

The Oratory Catholic Church of St Aloysius, Oxford

Parish Priest's Report 2011

2011 has been another busy and grace-filled year for our parish, with many events to report. In addition to the statistics attached, we have also seen two ordinations: both of the same person – Fr Nicholas – first to the diaconate and then to the priesthood, and the clothing of a novice: Br Oliver. In February, Fr Daniel was elected Provost, and Fr Robert has taken a well-earned sabbatical after over 20 years as Superior. He went first to the Oratory in Genoa and then (after the American visa finally arrived) to the Philadelphia Oratory. Fr Richard has returned to us after his time as Provost of the Birmingham Oratory, meaning that we now have nine members of the Oratorian community here.

Funerals have taken place in our church in 2011 of Mary Abel, Alexandra Konopelska, Martin Moran, Mary Burnell, Paul Carroll, Basil Burwood-Taylor, Mary Selwood, Andy Sivewright, Patrick O’Kane, Vera Ryhajlo and Caja Bayley. Since the beginning of 2012 we have also had the funerals of Professor Sir Michael Dummett, Valerie McNichol, Baby Marco Pezzini and David Whitaker. May they rest in peace.

Obituaries for David Whitaker and Sir Michael Dummett have been printed in the national newspapers, so it will suffice to say that we shall miss the twice-yearly confusion of the Emeritus Wykeham Professor of Logic whenever the clocks went back or forward. I would like to single out two of those who died during 2011 who were particularly long-standing and faithful parishioners:

Mary Burnell was the inspiration of the St Aloysius’ Drama group since the 1950s. She directed the very first Passion Play, and many others afterwards. Her daughter Rosemary played the part of St Mary Magdalene in that first play, and an undergraduate was found to play Our Lord. The two were married within a year – don’t tell Dan Brown. Mary’s passion for drama brought friendship to so many of our parishioners over the years. In advanced age, she was still heavily involved in the Parish Pageant in 2000, and took great delight in attending *Divine Comedy* in 2009. On the day of her funeral, the performance of this year’s production of *The Quality of Mercy* was dedicated to Mary’s memory. I hope that her tremendous sense of fun will encourage many to follow her in treading the boards in years to come.

Mary Selwood lived in our parish for all eighty-four years of her life (except for a brief exodus to St Gregory’s). She was brought into the church before going to her own home, on the way back from being born in hospital, attended St Aloysius’ School and was active in all sorts of different ways in parish life. Her husband Pat, was a permanent deacon here, her sons prominent among our altar servers and Mary and her daughters stalwarts of the choir. It certainly seemed like the end of an era when

she died. Mary's support of the Social Club and the Lourdes pilgrimage will be particularly remembered. She is probably the last link to the pre-war days of the Jesuit age: her father, Maurice Leahy came to Oxford after the Great War, having met Fr Plater, and was involved in the foundation of the Catholic Workers' College – later Plater College. In a place and time when most people come and go, it was sad to lose such a vibrant connection with so much of the parish's history.

At the beginning of 2012, Fr Gregory Winterton of the Birmingham Oratory died, aged 89, of which 51 years were spent in the Congregation. Fr Gregory was Provost of Birmingham in 1990, when Archbishop Maurice Couve de Murville invited him to send two priests to St Aloysius', Oxford with a view to making a foundation here. The community accepted the proposal, and in September of that year, Fr Robert and Fr Dominic arrived. Four of our Fathers in Oxford were clothed by Father Gregory, and we owe much to his kindness and support in the early days of our community. His funeral last week was thronged with those who had benefited from his ministry over so many years, and he will be especially remembered for his role in pushing forward the beatification of John Henry Newman. He saw this with his own eyes and was presented to the Holy Father during the Mass of Beatification in September 2010. Fr Gregory was also for us a living link with our English Oratorian history, having lived with Fr Denis Sheil, the last novice to be clothed by Newman.

In other Oratorian news: One of our former parishioners, who is a member of the London Oratory, Fr Edward Van den Bergh, was ordained priest there on 22nd October, and is coming to celebrate the High Mass here on 12th February. When Fr Robert returned from his sabbatical he was given the job of National Ecumenical Officer for the Bishops' Conference. His role will include representing the Catholic Church at the Anglican General Synod next week, and he has already been engaged in dialogue with the Syrian Orthodox.

