

PARISH PRIEST'S REPORT FOR 2022

FOR THE PARISHES OF RICKMANSWORTH, CHORLEYWOOD AND MILL END

I think the words to describe 2022 are renewal and growth. As we have gradually moved out of the Covid restrictions, many activities in our parishes have returned, others have changed and others have been introduced.

In the summer we said farewell to Fr Damian, after 5 years of ministry in our parishes. His contribution to our community over this time was great, and his support of our Alpha ministry and our young people was particularly inspiring. In his place we have welcomed Fr Matteo in his first placement since his ordination in June 2022. It is a great challenge for a newly ordained priest in his first months to find his feet, and we thank you for your support to Fr Matteo. I am sure that as he grows in his role as a priest, he will make a great contribution to our parish over the next few years.

This year we have had many other changes in our parish, with many people moving away, but many others arriving, and trying to find their role in the parish. On our Senior Leadership Team, Paul Forrest has stepped back as he prepares to move away from Rickmansworth, and Paul Matarewicz has kindly stepped forward to take on the role. We are very grateful to Paul Forrest for his incredible commitment and willingness to get involved over many years in the parish. When he eventually leaves us, he will be very sadly missed, but we are pleased he is continuing in his 'emeritus' role to support the SLT before he leaves. 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.

MINISTRIES

Since our last meeting we have managed to recruit nearly 20 Altar Servers across our parishes. Most are new to the ministry and taking some time to get used to their role, but it is wonderful to see our young people involved and gaining a greater understanding of the Mass. In the past year we have also introduced our new youth choir, employing Jaison as our Youth Choir Director and starting to recruit in the autumn term. The choir are rehearsing each week and singing twice a month at Mass, and although currently small, are already making a great sound and bringing great joy to our liturgy. In Mill End we also have a couple of teenagers reading each month, and I hope that this will start in our other parishes over the coming months. I strongly believe that through encouraging our young people to take on such roles in our liturgy, more families will return and feel welcomed to our parishes.

It is good to see all of our other music groups and choirs starting to grow in confidence after a few months together, and new adults joining their ranks. This was particularly highlighted at our first joint Christmas Carol Service in Advent, where each group sang a song or led a carol, and they united at the end with a rousing edition of 'O Holy Night'. We thank all those who lead and co-ordinate our music for their hard work.

There are so many people involved in a huge variety of other ministries, and it is good that in Lent we were able to hold Days of Reflection for our Readers, Welcomers and Eucharistic Ministers to give them formation and time for reflection on their important roles in our parishes.

EVENTS

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

In April we had a special Mass celebrating Fr Tim Dean's 80th birthday at Our Lady's Church. A large number of people came, alongside many friends of Fr Tim, and this was followed by a reception organised by some of the ladies of the parish. Fr Tim was overwhelmed with the love he was shown from the parishes and very grateful for the celebration.

In June we had Corpus Christi processions in Rickmansworth and Mill End, led by the children who had made their First Holy Communion. These were followed by thanksgiving celebrations in the parishes for the children which were enjoyed by all. It was good to have this tradition renewed and we hope such events will now be an annual occurrence.

In July the Rickmansworth Social Committee organised an Afternoon Tea to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. It was a beautiful afternoon with lots of refreshments and live music, and a very 'British' affair to celebrate the occasion.

The Social Committee in Chorleywood also organised a Summer Picnic, but this was postponed until September, due to the extreme heat! When it took place, a large number of parishioners came and had a lovely afternoon together in the garden.

The biggest event of the year was the leaving Mass and Reception for Fr Damian. It was decided that rather than having three separate Masses we would try one united large outdoor Mass on the field of Our Lady's. The Altar Servers, readers, welcomers and musicians from across the parishes came together to support our liturgy, and the social committees worked together to create the most wonderful celebration. A mention here also to our local scouts and all those who helped to put out, and return the chairs. Despite being in August, around 300 people came to the event and it was a fitting farewell to Fr Damian, on a beautiful and memorable evening.

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 provided by a group from Mill End, which were gratefully received.

As previously mentioned, in December the three parishes came together once again for our first joint Christmas Carol Service. All the groups in the parish helped to lead us and give us moments of reflection through music. We hope that this will now be an annual event.

We also had Advent and Christmas Fairs in each of our parishes which were a great success. It was good for some normality to return in the run up to Christmas.

At the start of January, we marked the death of Pope Benedict XVI with an evening Requiem Mass at Our Lady's, and a morning Mass at St John's, Mill End. It was an important moment for our parishes to mark, and pray for the repose of the soul of the successor of St Peter, whose visit to the UK in 2010 will be particularly well remembered by many.

EVANGELISATION & MISSION

Our parishes have continued our journey of personal ongoing formation and evangelisation over 2022.

In the new year we started a new venture with the Prayer and Life Workshops, with an opportunity for parishioners to grow in their prayer and relationship with Jesus Christ over a period of 12 weeks. A number of people took part in this, and two are now training to be leaders of the Workshops in future years. We hope this will return with new parishioners starting the journey in the autumn of 2023.

