**PARISH PRIEST’S REPORT FOR 2023**

**FOR THE PARISHES OF RICKMANSWORTH, CHORLEYWOOD AND MILL END**

2023 has been a summer of continued growth and renewal across our parishes filled with many blessed and exciting moments.

Our Senior Leadership Team continue to be a great source of support in ensuring that amongst all the activities that are taking place we are keeping to our parish vision of giving those we serve the opportunity to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ, and to help others into such an encounter themselves. Paul Forrest has remained in his Emeritus role, having still not managed to escape the area, and his experience and wisdom on this group has been a great blessing. In recent months we have also added Richard Booth to the team to help us in particular in our strategy and planning across the parishes. This was partly as a result of a very successful reflection day for the SLT, facilitated by Jordan Kelly from the Divine Renovation initiative, which came after Fr Andrew had journeyed for three months with clergy from around the world via zoom, on a Divine Renovation Kickstart Coaching programme, which assists Parish Priests in focusing on moving their focus in ministry from maintenance to mission.

The membership of our Joint Parishes Pastoral Council has changed a great deal over the past year, due to some members moving away or needing to step back, but we are delighted that so many new people have been willing to join the group to support the SLT in keeping to our parish vision. The JPPC report will talk more about the Parishes Development Plan, which has been created to help us to continually seek to grow in this task.

MINISTRIES

Across our parishes we have a huge number of people taking part in different ministries. Some of these are very visible in our liturgies, such as our growing number of Altar Servers, our Readers, Welcomers and Eucharistic Ministers. Others are very audible, such as our different choirs, including our Youth Choir which continues to grow in confidence and numbers. Those taking part in other ministries such as cleaning, flower arranging and administration, are also playing a key role in the running of our parishes. In each of our parishes we also have a team of sacristans, and we were pleased to be able to reward some of them in the summer with a visit to the Sacristy of Westminster Cathedral, where the Chief Sacristan gave them a tour of the two sacristies, and an insight into the huge number of treasures the team there care for.

I thank all those in involved in ministries in the parish for giving their time and their skills to fulfil these roles. Our aim over the coming months is to continue their formation in these ministries with further days of recollection and training in Lent and beyond.

EVENTS

Over the past year we have once again, had a number of events in our parishes.

In Rickmansworth we had the return of our Parish Quiz with a Fish and Chip Supper which was a great success, and beautifully organised by the Parish Social Committee. In Chorleywood, a dinner at Watford College was organised, and a large number of our congregation has a wonderful evening together.

During Lent we had Days of Recollection for our Readers and Ministers of Holy Communion, and then we had a Parish Retreat Day open to the whole parish, led by Canon Stuart Wilson. All of these were well attended and created a perfect way to journey through Lent.

In May over 30 parishioners from Rickmansworth helped on a gardening day to clear up the site and prepare us for our summer celebrations. This was replicated in Mill End later on in the summer, and on both occasions there was a great community spirit, a lot of laughter as well as a lot of hard work, showing how proud we are of the beautiful sites entrusted to us.

In the summer we had our first attempt at parish processions and celebrations. In May we had our Marian Procession at Our Lady’s, which included the blessing of our newly restored Calvary Cross and then in June we had a Corpus Christi procession in Mill End, involving some of the children who had made their First Holy Communion. Then in the middle of June we had a St John Fisher Procession in Chorleywood, ending with a litany of the English Martyrs. These were followed by thanksgiving celebrations in the parishes which were enjoyed by all in the warm (and sometimes baking!) sunshine. These were great opportunities for us to celebrate the independent nature of each of our parishes with traditional Catholic devotions and then a celebration, and we hope such events will now be an annual occurrence.

These independent events were quickly followed by our joint event of the summer – Brass on the Grass. It was a joy to bring my brass band from Potters Bar to play for the people of our parishes, but even more to see the response to that visit. We had up to 400 people attend and the Scouts and the Social Committees who catered for them worked incredibly hard all afternoon with several trips to Waitrose to restock! It was also a great blessing to have our Youth Ministry Team leading activities for our young people, and for all our different groups to advertise themselves in our Parish Group Fair, as well as our Youth Choir to give us an enthusiastic performance. We were also joined by Bishop Paul McAleenan who had a wonderful afternoon witnessing our parishes working together. There have been many requests for a repeat of this and I can confirm that the band will return this summer and Bishop Paul has promised also to come again!

In October a group of 28 parishioners travelled with me on pilgrimage to Florence, Siena and Assisi. We had a truly blessed time, and despite some rather wet weather, came back spiritually renewed and having learned about some new friends to help us in our own attempts at holiness.

In November, we once again marked the month by remembering those who have died with the blessing of graves and our Mass of remembrance for parishioners who had died at Our Lady’s Church on the first Saturday of November. A number of families who had lost a loved one in the preceding year attended, and this was followed by some refreshments which were gratefully received. Our tradition of blessing graves in our local graveyards also continued throughout the month, as did our involvement in the local Remembrance Sunday marches and Services.