Last year I promised that we would see some progress on the projects of our "Reaffirmation and Renewal" Campaign, and there has been an immense amount of work on this in 2011, both by the Fathers and by our volunteers. In February a great team of people stood outside the church for several weekends to inform people about our plans and progress. There were sponsored events: Billy and Nick Griffiths walked to the London Oratory, then to the Birmingham Oratory and finally back here; Julien Chilcott-Monk had his *Dream of Gerontius* performed at Christ Church; Seth Cox gave an excellent piano recital in St Margaret's Church; Eamonn Macdonald walked along the coast of New Zealand; and Catherine Brown and Jo O'Donovan bravely slept outside on New Year's Eve. In the course of the year, nearly one million pounds were raised, bringing the current total to £2,045,749.47. The result of this is that I am pleased to announce that we are to begin work on the new building immediately: the contractors should be on site by the end of February, and have been commissioned to put up the new accommodation, parish centre and library. We have appointed Stepnell Ltd of Rugby as our builders, since they

provided the most competitive tender and plan to build using “traditional” methods, without the need for a crane. At the moment we have the funds to put up the building, but not to fit it out, but we hope that by August we will have raised what is needed for this too. The figures for the completion of the work should be available soon.

The Fathers are very grateful for all the generosity of our parishioners, friends and supporters. We can all see the urgency of building new rooms for the community, given that Fr Richard is currently squeezed into the basement, and we need to have room to expand and take new vocations in the future. Obviously, while the building work is taking place there will be a certain amount of inconvenience. Today we moved the parish office into the house, and the parish centre and hall will be closed for most of this year. The end result should make up for the cramped conditions of 2012. We are also pressing ahead with designs for the restoration of the nave, and this should be the major project for 2013, having completed the first building works.

In August a group of thirty young people went to Spain with Fr Daniel for World Youth Day. The theme of this international gathering was “Firm in the Faith”, and so we had a programme of catechesis during our three weeks away, along with daily Mass, Rosary, silent prayer and parts of the Divine Office, as well as seeing the cultural sights. We were kindly hosted by the Daughters of St Joseph in Barcelona, by a former parishioner who is Director of the Colegio Roncalli in Madrid, and at the seminary in Avila. In Madrid there were vast crowds wherever we went, and exciting moments when the Holy Father arrived – greeted by dancing horses – and we managed close-up views of the Popemobile at least four times. The day that we had to make our way to Cuatros Vientos for the Vigil and Papal Mass was swelteringly hot, with temperatures reaching 40°C, and we had to wait in the shadeless airfield for most of the day. Your Parish Priest was threatened with arrest by the Spanish police because we were in the wrong section, through no fault of our own, and we were told that we had to make way for a group of a hundred Italians. You will be pleased to know that we stood our ground, and after a long confrontation, conducted in a variety of languages, during which I told the police that they would have to remove all thirty of us forcibly, they eventually got bored and left us in peace. After the blistering sun, a freak storm then forced the Pope to leave the podium for half an hour, and the tents from which Holy Communion was to be given the next day all blew down. But despite these tribulations, World Youth Day was an enormously inspiring event, showing our own young people that they are not alone in their faith, as was evidenced by the up to two million who attended the Papal Mass. The moving Stations of the Cross in Madrid, the silence of hundreds of thousands as the Blessed Sacrament was exposed, the majesty of the Sagrada Família in Barcelona (designed by Antoni Gaudí, a Brother of the Secular Oratory), our pilgrimage in the steps of St Teresa in Avila and the great kindness we were shown by so many are among the vivid memories that we took away with us. The next World Youth Day will be in Rio de Janeiro in 2013 – that should be quite an undertaking, but there are many who are keen to go.

