

The Oratory Catholic Church of St Aloysius, Oxford

Parish Priest's Report 2009

2009 Statistics

(2008 figures are in brackets)

Baptisms:	Infants –	(47)	54
	Adults –	(6)	8
	Total –	(53)	62
Receptions of Converts:		(5)	6
First Holy Communions:		(29)	50
Confirmations:		(28)	35
Marriages:		(29)	31
Funerals:		(9)	9
Average Mass attendance:		(885)	904
(On Sundays in October)			
Confessions heard in our church:		(6,844)	7,539

It would be dangerous to conclude very much from only one year's statistics – perhaps we might over several years – but it is heartening at least to see that in 2009 we had the largest number of baptisms (62) for any year since 1968. A positive development; but it leaves us, as a parish, with two challenges: how do we address the rate of lapsation that is implicit in these figures? and what do we do about the fact that St Aloysius' School can only accommodate 250 children on its already cramped site? The second question is one that the School Governing Body is seeking to address with the Archdiocese and Local Authority, but it is really part of a larger question about how we pass on our Catholic faith to future generations. In this report we shall see some of the ways in which we, as a parish, are attempting this, but I believe that we have to be mindful that we are increasingly living in an environment that is hostile to the Gospel. In the past year the Church in this country has lost control of her adoption agencies because of misguided and intolerant government legislation. There are ever more militant calls to exclude religion from the public sphere. Keeping our schools genuinely Catholic is a constant struggle – and on this and other fronts the Holy Father has recently urged our bishops to fight with “missionary zeal”. This endeavour really begins in the home. Where families are truly the ‘domestic Church’, the faith is passed on. A parish church is also, I hope, the home of those who come here, and we must constantly strive to pass on what has been entrusted to us.

Figures are generally up – except that once again funerals are mercifully few. In the past year the following funerals have taken place in our church: Brian Oliver, Noreen d’Silva, Joyce Smyth, Mary Holder, Patrick Hopkins, Elspeth Buxton, Thomas Mulvey, Huw Morgan and John Casley. Mgr Graham Leonard, former Anglican Bishop of London, was buried from here since the beginning of this year. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace.

There are no ordinations to report this year, but Br Nicholas received the ministry of Acolyte on the Solemnity of All Saints. At the beginning of 2010 Fr Robert celebrated his Silver Jubilee. There was a very splendid Solemn Mass, followed by a reception at St Benet’s Hall, and I know that he was much pleased and heartened by the many gestures of support and congratulation received from so many parishioners.

We have experienced the loss of Fr Richard, who has become the Provost of the Birmingham Oratory. He is greatly missed by the Community and parish – but of course we will continue to see him, especially in this momentous year of Newman’s beatification. Oratorians do not usually move, but perhaps this assistance being given to our Mother House is a reminder that our parish belongs to the wider family of the Oratorian Confederation. At Fr Robert’s Jubilee there were present Fathers from the Oratories of Genoa, Birmingham, London, Vienna and Port Elizabeth: a testament to the universal appeal of St Philip’s joyful heart. We are privileged to be sons and daughters of St Philip here, and it is by imitating his joy, gentleness and kindness that we can fulfil our own particular charism within the Church. The Oratorian from Port Elizabeth was of course Fr Gregory Mitchell, who was ordained on 10th January 2009, with Fathers and parishioners from Oxford present. He spent the first anniversary of his ordination here, where he was able to celebrate the High Mass and to give first blessings afterwards.

