



One Hundred Years

A history of the Catholic Parish of Hitchin, by Fr Andrew Odell AA

The people who were gathered at the first mass at Hitchin 100 years ago could not possibly have imagined the beautiful church we are celebrating in tonight - this noble monument of modern technology praising God. It is just as hard for us to imagine the conditions of their time. The first question that comes to mind is why, if you are looking for a place in North Hertfordshire to start a mass centre. choose Hitchin? A hundred years ago we must remember Stevenage new town did not exist. Stevenage Old Town was much smaller than we know it today - about 3300 people only. Letchworth Garden City had not yet come into being with Ebenezer Howard's ideas for the ideal town. Letchworth village numbered only 73 people. So in fact Hitchin, with 8.500 inhabitants, was the only place with any significant population.

Hitchin itself was, of course, very different from the town we know today. Not only did the housing estates built since the second world war not exist - Bedford Road. Oakfield. Priory Way and so on - but the older estates of Sunnyside. High Dane and Westmill were not even on the drawing board. In fact the area between this church and the railway station was relatively new. The town having extended in that direction precisely because of the coming of the railway. It had been planned to take the trains into the town centre but as it proved impossible to acquire the land, the railway was built outside the town. It was in one of these houses in Nightingale Road. belonging to Mr Hutchinson, that Father Spink offered the first mass just a century ago - the 30th November 1890 which that year was the first Sunday of Advent.

The attendance at the first mass was about twelve people; fewer than the number of altar servers here tonight. Yet numbers increased rapidly and the mass centre was moved to a house in Old Park Road. It was after a visit there at the end of the century that Cardinal Bourne decided that a church was needed at Hitchin. Land was purchased and in 1902 the cardinal returned for the solemn opening of the new building. In only twelve years that jump had been made by a tiny handful of worshippers. It is interesting to note that the local paper pointed out that the new church would cheer up this corner of the town. The same remark was made when this new church was opened a few years ago.

Sociologists tell us that groups go through various stages After a period of enthusiasm and growth there is one of consolidation. This is followed by decline unless new challenges meet the group. It is certainly true that challenges did not lack at Hitchin. Firstly the church itself was very small. The sanctuary was not added until the nineteen thirties. But long before that a gallery was needed to take the numbers at the evening services. Fr Aubin was a great preacher and many people came to listen to him. It was also felt that the building was not complete without a bell. A fund was organised to cover the cost of the bell tower. The Duke of Norfolk was approached three times for his total contribution of £8, a considerable sum in those days. Queen Alexandra donated £5. One feels that the few Catholic peers of those days must have been fed up with the continual appeals to their generosity.

The Persecution of the Church in France at the beginning of the century had a beneficial effect on the Catholic Church in this country. Many Congregations of priests and nuns came to England looking for a home and for an apostolate. The Fathers of St Edmund came to Hitchin taking charge of the parish and setting up St. Michael's School. At about the same time two Orders of Sisters arrived. One left after a short while finding there was not sufficient work for two convents in the town. The others, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, remained to run the parish school and later their own private school as well. The arrival of all these religious from the Continent did not go without some protest. In the *Hertfordshire Express* of that time there is a long correspondence on this topic. After trying to show that the religious were really only fleeing from just laws designed to prevent the growth in wealth of religious orders at the expense of the French people. One correspondent goes on to show how the exiles have treated their English hosts.

"By making each religious community a centre of propaganda and proselytising. By sending out branch settlements in all directions. by advertising functions where music, incense, vestments and the unknown tongue attract the curious and careless protestants. By taking pupils of every grade gratuitously for tuition in foreign languages. music. needlework etc. and indoctrinating them with Romanism at their most impressionable age.....
Our quiet town of Hitchin has not escaped this incursion which is already making itself offensive to the religious tenets of its inhabitants in a most uncalled for manner". (*Herts Express 3rd June 1905*)

The Catholic replies, led by Mr. E. Poster, only helped to fan the flames and the correspondence dragged on for weeks. It is noticeable that, at this time, the number of adult baptisms dropped to only six between 1905 and 1908.

The outbreak of war in 1914 had the immediate effect of drawing the people of Hitchin closer together in a common cause and enabling the Catholics to play a more significant role in the life of the town. At the beginning of the war Belgian refugees were stationed at Hitchin. The local authorities organised the collection of clothes and other necessities for these people. Many of the refugees were Catholics, as can be seen from the Flemish names which suddenly appear in the baptismal register. To help them feel more at home church notices were read in French as well as in English. The pastoral letters of the Belgian bishops were also read after mass to help keep the exiles in touch with events at home.

