**PARISH PRIEST’S REPORT FOR 2021**

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

Having only arrived in September 2021 it is quite difficult to give a full report of the activities in the parish over the past year.

I must begin by thanking my predecessor Fr Shaun Church for all his hard work over his 8 years in the parishes. I know that when he arrived, he had the huge challenge of bring together three parishes as a cluster, and from what I have seen he has done this to great effect whilst continuing to maintain the independent character of each of our parishes. We wish him well in his sabbatical and pray that the Lord continues to bless him in his priesthood.

I would also like to thank everyone for the welcome that you have given to me since my arrival from Westminster Cathedral in September. As my first appointment as parish priest, and of three parishes, there is much for me to learn, and I am very grateful for the support so many have shown me through their words and prayers. A special thanks to the members of the SLT, Geraldine Page, Anne Lorrimer Roberts and Paul Forrest, who have shared their knowledge and wisdom with me in these early months, to allow me to get to know the parishes with great love and dedication.

Here I also have to thank Fr Damian, our assistant priest, who is now in his fifth year in our parishes. His joy in his priesthood and his incredible enthusiasm for evangelisation are infectious to us all, and we are truly blessed to have him ministering in our parishes. On a personal note, I am incredibly grateful that he is here in my first year in the parishes, to share his knowledge of the people and the area, and to guide me away from making too many mistakes at this stage of my time here.

Over the past year we have of course been continuing to journey through the pandemic, trying to open our churches safely and cautiously, and adapting to various variants and changes in restrictions. We give thanks to those in our parishes who have been part of the Covid taskforce who have been making incredibly difficult decisions over these months. It has been wonderful to slowly witness the return of the musicians to our parishes, as well as the continued commitment and flexibility of our stewards, welcomers, sacristan, readers and cleaners in times when there have often been lots of slight changes to adapt to new guidance.

During this time the live-streaming of masses has continued to be an important feature of our outreach to the housebound and vulnerable. We are also aware that many from outside the parish are joining our masses, because of historical links to the area or because through surfing churches they have found our liturgies particularly helpful in nourishing their spiritual lives. It was a great joy for us that in the autumn we were also able to resume visits to the sick by our Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, and by our clergy. A special word of thanks to Richard and Angela Dumaghn who co-ordinate so much of the visiting that takes place.

Since my arrival we have also brought back a weekday Mass in Chorleywood on Tuesday morning’s and Mill End on Wednesday morning’s. Each Wednesday we also have a rosary in Mill End, with the intention of praying for our families, and this is being well attended by parishioners and some parents from the school. We also introduced confessions and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament on Saturday evenings in Mill End and Sunday evenings in Rickmansworth, with the intention of giving as many people as possible the opportunity to pray before the Blessed Sacrament and receive the Sacrament of Confession. We hope that as people become aware of these opportunities the numbers attending these will grow.

EVENTS

Despite the restrictions there have been a number of events that have taken place over the past year. Firstly, we had the three leaving Masses for Fr Shaun. I know that he was very grateful with the numbers who came to the masses and sent their best wishes, despite the restrictions in place at the time and the inevitable nervousness about coming to such gatherings.

In November we had a Memorial Mass for Fr Jim Duffy, a long overdue service to mark his 28 years ministry to Our Lady’s parish and for a period to St John Fisher. The Mass was very well attended and we give thanks to the social committee for organising refreshments afterwards.

In January in Mill End we were finally able to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the parish with a Mass celebrated by Cardinal Vincent Nichols. Again, this was well attended, and supported by a team of Altar Servers from the school which made it feel like some kind of normality had returned. After the Mass the celebrations continued with a very impressive sit-down dinner for about 75 people, organised by Geraldine Page with our ever-capable chef Sue Noble. Our thanks to all those who made this such a wonderful day to remember and real source of hope for St John’s parish in the future.

Also, since my arrival we were tasked with responding Pope Francis’ call to begin the synodal process of listening. In our parishes we had an opportunity for each parish to attend a meeting after a Sunday Mass to discuss the main questions of the Synod, reflecting on our journey through the pandemic, what our parishes and the Church as a whole do well, and where we can grow. We also sought to involve a variety of others not able to attend those meetings and so held similar discussion with our online Kairos groups, our First Holy Communion parents and our Youth group. Overall, around 180 parishioners contributed to these discussions in a healthy and open way. I was greatly impressed by the response. All the points made were collated into a large document by our Synod Representative, Maggie Stacey, and send to the diocese for the next stage of the Synod process before finally being presented to the Synod in 2023. We thank Maggie for her hard work in representing our parishes and for bringing together all our feedback.