Against the background of the usual round of the liturgical year there have also been a number of unusual events in 2009. In January, John Pridmore came to talk to us about his transition “From Gangland to Promised Land” – that is from life as a gangster to the Catholic faith. The Universal Church has kept the ‘Year of St Paul’, which locally included ecumenical Vespers at Pusey House and the visit of the diocesan icon of St Paul to our church. We have now begun the ‘Year of Priesthood’. In February Bishop Kenney came to make a visitation of the parish. Unfortunately that weekend saw exceptionally cold and icy weather, and consequently probably the lowest Mass attendance of the year! Nevertheless, the Bishop was able to accompany Fr Daniel in visiting the sick and housebound and in meeting parishioners over tea. Bishop Kenney returned to celebrate the Easter Vigil and to administer the Sacrament of Confirmation here. He also came in September to award Mrs Kathleen Watson with the diocesan medal ‘Ubi Caritas’ in recognition of her unstinting service

to the parish in many different spheres. Cardinal Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, celebrated a Solemn Mass in our church on 6th March.

The Wednesday morning over-60s group has been to the 'Magnificence of the Tsars' exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, to Coughton Court, and since the beginning of 2010 to the National Gallery to see the 'Sacred Made Real' exhibition. This last turned into something of an epic adventure, twice being cancelled because of the snow, but we made it in the end a few days before the exhibition closed. On all of these trips, quite a few people under the target age came along too.

In March we learnt that our Archbishop, Vincent Nichols, was to be taken from us to Westminster, where he was enthroned on 21st May. His Grace has kindly agreed to remain as patron of our Campaign, and we look forward to getting to know our new Archbishop, Bernard Longley, who was installed at St Chad's Cathedral on 8th December. Fr Richard and Fr Daniel enjoyed Archbishop Vincent's farewell lunch for the clergy at Villa Park. This took place in the Trinity Stand – and a sign read, "Aston Villa welcomes the clergy of the Archdiocese of Birmingham to the Trinity"!

Mr Chris Crouch retired as Head Teacher of St Aloysius' Primary School in the summer. At a farewell barbeque the large number of friends, pupils, staff, parents and former pupils all attested to the kindness and devotion to so many children that Chris had shown over 21 years. At a Mass of Thanksgiving beforehand he was presented with a Papal Blessing. Meanwhile, the Governors embarked on the difficult and time-consuming task of appointing a new Head. In fact, I think that this helped to consolidate our vision of the purpose and future of our parish school, which, as I said at the beginning of this report, is now more crucial than ever. We were delighted to welcome Mrs Maureen Thompson as acting Head in the autumn. Maureen brought an experienced and business-like eye to her task and in a short time introduced new traditions which are likely to stay – such as the weekly tea party to reward well-behaved pupils for their contribution to the school. We hope that Mrs Thompson will remain a friend of St Aloysius'.

Mr Tom Walker started as the permanent Head of the School in January. His first decision was to shut the school down...but only for a few days because of the unprecedented fall of snow. In the past few years cooperation between parish and school has greatly increased and it should continue to do so. The school is fortunate in having Fr Joseph as its chaplain, giving a significant amount of time and energy to the religious formation of our children. We are also blessed with generous and dedicated staff. To give an example: Mrs Brookes stayed with Mrs Thompson in Oxford rather than risk being stranded at home in the north of the county by the heavy snow.

Visitors from other places are a large feature of our life, and there is likely to be an increase of interest with the beatification of our Cardinal. In 2009 we welcomed groups from, among other places, Halesowen, Banbury, Poland, the Birmingham Oratory, the Newman School of Madrid and the London Oratory School as well as countless private visits. A group from the Legion of Mary in Malta came to the parish in July for the *Peregrinatio pro Christo*. They followed our Lord's command by going out in pairs to prepare His way and called on 2,000 homes, receiving 683 responses. 104 of these were Catholics, of which 24 were lapsed. The legionaries were surprised by the hostility to religion they encountered in many places, but found that everyone was happy to be given information about the visit of the relics of St Thérèse. It was at this time that we had the news that John Henry Newman's beatification had been approved, and on 12th July a Mass of Thanksgiving marked these joyful tidings. Although in some quarters there are stronger views against religion, there is also a greater interest in the Church, as is shown by the very numerous calls from newspapers, radio and television which we have had to field of late.