At the start of December our Youth Ministry Team organised a highly successful Youth Mass followed by activities in the Hall at Our Lady’s, marking National Youth Sunday. Then later that month the three parishes came together once again for our joint Christmas Carol Service, this year hosted by St John’s Church, Mill End. All the groups in the parish helped to lead us and give us moments of reflection through music and the Mill End parishioners served Minced Pies and Mulled Wine in a full parish centre afterwards.

We also had Advent and Christmas Fairs in different forms in our parishes which were a great success and we thank all those who worked so hard to put these together at such a busy time of year.

EVANGELISATION & MISSION

Our parishes have continued our journey of personal ongoing formation and evangelisation over 2023.

We began the year with a new season of Alpha, with around 15 guests and a great team to guide them led by Deidre Gilmour. Over the 12 weeks some strong friendships were formed as the group grew in their faith together. We hope to follow this with a new season of Alpha in the near future.

The Prayer and Life Workshops also continued with an opportunity for parishioners to grow in their prayer and relationship with Jesus Christ over a period of 15 weeks. We were delighted that in recent weeks two of our parishioners have qualified as guides of the Workshops in the Watford region and hope they will continue to lead these Workshops for many years in our parishes.

Our Kairos online formation has continued, now taking place once a month, and led by Anne Lorrimer-Roberts and Paul Forrest. This is based on zoom and involves watching a film and discussing its content. Over the past year the group have focused on a series on prayer. The group is open to all, but is a particularly valuable resource for those who are housebound.

The Faith and Friendship group, which meets every two weeks on a Wednesday afternoon at Our Lady’s also continues to grow in strength with up to 25 people attending. This is particularly aimed at the senior members of our parishes, and is a time of input, reflection and prayer supported by a cup of tea. Just before Christmas the group were joined for the afternoon by a group of Adults with Special Needs, and together they shared activities including singing some Christmas Carols. Thank you to Ann Gibson for her continued commitment to organising this group.

We will hear more about the ‘Warm Spaces’ initiative organised by the SVP in their report – but here I would like to thank all those involved in this important project at this time of difficulty for so many, as well as the other vital work the SVP do in our community, giving witness through putting our faith in action.

We are also in the process of training some volunteers as our new Bereavement Support Group, to journey alongside those who are mourning the loss of a loved one. I believe this will be an important group both for giving comfort to those who mourn, but also to help our community to show our continued support to families connected to our parishes.

SAFEGUARDING AND HEALTH & SAFETY

The safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults in our parishes continues to be of utmost importance. I express my thanks to the Parish Safeguarding Representatives of our three parishes for their care and vigilance in this time-consuming and at times difficult work, ensuring that all those involved in working with children and vulnerable adults are DBS checked. In recent years this role has been particularly frustrating for them with the time of such checks taking far too long. In recent weeks the diocese have undergone an Audit of their Safeguarding Procedures, and the hope is that this will highlight the delays and will lead to this issue being resolved in the near future.

We have a statutory responsibility to check that all of our premises are safe places to be in and we are very grateful to all those who help is with this difficult work, in particular Alan Opie, Michael Quinn, Peter Baxter, and Jim Elsdon, in taking the lead on this in each of our parishes. In October we had our annual inspections led by a new diocesan team, and in the subsequent reports, there were very few points we needed to address which is a great testament to their hard work in keeping up with the ever-changing requirements of fulfilling Health and Safety legislation.

CATECHETICS

We are continuing our journey of reviewing and adapting our Catechetical preparation to the society in which we live. As part of our parishes’ response to this, over the last few years our baptism preparation has included the requirement for the families to be attending Mass regularly for at least three months before the baptism takes place. It is lovely to see (and hear!) so many young families now starting to come to Mass as a result of this process, both before and after the child’s baptism and we thank Jane and Peter led by Fr Matteo in preparing families for this special moment.

You will remember that in the summer of 2022 we launched a new approach to catechesis with our families called GIFT, standing for Growing in Faith Together. This involves all families of primary school age being invited to monthly mass and classes for all the family on a Saturday morning, to help them bring faith into their home and their lives together. As part of this we also have a monthly zoom meeting for parents on a Wednesday evening, where they can have input and talk about living their faith in their busy family lives. We currently have 50 families signed up for GIFT and enjoying the process. Once engaged with GIFT and coming to Mass regularly, and after a period of discernment and a family visit from a priest, any children who are ready to receive their First Reconciliation and First Holy Communion, begin catechesis led by their parents at home, supported by a Catechist Mentor. This process is more flexible for the families, allows the parents as the children’s ‘first catechists’ to be more active in that role and it allows the children to be prepared at their own pace with no set date for their First Holy Communion. The feedback from those who have gone through this journey has been very positive, with parents far more engaged and finding it much easier to talk to their children about their faith.

