacristan, decided to retire. She is much missed and our thanks go to her for the service she has given. She continues to play a major role in the life of the Parish. Her place is taken jointly by Janet Watson and Julie Green.

This month also saw the retirement of our long serving secretary, Chris Eldred. The occasion was appropriately marked with a number of gardening vouchers and a reception.

The choir took part in the Henley Church Choirs Festival in St Mary's

February

For the second year running the several parishioners walked in and around Swyncombe taking in the snowdrops at St Botolph's as they went. This led to a call for a regular walk and since then two more have taken place in March and April with others in the planning.

Fr Anthony was away for most of this month as described earlier.

Conclusion

The views I held in my first year as Chairperson have been reinforced over the last 12 months. This is a parish which operates a model which is characterised by separateness, autonomy and lack of communication between the various groups and the Parish Council. As such it works well with the various groups being diligent and respectful of their obligations. It is sometimes difficult to see what value the PC has in this setting. However, one of the questions may be "Why should they report to a PC". The PC is a means of communicating with the parish as a whole so that for those, who whatever reason, cannot contribute to the day-to-day running of the parish can feel connected and included. There may be a more innovative and dynamic approach to providing this and I believe the new constitution is a stepping stone to a different approach.

Ros Whittaker, Chairperson of the Parish Council
May 2011