EVANGELISATION & MISSION

One of the great blessings of our parishes is the focus on evangelisation and mission, with the JPPC being a great driver in helping the parishes to move from focusing on maintenance to always remembering our mission to encounter Jesus, to serve others and to make disciples. It is very impressive to see the number of people involved in trying to grow in their own faith and to help others to discover the love of God in their lives.

The pandemic has not stopped this process, with particular success coming in the form of our Alpha course and Kairos, our online ministry. Alpha continued to be online in 2021 until we were able to launch the first in-person season for 2 years in the autumn. I was privilege to join this season myself, and was very impressed by the joy and love with which these are run by our committed Alpha Service Team. Also impressive is the work of the Kairos online ministry which has continued to nourish many housebound parishioners and others, during the past year with a mixture of prayer, church teaching and discussion, enabling people to continue to support one another during such a difficult period. We have also recently started the Prayer and Life Workshops in each of our three parishes. These lay-led groups give us an opportunity to learn different methods of prayer in an intense but life-changing way, helping people to have a truly personal and daily relationship with Jesus Christ.

As our parish strapline reminds us, part of our parish mission is to ‘serve others’ and this also happens within our community in many ways. We will have a report of the fantastic work of the St Vincent de Paul Society during this meeting giving full details of their work, but I would like to thank Maureen Fields and all the SVP team for their work helping those in our community. In a particular way I would like to thank all those who have represented in our parish at the SVP Community lunch over the past few months, which I believe is an important part of our engagement with those outside the regular churchgoing community.

In Chorleywood, Mary Latimer continued her mission to support many of the charities traditionally supported by our parish, despite the pandemic, with her art gallery in the garage and then once again holding the St John Fisher Christmas Charity Fair in the garage throughout the month of November. We thank Mary for her innovation and her constant enthusiasm.

SAFEGUARDING AND HEALTH AND SAFETY

The safety of children and vulnerable adults in our parishes is of the utmost importance. I express my gratitude 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 who are working with children are both fully DBS checked and trained in their ministries.

We have a statutory responsibility to ensure that all our church premises are healthy and safe places and as we all know the amount of administration and checks being made for Health and Safety is increasing all the time. I am therefore incredibly grateful to our three Health and Safety Representatives in our parishes, Alan Opie, Bo Bambridge and Paul Forrest for all their support in ensuring our sites are safe. Each year we have a Health and Safety inspection and all our parishes are doing very well in living up to regulations which are constantly being updated. Our three parishes have also recently been inspected by the Hertfordshire Fire Brigade, with very few issues raised. In the coming months Paul Forrest is planning to move away from Rickmansworth, and we are grateful for his incredible commitment to the parish in this role and on the SLT, where it has been a pleasure to work with him. Peter Baxter has kindly agreed to take on the Health and Safety mantle at Our Lady’s, with the support of Michael Quinn who has oversight of our Property in the parish.

CATECHETICS

Over the past couple of years much of our catechetics has had to be taught online via zoom which has completely transformed the way we would do things. For many families the usual build-up and celebrations of the Sacraments was far more muted than usual, although many have commented that in some ways the simplified version of those celebrations perhaps concentrated the mind on the true meaning of the event.

Our baptism classes remain online co-ordinated by Fr Damian and led by his team of couples who give such a great witness to Christian parenthood. The numbers of families coming forward has been low until recently. This perhaps reflects people’s reluctance to organise anything which involves their family gathering in recent months, but hopefully now the numbers of children being baptised in our parishes will increase once again.

It was with joy in the autumn that we were able to bring back both our First Holy Communion classes and our Confirmation classes in person. The First Holy Communion Class across the three parishes is 27 children for 2022, which I believe is down in number from previous years, but does reflect the lower numbers of families who are currently attending our parishes. We currently have classes in Mill End on Sunday mornings and in Rickmansworth on Monday evenings, supported by our wonderful team of catechists. For the parents sessions I have been doing a mix of in-person and online sessions, which have been greatly appreciated by the parents, who so often find it difficult to find child-care and fit such meetings around their children’s evening commitments. Perhaps a lesson from the pandemic has been this use of technology to make things easier for our families in this way.

