

GOLDEN JUBILEE OF ST GILES PARISH, KENNOWAY
HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN
FRIDAY 18TH SEPTEMBER 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege being here with you this evening in your church dedicated to St Giles so near the feast day of St Giles himself. I know that your church itself was solemnly blessed and opened on 1st September 1958 – with the parish itself being opened one year later.

In my own introductory remarks in the beautiful brochure prepared for this occasion I have indicated that I somehow prefer “golden jubilees” to “centenaries”. At a golden jubilee the memories of so many of those present are indeed vivid with the events which took place some fifty years before. Having myself served in Fife for some five years shortly after my own ordination to the Priesthood – and now approaching the silver jubilee of my own ordination as a Bishop – my own memories are very much alive of something of the history of the parishes of Fife and of my own service here.

HISTORY OF YOUR PARISH:

I know that the early history of your Parish is familiar to you all.

The first preaching of Christianity in the East of Fife is attributed to St Kenneth who died at the end of the 6th century. So near to the great primatial Cathedral Church of St Andrews in Fife the area around here became a great place of pilgrimage as many people journeyed from all over the world to visit the medieval Cathedral and venerate the relics of St Andrew.

However after the Reformation Catholics in Fife were few in number – until the restoration of the hierarchy in 1878 when numbers increased and consequently more parishes were opened. It was as long ago as 1912 that the Parish of St Agatha’s in Methil was opened with the church and parish there serving a wide area of Fife including Kennoway. The increase of work in the coal industry in the 1950s led to a great influx of miners and their families from the West of Scotland – with the result that the Catholic population of the Town increased dramatically.

This led to the priests and people seeking a church and parish here in Kennoway which eventually came to be.

We are told from consulting the records that for a number of years Mass was held in the Temperance Hall and the Community Centre – but in 1957 permission was given for the purchase of land and the building of a Catholic church leading to the opening of St Giles on 1st September 1958 and the establishment of the Parish in 1959.

A brief history – but an important one! There was a need; the needs were presented to the Archbishop and his advisors; and the need was satisfied.

HISTORY OF THE PAST 50 YEARS:

You are aware that over the past fifty years there has been a history of dedicated priests living and serving here in this Parish of St Giles: Father Tom Engelen; Father Anthony Kiernan; Canon Michael Carey; Father Andrew Forrest; Father Tom Flynn; Father Joseph McIntyre; and now your present Parish Priest Father Joseph Portelli.

However I am sure that each of these priests in their time would have acknowledged that the Parish was not just made up of its parish priests – no matter how good and dedicated they are. A parish is made up of the baptised faithful of an area and consequently however important that list of priests is even more important is the list of the baptised faithful of the people of this Parish with Paul Murphy being the first person entered into the Baptismal register of St Giles in 1959. Since that time your children and your children's children have been baptised; over those past fifty years the Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and First Holy Communion – have been shared among the people; Masses, Communions and Sacrament of Matrimony have been celebrated and the Sacrament of Reconciliation administered; and the dead have been brought here for burial.

St Giles Church Kennoway has indeed been an important part of your community of this Town of this family of the faith over the past fifty years.

DEVELOPMENTS AT THIS PRESENT TIME:

As tremendous changes in population happened some fifty years ago so we might say the same is happening at this present time – but in reverse. The population in general in our country is not increasing nor indeed is the Catholic population – rather the opposite. The number of priests being ordained and the number of students for the Priesthood in our seminaries is not increasing – again rather the opposite. Parishes have had to be combined and priests have had to take on more and heavier responsibilities. Consequently as you know St Giles Kennoway has been united with St Peter's Leven in 1989 and then with St Agatha's Methil again in 2006 – all served with your present dedicated Parish Priest, Father Joseph Portelli.

If there is an obligation placed upon the shoulders of your Parish Priest – so there are increasing obligations placed upon the shoulders of each and every parishioner.

In his fine words on the occasion of the opening of your church in 1958, Cardinal Gray, stressed the importance of the people of the parish. He said of the building that: "It was a house of God in the fullest possessive sense of the word. This was a Catholic church. The Church, Jesus Christ himself, founded and spread his teachings".

Consequently he stressed the importance of the lay faithful, each and every individual in the parish, with their own responsibility to live the Catholic Christian faith and hand on its teachings.

I can do no better than repeat those words to you.

I think it is fascinating to read something of the history of the parish and to realise that as well as Father Dorrian then Parish priest of St Agatha's Methil appealing for a new church – so too did the people of the parish. It was in a letter of 3rd May 1959 that one of the parishioners, a Mr Norman Cunningham, described as the "honorary secretary to the committee of the Catholics of Kennoway" who wrote to my immediate predecessor: "The Catholics of Kennoway have been much encouraged

to learn of your Grace's interest in our welfare and we thank you sincerely for it. We shall continue to work and pray that a Catholic centre in this community may soon be established".

Priests and people spoke out together to ensure that this church was built and this parish established. The same must continue at this present time with priests and people continuing to work together for the good of the whole community in this area.

CONCLUSION:

Even at this present time I find that Catholics are not fully aware of their individual importance in the sight of Almighty God or in the ongoing building up of their parish. I take this opportunity of reminding you of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council which took place just some ten years after the establishment of your parish. Following on that Council it was the late Pope John Paul II who spoke to the lay people of the world and said: "You have an exalted vocation and there are many and varied forms of mission open to you!"

On this golden jubilee I ask you to heed those words and take them to heart. On saying this I speak to the lay faithful of this parish and remind you of that exalted vocation which you have and of the mission which you have in your church and in your community at this present time to fulfil your role and your mission as those who are fully aware of your exalted vocation as members of the Body of Jesus Christ.

Obviously there are many more challenges facing us in the years which lie ahead – without any sign of increase in the number of our priests and still a decrease in the number of our practicing Catholics. I remember the late Cardinal Winning once speaking to me and saying: "It must have been wonderful for our predecessors going around opening things – you and I are going around closing them!"

It is sad that as in the country at large we appear to be living through a period of recession in our Church rather than through a period of growth and expansion. However we must acknowledge our responsibilities whatever state our country is in or whatever period our Church is in. We all bishops, priests and people share in that vocation of being members of the Body of Jesus Christ with our various responsibilities.

As God indeed blessed this church and parish on their establishment some fifty years ago so again we ask His blessing on each and every one of us.

May we thank God for the past; may we be evermore fully aware of the challenges at this present time; and my God's Holy Spirit help and guide us all in that future as we consider how best to live out our exalted vocation in the Church and in the world at this present time.