In Mill End we now have a strong team of adults leading Children’s Liturgy at our 10.30am Mass three times a month, and they are now supplemented by teenage volunteers to looking after the increasing number of children who attend. We thank Liz Townsend for her leadership and input of this group.

In the summer our lead Confirmation catechist, Caitlin Scott, and her family moved away, which was a great loss to our parish. We thank her for all her commitment and enthusiasm over many years in the parishes. However, under the leadership of Fr Matteo, a new team of catechists have been formed and are now working with our young people encouraging them to become engaged with their faith, and taking on roles in our parishes.

RCIA has also restarted led by Judy Gordan and her team. This year we have one candidate being prepared for initiation into the Catholic Church at Easter in Rickmansworth. Our hope is that over the coming years this is a group that will grow, as we all encourage those around us who have not yet done so, to consider being received into the Church.

My sincere thanks to all those who give so much of their time to share and teach our faith to others in our parishes. We always need more support, so if you are interested, please do let us know!

ADMINISTRATION

Each year at the end of January a parish has to submit a Parish Annual Financial Return, which goes into great detail about where every penny has been spent and for what purpose. This is a huge operation that every Parish Priest, Administrator and Chair of Finance dreads, but here we have to submit three of those reports! This year, our Parish Administrator Kerry did this with her usual calmness and accuracy, whilst also trying to organise the replacement of two boilers in Rickmansworth. This is just a glimpse of what an incredible asset Kerry has been to our parishes over the past 10 years. The amount of administration and legislation involved in running a parish continues to grow, and even though we have some volunteers helping occasionally in the office, the bulk of this work and pressure falls onto her shoulders, and she continues to do this with a smile on her face. We thank her for all her hard work and dedication to our parishes and patience, most particularly with the parish priest!

To assist our administration in the past year we introduced our new database system called ChurchSuite. This has been a great benefit to the parishes, and we are continuing to grow in our use of all that it offers us. In the summer we also brought together our three parish websites into one website, to ensure our website is constantly up to date and accessible. We thank Casey and Siobhan Lambie for their hard work in designing and programming this website which is a vast improvement on what we had before. Also in the summer months, our Communications team was formed with several members of the parishes tackling our different offerings on social media. We now have regular updates of things happening in the parishes and helpful tools in our faith posted, which I know are of great benefit to many in our community and beyond.

We also give thanks to Daniel, our caretaker and cleaner, who continues to work with diligence and thoroughness, to ensure our sites are clean and safe places to work and worship.

Another often hidden but vital group to the running of our parishes, are those on our Finance, Operations and Property Committees, who are currently leading us through our Parish Planned Giving Campaigns across all three parishes. These are volunteers who give much time in supporting the parish priest in ensuring the sites are maintained and the bills are paid. We thank them for sharing their skills and expertise in supporting the mission of the parishes.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In our Lenten retreat last year Canon Stuart Wilson referred to a book entitled *‘From Christendom to Apostolic Mission’* which reflects on the changing world in which we now live. To be a Christian in the western world today is not as it was for many hundreds of years. We cannot expect everyone around us to share our Christian beliefs or understandings about things. We live in a world where once again to be a practising Christian is rather unique, and therefore our approach to how we live our faith and express it, has to change. This has become starkly clear in the years since Covid – although our numbers have gradually increased, we are still well below the number of people attending our churches as were before. We know that there is an increasing pressure on our clergy, with many priests now retiring not being replaced by the same number of ordinations, and as you can see by my own additional roles, those of us left are increasingly stretched with other responsibilities across the diocese. As I said last year *‘We need to be realistic and creative, to ensure that the Catholic presence in Rickmansworth, Mill End and Chorleywood, and the surrounding area, is not only strong, but sustainable in the long-term.*’ This means that we look at consolidating our resources, but we also look for more engagement from those who continue to be part of our parishes to increase the resources we have – to reflect on that is the purpose of our Parish Planned Giving Campaign so you’ll hear more on that soon!

In the coming year we have many plans to help everyone grow in our faith journey. In this post-Christendom world, we also recognise that we need to support each other even more as disciples. Soon you will hear of a Week of Guided Prayer that is being organised in Eastertide to help us grow in our prayer life, we are also working on creating small Cell Groups meeting in each other’s homes regularly to grow together in faith and in supporting each other in living out the faith. We are also reflecting on how we can share the good news we possess with those who have never heard it, and those who have perhaps never really understood it. We are after all called to not just be disciples, but to make disciples!

Let us continue to entrust our parishes and all those who live in them to the Lord, and through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, seek to work together as missionary disciples to make his love and mercy known to our community and to all those we encounter.