Before Fr Robert set off for Philadelphia we had an splendid party with an American theme. This was the first of many such parties we have enjoyed in 2011. There was a packed indoor street party for the Royal Wedding, at which hordes of ladies entered the fiercely-fought hat competition. Congratulations to Mrs Carol Wilson, Mrs Phyllis Horan, Miss Anna Maria Mendell and Miss Grace Bale, who were the prize-winners and who all looked elegant enough to grace Westminster Abbey itself. We shall have to find an imaginative way of celebrating Her Majesty the Queen's Diamond Jubilee this year, without the parish centre to provide a venue. Our party organizers were busy again for the day of Pope John Paul II's beatification, and for Fr Nicholas's ordinations, first to the diaconate on 18th March by Bishop Kenney, and to the priesthood on 1st October by His Grace the Archbishop, when a large number of Fr Nicholas's family and friends came over from Cape Town. In May we marked Fr Daniel's ten years of ordination and in October we celebrated Fr Richard's 25 years in the habit of St Philip. Our thanks go to all those who have worked so hard to produce such enjoyable celebrations. Our parish festivities will be somewhat curtailed this year by the building works, but the new kitchen and bar should give these new vigour in the future.

As you will hear in the financial report later on, the Fathers have been tidying up our worldly affairs, so as to be more efficient and cost-effective in the current economic climate. We have reduced the number of our accounts from ten to four, have adopted internet banking so that our transactions can be more closely monitored, and have had the help of our industrious accountant, John Hardcastle, in producing budgets and monthly finance meetings. This is still a work in progress, but it means that we are now able to make sure that every penny you give us is put to good use. This is particularly important with our coming building works.

There have as always been many visitors to our church in 2011. Among these, we welcomed the boys from St Philip's School, where Fr Dominic is chaplain, for their retreat on Shrove Tuesday. The Chancellor, Lord Patten of Barnes, gave a fascinating talk in February about the Papal Visit. The newly-appointed Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Antonio Mennini celebrated the Solemn Mass on St Philip's Day and was a genial and entertaining guest. Cardinal Mazombwe, the only Zambian-born Cardinal (so far) came to see us in April. A group of seminarians from St Paul Minnesota spent a week on a study visit here in January, and priests and parishioners from the French Oratory were among the many other groups who came on pilgrimage to our church. An event which has not happened for some years was the *Day With Mary* in September. This was a jam-packed day of devotions, processions, confessions and liturgy in honour of Our Lady. The absence of meeting rooms means that we can't host the day again in 2012, but we hope they will come again next year.

Our parish Lent Project in 2011 was for *Light for the Blind*, a charity founded by Fr Thomas Rathapillil to care for the blind, abandoned and dying-destitute in Tamil

Nadu. Fr Thomas himself came to thank us for our contribution later in the year, and inspired one of young parishioners to go out to India for a time to help with this work. I hope that others might follow Nick Griffiths' example in the future.

On St Aloysius' Day the new courtyard building at St Aloysius' School was blessed and opened by Bishop William Kenney. The room, which is the old courtyard at the centre of the school, is a beautiful addition to the building and is used for a variety of purposes, including the library. Fundraising by the PTA to make up the shortfall in funding has been successfully completed, and the room has some lively and attractive artwork by the children, carried out under the direction of Louise Frith-Powell, depicting the new Mission Statement. This was adopted by the governors this year after a wide consultation. The school also has a new motto: "Be ambitious for the higher gifts", from 1 Corinthians 12:31.

Not all our endeavours have met with success: when we heard that the County Council planned to reintroduce parking charges on Sundays, parishioners from all the churches along St Giles' sent off a fierce protest, and many of us attended the public meeting at which our voice was meant to be heard. A very tiny victory was won, in that the charges begin at 10am rather than 8am, but otherwise our objections fell on deaf ears. Thankfully, the statistics indicate that these new charges have not brought about the decline in Mass attendance that was feared, but there are still important principles at stake here. The special character of Sunday as a day of rest is something that we ought to strive to rescue from commercialism, and Christian religious practice ought to be aided and encouraged rather than made more difficult. We should all raise these issues with candidates for Oxfordshire County Council next time that they are up for election.

In happier news, we have seen the introduction of the new English translation of the Roman Missal. The new words are a vast improvement on the blandness of what they replace and have generally been welcomed with tremendous enthusiasm. After a few weeks of confusion, people have got used to the new translation very quickly. At the suggestion of the Archbishop, the Fathers gave a series of sermons on the Mass during the introductory period, and we were all able to see how the new translation is both more faithful to the Latin and conveys a correct understanding of what the Mass is.

