**PARISH PRIEST’S REPORT FOR 2020**

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

It would be the understatement of the century to say that 2020 was a year like no other! Even as they year began cases of COVID19 were beginning to spread around the world, but none of us could have expected how dramatically our lives would be changed during this unprecedented year.

It was in late March that we entered into the first national lockdown and this meant that our churches were obliged to close and the public celebration of Mass was suspended. Although Fr Damian and I continued to celebrate Mass each day, we had to do so without a congregation and we had to encourage parishioners to virtually “attend” Mass at other churches which had a livestreaming facility.

During that long first lockdown, Fr Damian and I tried to call our most vulnerable parishioners on a weekly basis to make sure that everyone was doing OK. Fr Damian sent out a weekly email blast with key information for parishioners as well as an electronic version of the parish newsletter. He also made available regular spiritual reflections on Facebook. I am very grateful to Fr Damian for all his efforts to keep people feeling connected to the life of the parish. I am also very grateful to our SLT members Paul Forrest, Anne Lorrimer-Roberts and Geraldine Page, who very generously took on the important role of coordinating our response to requests for practical help from parishioners.

The lockdown began as Lent was drawing into its final weeks and so Holy Week and Easter had to be celebrated without any congregation at all. I am sure that you will appreciate that this was a very strange situation for Fr Damian and myself.

In the Easter Season, we had our first big experiment with *Zoom* at a parish level, when we launched the first season of Online Bible Study on the Acts of the Apostles on Monday evenings and Lectio Divina evenings, and using the same scripture passages, on a Friday evening. We had a fantastic response with 60 to 70 (sometimes more) parishioners online for each of the eight sessions. I am very grateful to those parishioners who hosted the small-groups discussions and those who, supported by Fr Damian, led the Lectio.

Such was the success of the first season, that we decided to have a second series of online bible study and Lectio Divina – this time a six week season on the Psalms, which took us up to the summer holidays. Once again, we had a great response from parishioners and I am again very grateful to the small group hosts and Lectio prayer leaders for their very important role in the success of this second season.

In mid-June came the news that places of worship could re-open for times of individual prayer. Accordingly, we made arrangements for Our Lady’s to be opened several times a week so that people could come and pray. Following on very soon from that announcement was the news that churches could re-open for the celebration of public worship from early July. My priority from this point on was to ensure that we had a COVID plan for the safe recommencement of Mass. I established a COVID taskforce for each of the three parishes and tasked them with advising me on how and when we could safely open our churches for the public celebration of Mass. Together, we agreed that Our Lady’s would re-open first on 12th July and that St John Fisher and St John the Evangelist would re-open on 13th September.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the Task Forces of the three parishes for the huge amount of work they have put, and continue to put, into making sure that our churches are COVID secure places.

We would not have been able to re-open our churches for Mass without the exceptional generosity of all of those who volunteered to act as stewards for Mass (and in the case of Our Lady’s, as cleaners). I wish to express my deepest gratitude to everyone across the three parishes who took on these roles and, indeed, who continue to fulfil them at this time. I also express my thanks to those who have coordinated the rotas for stewarding and cleaning, which isn’t always a straightforward task.

During the summer I announced to the parishes that we planned to install a livestreaming facility at Our Lady’s for the benefit of all three parishes, and I invited parishioners to consider making a contribution to the considerable costs involved. I was truly overwhelmed by the generosity of the response, which far exceeded my hopes. Indeed, so generous were parishioners, that not only were we able to cover all the costs of the installation without having to draw on existing parish funds, but we raised enough to be able to cover the monthly service contract and streaming costs for several years to come. I know, from the many emails I have received, how delighted parishioners have been with the installation of the livestreaming and with the quality of the service. It has indeed truly been a life-line for so many people during this time of pandemic.

Unlike Holy Week, we were able to celebrate Christmas with public Masses, albeit with greatly reduced numbers due to the need for social distancing. We kept to our normal pattern of Christmas Masses across the three parishes and we tried very hard to ensure that, although much simplified, our Christmas Masses were dignified and joyful. I am very grateful to our parish organists for playing carols at these Masses which greatly helped in creating a festive mood.