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 and on celtic spirituality. The group is open to all, but is a particularly valuable resource for those who are housebound.

During this past year we have also looked to build on the Alpha Courses of the past, and a new course started in January 2023 with 19 people journeying with the support of our fantastic Alpha Team, led by Deidre Gilmore. Our thanks to all those who welcome people onto this journey and all those who pray for them.

A new initiative created by Ann Gibson is our new Faith and Friendship group, which meets every two weeks on a Wednesday afternoon. 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. Thank you to Ann for spotting this gap in the market, and for being willing to organise 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.

Finally, we organised two pilgrimages in the autumn, the first joining the diocesan pilgrimage to Walsingham, and then soon after, traveling to Stevenage for the visit of the relics of St Bernadette. It was good to journey together on pilgrimage, and be reminded of the stories of the two shrines of Walsingham and Lourdes, whilst also uniting with the wider Church of our diocese and country in prayer and thanksgiving. We were joined for these by members of the parish of St Bede's, Croxley Green, and we hope such a link will continue to flourish in the future.

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 and trained. The past year has been particularly frustrating for them with the time of such checks taking far too long, and so we also thank them for their patience and support.

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 us with this difficult work, in particular Alan Opie, Michael Quinn, Peter Baxter, and since the autumn, Jim Elsdon, in taking the lead on this in each of our parishes. In December we had our annual inspections, and in the subsequent reports, the points for us to address and be aware of were considerably less than in 2021, which is a great testament to their hard work in keeping up with the ever-changing requirements of fulfilling Health and Safety legislation. Here it must be noted that in complying with this legislation sometimes hard decisions have to be taken for the safety of all, and the changes in the management of the car park at Our Lady's has been one of those decisions. At the inspection in Rickmansworth, this change was noted and commended, and the issues that have been of concern for many years, have now been resolved. We thank you all for your patience and understanding in this matter.

CATECHETICS

During the past few years there has been a concern in our parishes, and in many others, about the impact of our catechetical programmes on the lives and faith of our families. 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. Although this has had an impact on the numbers of children being baptised in our parishes, it has also led to far more engagement from those who have come through the baptism process after the baptism has taken place.

At the beginning of 2021 the SLT and JPPC decided to take the next step and review the way in which First Holy Communion preparation takes place. In the past we have had between 30-40 children receiving their first holy communion each year, with less than 5 of those children attending Mass regularly after receiving the sacrament. This is clearly not an effective or good use of our resources in making disciples. Having

reflected on models used elsewhere, in June 2022 we started our GIFT Family Catechesis, based on the idea of growing in faith together. This involves all families 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 36 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 using the Growing Up Catholic resource, 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. This will now take place at their normal Sunday Mass, in the community to which they belong. Currently we have 12 children preparing for these sacraments, whose families are all engaged in our community, and we have others who will begin that journey soon.

Confirmation continues under the leadership of Fr Matteo and his team of catechists who are working closely with the families to ensure our young people are also engaged with coming to Mass, and taking on roles in our parishes.

RCIA has also restarted after a small lull at the end of COVID. This year we have three candidates being prepared for initiation into the Catholic Church at Easter, and they are being ably led on this journey by Judy Gordan and her team of catechists.

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

With an ever-increasing amount of administration and legislation involved in running a parish we are so blessed to have Kerry as our Parish Administrator. Her efficiency and organisation, alongside her immense patience and friendly manner, are essential in the operation of our three parishes. We thank her for all her hard work and dedication to our parishes.

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

Another hidden but vital contributor to the running of our parishes are those on our Finance, Operations and Property Committees. All of these members are volunteers who give much time to bring their skills and experience to the meetings and help to ensure our parishes are sustainable and viable places for worship.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

We hope that now we are gradually coming out of the times of Covid, we can now start to see some stability amidst continued growth in our parishes. We are aiming to continue to grow in our spiritual lives, with events such as a parish retreat day planned for Lent. We are also looking forward to an increase in the number of social events in each of our parishes, and another joint parishes event in the summer.

In the year ahead we are also hoping to become more efficient in the way we run our administration, with the introduction of a new database and communication system called ChurchSuite. We are also in the process of bringing together our three websites into one website for the three parishes, to ensure our website is constantly up to date and accessible.

Amidst this process, we also have to be realistic about what the future looks like for the Catholic Church in England and Wales, and in our diocese of Westminster. The number of people attending Church regularly

has fallen by about a third since before the first lockdowns, and the number of priests about to retire in our diocese will inevitably leave our clergy stretched in the years ahead, if we continue to operate with the same structure in place. 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. To this end, over the coming months we are aiming to create a Parishes Development Plan. This will be a living document which will constantly be reflected upon by the SLT and JPPC so that we can continue to ensure we are working towards fulfilling our Parish Vision Statement, whilst also adapting to the ever-changing circumstances in which we live.

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.