

Chapter 3 - LIFE HERE IN THE TIME OF MONSIGNOR McKENNA AND FR. GRAEME DUNNE

Monsignor Michael McKenna became the eleventh parish priest at Weld Bank in 2000. He knew something of the place from his previous role as the Episcopal Vicar for Finance in which he took the lead on managing the Diocesan finances in times when they were severely stretched. He, like other incumbents at Weld Bank, had done some of his priestly training at Upholland Seminary and he has told the story of how, in his youth, he had been an altar server in a parish where Fr. Firth was based and how it was Fr. Firth who took him to Upholland and left him there “with just a ten-bob note” to pay for any extras he might need. So, the two parish priests had known each other for many years and, on the numerous occasions when Fr. Firth had needed to seek Diocesan approval for repairs and renovations to the church, it was to Monsignor McKenna that he wrote explaining the situation and what the costs would be. He was a friend of Archbishop, later Cardinal, Vincent Nichols, a fellow Liverpudlian, who, on several occasions has said mass with him here. It was the Cardinal who once commented that the Monsignor should have been a bishop!

Changes

Monsignor McKenna was savvy enough to see that the church was changing – shrinking in numbers - and made bold moves to remove excess costs. In his previous role, he had been responsible for selling off land on Carr Lane for housing and later, in his time here, once the junior and infant departments of the school had been moved to one site in Eaves Green Road, he found a tenant for the old school in Weld Bank Lane – a company that wanted to use the property as a private school. The parish hall and club, together with the ladies lounge and the bowling green were all included in the lease which was quite a blow to many but it was recognised that these facilities were a drain on parish finances. However, he also created a new space for parish gatherings within the presbytery where two rooms complete with a kitchen area were redesigned and decorated to enable their use for meetings and small social gatherings. For larger gatherings, he initiated the

use of hired marquees which could be sited in the spacious presbytery gardens.

Improvements to the church grounds

While reducing costs and creating an income stream in some areas, Monsignor McKenna was keen to maintain the church and surroundings in good order. He decided that the graveyards needed to be tidied and made safe and so had the kerb stones removed and headstones made secure. He also employed a sexton to keep the place tidy.

Redecoration of the church

When the time came to redecorate the church, Monsignor took specialist advice on the colour scheme and it was recommended that, as the church was built in the early Georgian period, colours that were popular at that time should be used. So it was that church was brightened with blues, pinks and greens. For the greater comfort of the congregation, cushions were provided for most of the benches.

Celebrations

Monsignor McKenna encouraged the people of Weld Bank to come together on numerous occasions when he, with a dedicated team of helpers, organised parish lunches. These were held at various venues including St. Joseph's parish hall and at the Kilhey Court Hotel on Wigan Road. There were also special events held in marquees and these included a celebration of Fr. Firth's 60th anniversary of ordination in 2005 and again, in 2009, when we celebrated Fr. Firth's 90th birthday and also that of Monsignor Jim Commins, the last curate at Weld Bank in the time of Fr. Croghan. On this occasion, Fr. Firth was made an honorary Canon. (See *photos*) Once again there was a lovely celebration in a marquee on the church lawn in 2015 when Monsignor McKenna celebrated his Sacerdotal Golden Jubilee.

Monsignor McKenna enlists help from Fr. Patsy

For a time, Monsignor McKenna had an assistant priest here who I'm sure would not be classified as a curate. This priest was the very popular Fr. Patsy Foley who found a warm welcome amongst the people of Weld Bank. In his youth he had played the Irish sport of hurling and made two championship appearances. I recall him helping the sexton with digging over the soil near the wall at the bottom of the daffodil field. He cheerfully explained that it was work that he was accustomed to, having grown up on a farm, and in fact he seemed to make light work of this job which most would have found very heavy indeed. In time Fr. Patsy was needed elsewhere and had to move on but is still serving as a priest in the diocese.

Monsignor McKenna retires

In 2016 Monsignor McKenna chose to retire but, like Fr. Firth before him, he did not go very far. In fact, he stayed within the parish grounds moving only down to the Lodge at the end of the church drive which had previously been occupied by the former rector of St. Mary's, Canon Mullen. Again, as Fr. Firth had done, Monsignor has been able to remain a part of our community and almost always concelebrates Sunday mass with Fr. Dunne. Furthermore, he has been able to stand in for any of the local priests when the need has arisen.

Fr. Graeme Dunne

In September 2016 the parish welcomed Fr. Graeme Dunne as its first parish priest ordained after the Second Vatican Council. Fr. Dunne recounts that Weld Bank was regarded by many of the Liverpool clergy as something of a 'jewel in the crown', having a good attendance, no debt and a lovely setting but he wasn't sure that it was for him. However, the Archbishop told him that he 'needed a break' as he had been extremely busy in his previous parishes which encompassed what had once been ten different parishes and which had seen church closures, break-ins and much decline. When he still demurred, the bishop advised him to have a chat with Monsignor McKenna.

This is what swayed him to accept the move as, when asked what were the best features of the parish, the Monsignor explained that above all else it was not the setting or the lack of debt, but the people here. So, it was the Weld Bank community who, without knowing it, brought our new rector to the parish.