On 28th December, we heard the sad news of the death of Fr Jim Duffy, who had served and ministered as parish priest of Our Lady’s for some 26 years, and who, for a brief while, had been priest in charge of St John Fisher. Fr Jim’s funeral was celebrated by Bishop Paul McAleenan on 18th January 2021. Due to social distancing the numbers in church were quite small, but hundreds of parishioners were able to share in the celebration of the Requiem Mass via livestream.

**EVANGELISATION AND MISSION**

COVID 19 certainly impacted our on-going work of evangelisation and mission, but did not bring it to a halt. The season of Alpha, which had begun in person in the early months of the year was completed via Zoom and a second fully Zoomed season took place after Easter. I express my thanks to the Alpha Service Team for the innovative ways in which they ensured that we didn’t lose sight of the importance of continuing to build upon the foundations of building communities of missionary disciples. You will hear later a report from the JPPC about how during 2020 we have tried to continue to develop our work of parish renewal.

**CATECHETICS**

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic had a significant impact on all of our catechetical programmes. Our celebrations of First Holy Communion were postponed from May to September 2020 and all took place at Our Lady’s over three weekends with a total of six Masses. Numbers were restricted due to social distancing, but our livestreaming facility was used by many families. Despite the simplicity with which the First Communion Masses had to be celebrated many families commented that the simplicity of the Masses helped them to focus on the true significance of the celebration.

The Confirmation programme, which had begun with in-person classes, was completed online via Zoom and three Confirmation Masses were celebrated October. In the absence of a bishop, I had the privilege of conferring the sacrament on our young people.

As Holy Week had to be celebrated without a congregation is was not possible to complete the initiation of those adults seeking baptism, reception and confirmation on Holy Saturday. Consequently, we celebrated a Mass with adult baptism, reception and confirmations in September. Once again, social-distancing meant that the celebration was a simple one, but it was a great privilege to complete the rites of initiation with these people and formally welcome them into the family of the Church.

I express my sincere gratitude to our First Communion, Confirmation and RCIA catechists, who had to work in very different and challenging circumstances. Without their hard work and generosity we would not have been able to proceed with our celebration of these sacraments in such a challenging year.

**OUTREACH**

The circumstances of COVID19 meant that our outreach to those struggling in different ways because of the pandemic was more important than ever. We are blessed to have a flourishing Conference of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. A full report of their activities during 2020 will follow later in this meeting.

The St John Fisher Christmas Charity Fair at Chorleywood took a different form under the title “The Not the St John Fisher Charity Christmas Fair”, which was the inspiration of Mary Latimer and which she coordinated and ran from her garage! Once again Marguerite Watkins’ wonderful cakes were very popular and quickly sold out. It is truly astonishing that the grand total raised from the innovative “Not the …” Fair was £4,600!

Parishioners have continued to give generously to the charities supported by the Diocese via online giving and via the Red Missio boxes. Indeed, at St John Fisher more was collected in the Missio Red Boxes in 2020 than in the previous year and I thank Mary Latimer for coordinating this.

**SAFEGUARDING AND HEALTH AND SAFETY**

The safety of children and vulnerable adults in our parishes is of the utmost importance. I express my sincere gratitude to our Parish Safeguarding Representatives of our three parishes for their unstinting care and vigilance in the crucial, but painstaking, work of processing the DBS applications of those ministering to children and vulnerable adults in our parishes. In 2020 Dave Pione stepped down as the PSR for Our Lady’s after many years of dedicated service in this role. I am very grateful to Caroline Mathie and Carol Bartlett for taking on this important role for Our Lady’s.

We also have a statutory responsibility to ensure that all our church premises are healthy and safe places. I am indebted to the Health & Safety Representatives in each parish for working with me to make ensure that we meet our obligations.

**SOCIAL LIFE**

Understandably, the social life of the parish was very limited in 2020, but we did have the visit to the Elgiva Theatre in Chesham in February to attend a streamed live performance of La Boheme, organised by the St John Fisher Social Events Committee and we had two very successful online quiz nights organised by Yasmin Lakin and Jessica Kenny and I express my thanks to them for organising and running these great events.