At no time was this more true than during the great and extraordinary event of 2009: the visit of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux to our parish. The preparation for this was immense: two films were shown; the Carmelites from Boars Hill gave a series of excellent and well-attended talks; there was an exhibition put up around the church, seven schools were visited; and of course the play, the *Divine Comedy*. This was the brainchild of Léonie Caldecott and was directed by her daughter Tessa – though I would say that the Holy Spirit was also at work here. There was a cast of over 60 people (plus one dog at the matinee) and a supporting team of carpenters, lighting and sound engineers, wardrobe mistresses, make-up artists, caterers, ticket-sellers and stage-hands. The play was performed four times to full houses, with the church temporarily transformed into the stage of a mystery play. As an opportunity to bring together different people in the parish, aged 5-85, it was invaluable, and as a way of teaching people the story and spiritual message of St Thérèse it was unique in the whole of her visit. I hope that we might use drama again – though whether the Parish Priest will once more grow a beard is more doubtful!

The visit of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux to England and Wales was one of the most important events in the history of the Church in this country, and one which caught many sceptical commentators by surprise. Many of those who came to venerate the Little Flower were not Catholics, or even church-goers, and 7th and 8th October 2009, when 6,200 people came through our doors in 22 hours, must have been the busiest in the whole history of St Aloysius' Church. Despite the pouring rain when the relics arrived, queues stretched down the street and even the courtyard in front of the church was packed for the opening liturgies. Large numbers of confessions were heard throughout the visit (these have not all been included in the parish statistics), for which we are grateful for the help of visiting priests, especially the Jesuits and the Benedictines of Prinknash. We shall never know the full

effect of Thérèse's visit, but the Fathers received many letters afterwards, commenting on the prayerfulness of our church and the exceptionally warm welcome given by over 100 volunteers, who ensured that everything ran so smoothly. I would like to quote from one such letter as an example:

"I write to express thanks for the wonderful way in which your parish hosted the visit of the relics of St Thérèse. It was so well organized and prayerful. It seemed that the whole of your parish contributed with the ushers, guides and refreshments. Congratulations of having such amazing parishioners!"

If we were worried that 2010 would prove a less exciting year after such a momentous event, we need not fear, with a beatification and a Papal visit to this country approaching. In November, doing our Forty Hours Devotion, Deacon Jack Sullivan of Boston came to preach movingly about his miraculous cure, which has enabled our Cardinal to be raised to the altars. Deacon Sullivan wrote me a gracious letter of thanks for the welcome given him and his wife Carol in our parish, and promising to be back on these shores in September!

Which brings us back to the purpose of the Congregation of the Oratory and of our parish: to preach the Gospel, to administer the sacraments, and to draw men and women to God by the good things of His creation. The Fathers do not do this on their own, but with the help of all our friends, who do so much, often in hidden ways, to make our ministry possible. I said before that a parish church is our home – and we should try to build up this sense of a parish as a family: everyone who helps to clean, to welcome, to teach or to serve in any way is building up our community – and this is ever more important as a way of supporting each other in our Christian life. There is a separate report on parish finances – but it is noticeable that despite the economic pressures of the past year your generosity to the parish has shown a marked increase. Our *Reaffirmation and Renewal* Campaign seeks to consolidate and expand our mission here – about which there is yet another report – and the newly-restored Relic Chapel has enhanced the beauty of our church and our sense of belonging to the Communion of Saints. I don't suppose that there is another church in England where you can find a 'relic of the week'! The Communion of Saints also exists here on earth, which is why the many and lively social events of our parish are so important. At our recent fundraising dinner for the Campaign, the Fathers were touched that at the promise auction, tea with the new Provost of the Birmingham Oratory went for three times the price of lunch with the premier duke of England! This is a sign of the love and devotion of our parishioners and friends, which I know I can say that all the Fathers greatly appreciate. It encourages us to go forward in the spirit of our Holy Father St Philip, who drew so many souls to God. Let us pray that we may continue to follow in this path in 2010.

Fr Daniel Seward, Cong. Orat.
Parish Priest
8th February 2010