The local Catholics did not fail to join forces with the rest of the town in collecting for the War Relief Fund and in organising schemes to raise money to provide comforts for the local territorials who had been called to the front. These efforts were crowned with some success as letters were received from the First Hertfordshire Regiment expressing the soldiers' gratitude for gifts, especially for tobacco.

As the Catholic community at Hitchin still only numbered about two hundred there were not many men to be called up. Two parishioners were killed on active service and the parish priest, Fr Cheray, being a French citizen, was called to the colours in January 1915. During the absence of the parish priest services were conducted by priests from St. Michael's School

By the summer of 1925 the Assumptionists Fathers had replaced the Edmundians at Hitchin. The school became St Michael's College and the priests undertook a great deal of supply work in the locality. In 1926 it was estimated that, each week, over 600 miles was covered by the Assumptionists when helping in local parishes and convents.

The number of Catholics steadily increased during the inter-war years. The main reason for this seems to be the steady flow of workers from the North of England and from Scotland. These people, hit by the unemployment of the late twenties and early thirties, moved to the newer light industries of Letchworth's new factory area.

Many of these people settled in the Garden City, but others preferred the more homely atmosphere of the old town of Hitchin. The continual increase in numbers gave rise to the

need for more accommodation in the church. New pews to replace the old straw bottomed seats had been installed in 1922 and, to celebrate the silver jubilee of the opening of the church (1927), it had been hoped to extend the building.

This work was undertaken by Fr Buytaers A.A. but he had been replaced by Fr. Manser A.A. before the work was completed in 1933.

During the thirties a great deal of renewal took place in the town. The Queen Street slums were demolished and new housing estates built. The swimming pool in Fishponds Road and the new buildings for the Grammar School were erected. The convent school had already moved from its home next to the church to a new site in Verulam Road (1924), and the parish elementary school which had existed in a tin hut took over the old convent which, at the same time, became presbytery and parish hall.

This was the position when development was almost brought to a standstill by the Munich Crisis in 1938. St Michael's College became a gas mask distribution centre overnight. The senior pupils prepared and gave out 1300 gas masks while the priests joined the A.R.P. It was also in 1938 that the Carmelite Sisters moved into Newlands off the London Road. They were to stay there until 1959 when they moved to a new site at Ware.

Many soldiers were stationed in the Hitchin area during the Second World War. These men, and the airmen stationed at Henlow Camp, were entertained in the people's houses when off duty. It was for them that a fourth mass was said in the church on Sundays. After the war it was found that sufficient new Catholics had settled in the area for this mass to be retained.

The major developments of the parish school also took place after the war. Under the care of Sr Columba the number of classrooms gradually grew, taking over all of the building. The priests moved out into two cottages next to the church. Sr Columba, who at one time had taught 87 children on her own, became headmistress of a new school at Stopsley. Plans for a new site and better facilities went ahead and, at Easter 1967, 180 pupils moved to the new school in Old Hale Way.

A year later St Michael's College was transferred to Stevenage as a five form entry boys school. It has since been amalgamated with St Angela's School to become the John Henry Newman School.

Once the school had moved to its new site it was realised that the church itself was far too small. Six masses were being offered every Sunday as well as one mass at St John's, which stood on the site of the present Cheshire Home and had been rented from the Anglican Church. The new church was consecrated by Cardinal Hume in December 1977.

The growth of the Catholic community is, as we have seen, reflected in the development of its buildings but this is only a minor part of the life of the any Catholic community. Over the years various societies have developed and been a great support to many parishioners: the Guild of the Blessed Sacrament, the Children of Mary, the Knights of St Columba, the Guild of St. Stephen. Some of these have disappeared and been replaced by the Union of Catholic Mothers, the Catholic Women's League, the Bethany Club, the Parish Council. This is a reflection of the vitality of the parish and the development of the role of the laity in the Church. Another factor of great importance is the growth of ecumenism. The past hostility between Christian Churches has given way to co-operation. We ask God's blessing on all these endeavours as we go into the challenge of our second century.

In a brief summary it is clear that a great number of events are left out and many people who have served the church well are not even mentioned. We thank God for all those generations of people and pray that we will be worthy of their faith and pioneering spirit.