The record numbers of converts received in our church this year is largely accounted for by those coming into the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham. On 1st January, three former Anglican Bishops were received into the Church in Westminster Cathedral, and they were ordained deacon and then priest later that month. Among them was the former Bishop of Ebbsfleet, Andrew Burnham, who lives in Oxfordshire. He celebrated his first Mass in our church on Sunday 16th January, at which Fr Aidan Nichols O.P. preached a memorable sermon. By March Fr Andrew had been made a monsignor, and during Lent he gave an express series of instruction

to a group of 19 people on Saturdays in our parish centre, with the help of some of the Fathers. The prospective converts were surprised and touched when His Grace the Archbishop called in unexpectedly one Saturday to see them and offer his prayerful accompaniment. The group was then received on Spy Wednesday at our 6pm Mass, and is among the pioneering members of the Ordinariate who have responded to Pope Benedict's generous invitation to unity. They have a weekly Mass at Holy Rood, but Mgr Burnham also usually celebrates Mass here on Wednesday mornings. We wait to see what the long-term developments will be, but any move that brings the conversion of England closer, even by a fraction, should merit our prayers and support.

Léonie Caldecott wrote a highly original and thought-provoking play - *The Quality of Mercy* - to celebrate the beatification of Pope John Paul II in April. Thirteen young actors traced the life and teaching of Karol Wojtyła in the context of a pilgrimage, and there was some moving acting, as well as effective choral-speaking and impressive dance. Frs Dominic and Daniel also had roles, as did George Weldrick, who gave a brilliant cameo performance as the elderly Pope. We are very grateful to the Jesuit Fathers at the Old Palace, who kindly allowed us to use the Newman Rooms, even for practices which went on far into the night. The play was very well-received by its audience and favourably reviewed in the Catholic press. EWTN came to film some of the rehearsals and made a discussion programme about the play, which was broadcast to millions around the world. Initiatives such as the *Quality of Mercy* are not only tools for evangelizing culture, but also give us great hope for the future of the Church.

In all this I haven't really touched on the weekly round of parish groups, of Masses, confessions, catechism classes, on the Fathers' different works and ministries or on the devoted work that so many of the lay faithful carry out. Last week we began our parish census, which a sub-committee of the Parish Advisory Group, led by Mark Millward, has been preparing. So far there has been an excellent response, and it has already identified some pastoral needs or areas where people are willing to get involved. So if you haven't filled in your form yet, please do so!

So we look to 2012 with hope. Just as Our Lady of the Vallicella held up the roof of the church in St Philip's time when the *Chiesa Nuova* was being built, let us ask her to protect and guide all our undertakings, and especially our building works, as Mother and Queen of the Oratory. May our Holy Father St Philip, St Aloysius and Blessed John Henry aid us by their intercession, that our parish may continue to flourish and grow, drawing souls to God and witnessing to the Gospel of Christ.

Fr Daniel Seward, Cong. Orat.
Parish Priest
30th January 2012

The Oratory Catholic Church of St Aloysius, Oxford

Statistics 2011

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Baptisms:													
Infants –	25	35	32	38	34	44	30	32	34	47	54	31	47
Adults –	10	0	3	4	6	5	6	5	3	6	8	2	3
Total –	35	35	35	42	40	49	36	37	38	53	62	33	50
Receptions of Converts:	7	5	7	4	5	12	9	9	4	5	6	8	32*
First Holy Communions:	30	26		29	30					29	50	41	49
Confirmations:	14	17	5	25	16	36	31	18	32	28	35	31	17
Marriages:	14	25	23	18	16	20	16	25	16	29	31	24	28
Funerals:	9	15	9	16	11	12	12	17	12	9	9	10	11
Average Mass attendance: (On Sundays in October)	660	677		750	793				862	885	904	973	979
Confessions heard in our church:	4,624†	4,710†	4,897†	5,990†	6,523†	8,370†	8,106†	7,701†	6,844	7,539	7,384	8,099	

*of which 19 were received into the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham
† estimated figures

Mass Attendance in the Church of St Aloysius Gonzaga, Oxford