Fr. Graeme relates how his vocation was awakened in school assembly one morning when his headteacher at St. Dominic's, Mr Shuttleworth, said that, although there were ten priests at that time serving the parishes in the area, by the year 2000 there would only be one priest. Fr. Graeme thought that he might be able to double that number! In fact, Mr Shuttleworth's predictions were quite accurate in relation to Fr. Graeme's future postings which, although in a different area, indeed saw a tenfold reduction in priests.

Fr. Graeme did his training in the three northern seminaries: firstly at St. Michael's Underley, near Kirkby Lonsdale in Cumbria, then at St. Joseph's, Upholland and, finally, at St. Cuthbert's, Ushaw, and at the University of Durham. He was ordained by Archbishop Worlock at the Parish of the Blessed Sacrament, Aintree, on 9th November, 1985 and then began his priestly ministry as a curate at the joint parishes of Sacred Heart and St. Alban's in Warrington where he spent 6 years. From 1991 to 1997 he worked with the Catholic Missionary Society based in Golders Green, London, but travelled around Britain doing both Parish and School missions, one of which brought him on his first visit to Chorley where he ran a school mission at Holy Cross. In 1997, he became Parish Priest at Sacred Heart, Leigh with the additional responsibility for Leigh Hospital. After this, in 2004, he transferred to the parishes of St. Anthony and Our Lady Immaculate on Scotland Road, Liverpool. During Fr. Graeme's time here, the parish expanded with the addition of Our Lady of Reconciliation and later of St. Sylvester's. This was where he was managing what had once been ten parishes and it is little wonder that the Archbishop felt he 'needed a break' though in offering him the parish of St. Gregory, he warned that he would not have the luxury of caring for just one parish for long.

As he moved into his new parish in Chorley, Monsignor McKenna retired into the Lodge and Fr. Graeme explains that he has been truly blessed to have his predecessor's support and friendship. As foretold by the Monsignor, he has been pleased to find that there is a lot of involvement of the parishioners in the church and he was particularly delighted that it had not become a general habit here, as in some places, for many of the congregation to leave the church immediately after communion without waiting for the final blessing.

Death of Fr. Firth – the Weld Bank community give thanks for his life

Fr. Firth died in Ireland in April 2017 and was buried there so his funeral mass was not held here at Weld Bank. However, a commemorative mass was held here at the same time as the funeral in order that we could pay our respects for our much-loved former parish priest. Although he was not to be buried here, a tombstone has been placed on the very spot where he had asked to be buried, believing that he would end his days in Chorley. His tombstone is never without some flowers.

Highlights of Fr. Graeme's first years at Weld Bank

Amongst the various highlights of his time here so far was the parish pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2019 (see *photos*) and also his introduction, well before Covid, of the online streaming of both Sunday and weekday services - probably the first parish in the area to offer this. Initially, the 'Livestream' was intended to be a means of allowing the sick and housebound to hear mass and in the early days it attracted some 30 viewers but no-one could have foreseen how important it was to become in 2020 when the Covid pandemic struck. At the peak of the pandemic, St. Gregory's livestream was attracting well over a thousand viewers and is still well used. Furthermore, Fr. Graeme has been pleased to meet various viewers who have chosen to pay a visit to the church when in the Chorley area after watching our services on the web.

St. Gregory's and St. Oswald's come together as one parish and Fr. Graeme's responsibilities increase even further

As Archbishop Worlock had said, he was not to have the luxury of managing only one parish for very long for, in 2021, St Gregory's parish was amalgamated with that of St. Oswald's at Coppull when Fr. Mayne became too infirm to continue his ministry there. Fr. Graeme's responsibilities also increased with his appointment as Dean, originally of the Chorley Pastoral area and, more recently, of the expanded Lancashire Deanery which now encompasses some 18 parishes. They are about to increase further with his new and additional appointment as Episcopal Vicar for Finance in the Archdiocese but, thankfully for this community, he has asked to be allowed to continue as the parish priest for St. Gregory's and St. Oswald's.

Celebrations

In 2023, the community once again came together to mark the sixtieth anniversary of a former rector's ordination. This time we were sharing Monsignor McKenna's celebrations and, not for the first time, we had very distinguished visitors in the persons of Archbishop Malcolm McMahon and our local Member of Parliament and Speaker of the House of Commons, Sir Lindsay Hoyle who, in keeping with his role in the House, silenced the general hubbub with his familiar cry of "Order! Order!" and with this the Archbishop could say Grace and the banquet commence. A further celebration took place in May 23 when two members of our community were recognised for their many years' work for the church; Clare Meredith and David Critchley were each awarded the *Bene Merenti* medal by Bishop Tom Neylon.

The 250th anniversary of Weld Bank

And so we arrive at the forthcoming celebrations to mark the 250th anniversary of the founding of our parish community. One feels the presence of those who over the last quarter millenium have belonged to this place,

many of whom rest in our graveyards and believe that they smile benignly down on us. Perhaps we can close with the following quotation from Ecclesiasticus (44:1 verses 10-15) which was used in the booklet printed for the service of consecration in 1974.

In tribute to the Priests and People of Weld Bank parish

Let us praise illustrious men, our ancestors in their successive generations.

Here is a list of generous men whose good works have not been forgotten.

In their descendants, there remains a rich inheritance born of them.

Their descendants stand by their covenants and, thanks to them, so do their children's children.

Their offspring will last for ever, their glory will not fade.

Their bodies have been buried in peace and their name lives on for all generations.

The peoples will proclaim their wisdom, the assembly will celebrate their praises.