**SPECIAL WORDS OF THANKS**

The pandemic also had a very significant impact on the administration of the three parishes. Kerry Van Rensburg, our brilliant Parish Administrator was furloughed for the first lockdown and consequently her workload upon returning from furlough was enormous. Kerry, with her usual calm efficiency was soon on top of everything and we were able to complete all of reports and returns required from us by the Diocese on time and excellent order.

Every year I express my gratitude to Kerry for all that she does for our three parishes. It is literally true that the parishes would pretty much cease to function smoothly, effectively or efficiently without all the work that Kerry does so diligently and faithfully behind the scenes. This was more true than ever in 2020. I recently had a conversation with a senior member of the Diocesan Parish Support team, who is very familiar with Kerry’s work. She told me that Kerry is the best Parish Administrator she has encountered in her many years of working across our Diocese. I can hardly begin to express my gratitude to Kerry for all that she does for the parishes, but also in support of Fr Damian and me. I hope that you all realise how fortunate we are to have such truly outstanding Parish Administrator.

I would also like to record my thanks to Daniel Callero, for his work of caretaking and cleaning in all three parishes, as well as in the presbytery. Daniel is very generous with his time and skills and makes sure that everywhere is clean, tidy and safe. During 2020, Daniel’s role has been even more important than ever, as he has taken responsibility for the COVID secure cleaning of St John Fisher and St John’s, Mill End so that Sunday Masses can be safely celebrated and he has also been undertaking the same role at Our Lady’s for the two weekday Masses and funerals.

In September 2020, Patricia O’Sullivan, who had served as organist and music director at St John Fisher for over 15 years decided it was time for how to move on to pastures new. Over those years Patricia made an enormous impact on the musical life of the parish, ensuing that the liturgical music of the parish was of an exceptionally high standard for such a small parish. I record my thanks to Patricia for the generous contribution she has made to the music and parish life at St John Fisher over the year. Patricia will be much missed by her many friends in the parish and especially by the choir, but she leave behind her a rich and solid legacy of musical excellence.

I cannot finish without expressing my deep and sincere thanks to Fr Damian for all the assistance he gives to me in so many different ways in caring for these three parishes and for all that he does in his excellent and varied ministry here as Assistant Priest. I am sure that you will appreciate what a challenging year this has been for your parish clergy. Fr Damian has worked so hard, not only to see that our parishes “survive” the pandemic but that we continue to thrive and grow and stay focused on our core vision and mission. In so many practical ways, by his hard work and dedication, but also by his generosity, kindness and thoughtfulness Fr Damian has played vital part in ensuring that we came through 2020 in a good place, poised for new and exciting developments in 2021. This parish is so blessed to have such a fine young priest as its assistant priest as Fr Damian and I considered myself truly blessed to have such a faithful, enthusiastic and supportive co-worker.

**IN CONCLUSION**

I began my report by saying that 2020 was a year like no other! It’s true, but it’s important that we recognise that some good things have come out of the experience of “being Church” in the midst of a global pandemic. I think especially, of the many ways in which parishioners have gone out of their way to help those in different forms of need, of the generosity with which so many have come forward to make sure that our Masses can take place safely and securely; I think of the many initiatives in which we have engaged in 2020 which are clear evidence of the parishes we seek to be, as expressed in our Three Parishes Vision statement – parishes which are *truly vibrant, welcoming communities, united in worshipping God and serving our neighbours.*

Despite all the challenges we have had to face in 2020, I believe that we begin 2021 in a very positive place. We are now in the process of launching our new online ministry Kairos – an exciting new initiative, truly born out of the pandemic. We look forward to the day, hopefully, not too far off, when we can return to a “more normal” pattern and experience of life and worship in our three parishes, but never forgetting all that we have learnt, experienced and shared as a result of the pandemic.

So we go forward into 2021 with great hope, thanking God for the many ways that he has shown his presence with us, his people, in the dark days of 2020 and with trust that he will bless all that that we are striving to do in his name, through his Son, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.