Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and St Joseph: Waltham Cross

We have today because of the sacrifices made by the people in the past

By Patrick Daly

With the Reformation interrupting the flow of Catholic history in England, the Catholic Church here sometimes feels relatively new. It is no wonder, then, that the people of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and St Joseph in Waltham Cross are proud of their parish and its 150 year history.

Fr John Cunningham, parish priest for seven and a half years, is evidently very conscious of his place in the timeline of the church's life. "I've always been aware that we only have what we have today because of the sacrifices made by the people in the past," he explains. "We hold it in trust for those that are coming in the future. In a sense it's not ours at all - we just borrow it for a number of years."

Fr John is not alone in his awareness that the current parish is built on the hard work of the parishioners of the past. Geoffrey Kinton, a long standing member of the parish, said "I often took the parish for granted and it's only since I've got older that I've realised that it is all due to the money and efforts of the people in the past – they did it for my benefit."

This is not to say that the parishioners of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and St Joseph feel that the best is behind them! With a Mass count of a thousand each Sunday, which doesn't include the hundreds at the Polish and Ukrainian Masses, this is a busy parish to be a part of. Meeting some of the parishioners, it is obvious that there is a lot going on in the parish and also a fantastic rapport amongst them. During our interview, peppered with laughter, it is clear that the relationship they have with their parish priest goes far beyond merely respectful acquaintance.

The chosen ones

Ask the members of the parish why this church has lasted for so long and the answer is unanimous: the congregation itself. Patrick Shine, who has been affiliated with the parish since 1951, said "It is surely the congregation that has set this Church apart – that's the main thing. We've also had a long succession of good priests here. I think we're the Chosen Ones – sometimes it feels that way."

What is especially encouraging about Waltham Cross is that the young people are fully included in the parish's life. David Willis, Chairman of the Parish Finance Committee, tells me: 'What's noticeable is that there are a lot of families - and young ones too. What I like to see, is the younger people up there, doing the readings. They're very confident too! Letting them read encourages the youth to get involved, you see."

The life of the church

Ensuring that the young people of the parish are involved in the life of the church is one of the key priorities for Fr John Cunningham. Allowing them to be involved in the Mass, such as doing the readings, has been one of the ways he is taking this forward. "We start them as readers, reading the bidding prayers, in about Year Six of primary school. We also have teenagers from the local catholic schools, St Ignatius and St Mary's Catholic School in Bishop Stortford, as Eucharistic Ministers and that starts when they get to Years 12 and 13 (Sixth Form)."

Jacqueline Farley, a mother in the parish, is keen that her children will carry on using the parish and that they will sustain its long history. She said: "I pray that my children will come and be a part of the church because it's really important. My children do help out a lot at certain times in the year; they get involved with decorating the church and stuff like that, and I just hope that it's a place that they feel they can always come to."

Jacqueline's children are lucky that they are part of a parish that is looking to the future. Currently, plans are in motion for a new parish centre to be built to replace the old dilapidated hall, which was at one point both a church and a school for the local people. It is hoped that the new parish centre will be erected and ready for use by summer 2011. Fr John is glad that the parish hall will finally be a reality, saying: "The new parish hall will give us somewhere warm and safe and somewhere where we can actually use the kitchen!" (The current parish hall's kitchen has been condemned).Parishioner Mr Kinton believes that the new development "will help us with our social life and perhaps our fundraising for other things."

Focus of our unity

The first ever Mass at Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and St Joseph in Waltham Cross was celebrated on 5 February 1860 and so it seemed fitting that the current Archbishop of Westminster, The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols, was in the parish on Saturday 6 February 2010 to celebrate its 150th anniversary. "He is the father of the parish - he makes us conscience that we are part of the wider church, and he is the focus of our unity" explained Fr John.

When Archbishop Vincent visited Waltham Cross, he reminded the parishioners that this parish started out as a mission and that they were all called to be missionaries. It would seem that the people of Waltham Cross are successfully living up to that call. As Bishop George Stack says in his foreword to Waltham Cross' parish history: 'History is important, and the history of this parish is one of the glory of God and the well being of his people today and in the years to come." And long may that history continue.

From left to right: Patrick Shine, Jacqueline Farley, Fr John Cunningham, Una Griffin, David Willis and Geoffrey Kinton.

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Archbishop Vincent Nichols celebrating the150th anniversary of the parish's founding

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