



Feast of Saint Michan
BICENTENARY OF THE PARISH CHURCH OF SAINT MICHAN HALSTON
STREET

Homily notes of
Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin
Archbishop of Dublin

Church of Saint Michan, 25th August 2017

We are here to celebrate a unique occasion, that of the two hundredth anniversary of the completion of this Church of Saint Michan in Halston Street and North Anne Street. The foundation stone was laid already in 1810 and the Church in its first version was completed in 1817.

The years around 1817 were years in which the religious culture in Ireland

was changing and the rigid penal laws outlawing public Catholic worship were beginning to be relaxed. Various older Church had already existed in this area, in a parish that was first registered as far back as 1096. This is thus one of the oldest parishes and Ireland.

The Church building itself was later extended and various sections added especially towards the end of the 1890's as this part of the city further developed, especially with the building of the fruit markets.

In preparing for this bicentenary, a huge amount of restoration work has been accomplished in sustaining the wonderful stained-glass windows, in painting the Church and in restoring it to its original beauty. I congratulate all those who were involved in this work. The parish and the parishioners have every right to be truly proud of the work done.

What was Dublin like in 1817? In one sense, it was a time of progress. The Royal Canal, between Dublin and the Shannon, was finally completed in 1817 and it is hard for us to imagine how

revolutionary it was as a means for the transport of goods within a country where the only alternative was very primitive roads.

In 1817, the foundation stones of two important distinctive marks of the Dublin landscape were laid: the harbour pier in Dun Laoghaire, then Kingstown, and the Wellington Monument in the Phoenix Park. You can see that I have been busy Googling 1817 on my computer.

Dublin was attempting to strengthen its role in an Ireland that had become marginalised with the 1800 Act of Union,

when the Dublin Parliament and all the institutions attached to it were transferred to London. This brought a change in the political and economic fortunes of Dublin and an increase in poverty.

1817 was also a tragic time. Between 1817 and 1819 there was a series of disastrous outbreaks of typhus killing tens of thousands of people in Ireland. There is a website called “The ten worst times to have lived in Ireland” and it includes the typhus epidemic of 1817 among them. It was in that context of growing poverty and epidemic that the

people of this area worked to construct such a striking Church. They were people of great faith.

As you will have noticed in the entrance procession, symbols were brought to the altar that showed how over these two hundred years, marked as they were by continuous change, this community steadily grew into that active parish that it is today. In our celebrations, we remember in prayer the numerous generations of people who contributed to building up this community. We celebrate the anniversary of a building, but much more

a bicentenary of the people who from this building built up faith and built up community.

The history of this parish is not a history of the nobility or the powerful but of families and community that in hard times kept alive the values that endure: good neighbourliness and solidarity, hard work, a commitment to education and to ensuring that, as each generation passed, children could attain even little greater opportunity than their parents could. Parents did not think of themselves in giving for their children;

but they could be proud of what their children attained.

This parish is blessed in its schools. When President Higgins came for the anniversary of George's Hill school, he noted that the school was founded before the establishment of the United States of America. Brunswick Street School has an equally proud tradition

When this Church was opened, the parish was right at the centre of Dublin life in its time and continues until today to reflect what is best in Dublin inner city traditions. There may have been harsh poverty but there was always great

warmth and strength within the family walls even in the struggle to make ends-meet.

Next year Pope Francis will come to Dublin to celebrate the *World Meeting of Families*. People often ask me what a *World Meeting of Families* is about and I tell them to come to any Dublin inner city parish and they will see really, what family means in itself and for the community and society.

Right throughout the history of this parish, with all its ups and downs, it was families that kept the good values of life alive and strong. This took place even at

moments when society may have drifted in the wrong direction. Today that spirit of family life remains and you have seen over these months of celebration just how much family is alive and strong. We thank God for what parents and grandparents have done and continue to do within this community.

This Church building has played a vital role in the process of consolidating values in this area. If the walls of this Church could talk, they would talk about baptisms and weddings and funerals; of the birth of new generations, of passing on the faith from one generation to the

next and of accompanying and supporting the poor and the lonely and the elderly. They would also talk of the silent prayers of so many who would have dropped into the Church at moments of joy or sorrow or indeed of desperation.

There is great affection within the community for the Church building and all that has taken place in it over the years. We remember all the priests who have worked here over these two hundred years. I want to thank especially the Capuchin Fathers whose presence in this area has been a great

blessing. Only last year, we celebrated the vital place of the Capuchin Fathers in the events around the uprising of 1916. The Capuchin Fathers in this diocese have always been very close to the people and to the poor. Brother Kevin is now a household name across Ireland yet, like his confreres, he is someone who would never look for celebrity status, other than being a simple follower of Saint Francis. I want especially to thank Father Bryan Shorthall the current Parish Priest who has brought great life and renewal into the parish.

The readings of the Mass help us to reflect on the meaning of the Church. The Old Testament reading talks about the Temple. It describes how thanks to a generous flow of water, all sorts of fruits grow and remain refreshed providing fruit as nourishment and leaves as medicine. The Church is a place where people can encounter the waters of baptism and the faith that enriches lives, heals, and reconciles

That source of nourishment in the Church comes from the fact, as we heard in the second reading, that the Church is built on Jesus Christ as the corner stone.

In today's world, many have drifted away from understanding who Jesus is and what a difference faith in Jesus can bring to an individual life and to a community. At the time of the Apostles, as we heard in the Gospel reading, there were many interpretations of who Jesus was. Jesus does not force his own identity on anyone. He invites us to come close to him and to listen to his comforting voice and allow his love to embrace us and make us people who know how to spread love in a world that for many can be so harsh.

The Church must learn to appear as the place where the generous love of Jesus is experienced, fostered and shared. A Church just of rules and prohibitions will never attract our young people. A Church that appears just as an institution closed-in on itself will never attract them.

The Church must be a place that is open and welcoming and stands with each of us as we attempt to grow in the love and honesty, integrity and solidarity which should be the marks of the community of the believers in Jesus Christ. We thank God for the many ways

in which he has guided this believing community of the past two hundred years.