Our Confirmation numbers remain healthy with 27 candidates meeting every other Sunday in Rickmansworth. We are again lucky to have such a great team of catechists to guide them, led so ably by Fr Damian, and we thank them for all their commitment to their ministry.

This year we do not have any candidates for RCIA, but here we are not alone. There are no candidates in the whole of Watford Deanery attending the Rite of Election next weekend, and I believe this reflects a very low number across the diocese. Hopefully, now that people are starting to come back to Mass more will begin to step forward wishing to become Catholics over the coming months.

ADMINISTRATION

With three parishes to organise comes a lot of administration and we are so fortunate in our parishes that our Parish Administrator is Kerry Van Rensburg. Her knowledge, efficiency, eye for detail, calmness and constant patience with the parish priest, is invaluable in our parishes being able to operate. As a new parish priest, I could not have asked for a better person to assist me in beginning to understand how to run a parish and we should all be giving thanks to God for Kerry every day.

Also our thanks to Daniel Callero, for his work in caretaking and cleaning in our three parishes, as well as in the presbytery. Daniel is completely dedicated to his work and to ensuring our property is kept clean, tidy and safe. He has also been very patient with the new parish priest who likes to clean out cupboards and investigate hidden spaces.

Here I must also give thanks to all those who are on our Finance, Operations and Premises Committees. Even in parishes who wish to move from Maintenance to Mission there is a lot of maintenance to do! Our thanks to all those who have worked so hard, particularly over the last couple of years when there have been enormous financial challenges in our parishes, to ensure that we are able to operate and provide sustainable and viable places for worship. A special thanks here to Mark Blayney who has chaired the FOP so ably in Rickmansworth for many years, before moving away with his wife Sharon, who was also chair of the JPPC, soon after my arrival. Our thanks too to Louise Leahy who has graciously assumed the role of chair.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In recent days the Prime Minister has announced that all restrictions from the pandemic are ending and we are to begin to return to normal life. The past two years have been life-changing for so many of us, and this is also the case for the Church and for our parishes. Many people have moved, or are moving away from the area. The numbers attending Mass in our parishes is still between 40-50% of the numbers that came in the autumn of 2019. We are aware that there are still some people sheltering, but we are also aware of many others who have fallen away from the Church or just lost the habit of coming to Mass over this time. Such low numbers attending also has a potential impact on the operation of our parishes. Of course, there is the financial impact this will have, although the generosity of so many in our parishes has helped us up to this point. With lower numbers of clergy in our diocese we have to be prepared for more changes in our area over the coming years. We also need more people to step forward to do their bit and help our parishes to be sustainable for the future.

To this end we have begun the year with two initiatives.

The first was our new parishioners soup lunch held at the start of February, hosted by the SLT. We had around 30 people attend this lunch and it was a wonderful opportunity to welcome new parishioners and get to know them, but also to allow them to have an understanding of our parish structure and mission. We hope that this lunch will be able to be replicated each year, as more people move into the area, and join our parishes.

Secondly, at the end of January we held a skills audit in our parishes. This was held in recognition that so often in the Church we fill gaps with enthusiastic people who have no experience or understanding of the field they are being asked to work in. Everyone has skills to share in our parishes, and we all have time to do so, although of course what time we have varies with our other commitments. The response to this audit was though most impressive. Many people were very generous in saying they could help weekly or monthly with their skills. We have already created a team to assist Kerry in the parish office when she is away or in need of support. We are also in the process of creating a communications team to enhance our online presence. We have also approached several individuals to support us on our operational committees from this audit. And there are many more individuals who will be approached to share their skills from this process.

I also have several other ideas of helping to build up our parishes over the coming months, especially in encouraging our families back to Mass and therefore back into our community in many other ways. These ideas will become clear over the coming months!

Despite all the challenges we have faced, I believe that there is huge potential in our parishes for growth and renewal in 2022. We give thanks to God for his constant presence to us in these past months, particularly in those who have supported us and sustained us. We pray that we may now move forward with trust and hope, that through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will continue to do his will in our parishes of Rickmansworth, Mill End and Chorleywood, working together to make his presence known and sharing the joy we have in knowing his love and mercy for us.