

CHAIRMANS REPORT – PARISH COUNCIL AGM – 11th June 2013

This report provides a summary of some of the work of the Parish Council over the past few months since the last AGM back in June last year. It will also look at some of the other events which have taken place which have provided a witness of Christ's work both within the Parish and the wider communities of Tolworth and Surbiton. I would like to start by thanking all members of The Council for their work throughout the year, and especially Chris who has tirelessly supplied us with minutes of our meetings.

This year has seen us celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Consecration of the church building. Last month, Archbishop Peter celebrated Mass on the day of the anniversary which was an incredibly beautiful event and thanks must go to all those who not only took part in some way in making it such a memorable evening, but to those who turned up and supported it. It was, however, slightly disappointing that numbers were not as high as they could have been. During this year, we have held a concert with the St Petersburg Blagovest Ensemble and a flower festival, and we thank those who have made these events possible. In a few weeks' time, we have a School and Parish Picnic to be held in the grounds of Richard Challoner School, organized by the PTA of OLI School, and we are very grateful to them for that organization. To complete the marking of this milestone in the life of our church, we have had commissioned new Consecration Candle Sconces (which are located below the 12 crosses in the building where the sacred oils were applied) to replace the ones which are currently there which are rather unattractive and unfit for purpose. We hope these will be ready in about 3 months' time.

The Year of Faith started in October, and as part of that we hoped to be able to become more proactive with our message of evangelization. Of course evangelization, being the process in which the Church seeks to spread the Gospel and the knowledge of the Gospel throughout the world, in many respects must start with ourselves as we challenge our own faith and knowledge of scripture, which in turn gives us the tools we need to look beyond the comforts of our own lives and spread The Word. Fr Anthony (accompanied by Marie-Helene and others) have led several sessions including videos and talks about our Faith and these continue very successfully. Booklets and calendars have been provided to the whole community to assist families with ongoing reflections at home. We have seen the launch of the new Parish Library which has been well supported, so we thank those who have set up and run this venture. It is, of course, essential that we all find our own way to engage with the teachings the Church, with scripture, and our experience of Mass, in order to keep our Faith alive and fresh for ourselves, but also in order that we can pass on our Faith to our children and the young people in our care, so it is hoped that people will continue to make use of these, and other resources in the future.

The banner erected on the front of the church building reminds passersby (and those coming into church) that we are celebrating the Year of Faith and that a strong faith is absolutely key to our spiritual wellbeing. Prayer is central to this, and we are currently working on a booklet to be made available in church which will have a collection of prayers associated with the various statues and different parts of the building.

Last year we ran our second pilgrimage to the Holy Land which was a huge success. I am sure you have read the write up on the parish website and, through the national media, have gained a greater understanding of the plight of the remaining Christians in this part of the world. Our trip was filled with so much joy, but also sadness as we witnessed firsthand the dreadful double standards of Palestinian villages with all the poverty that goes with it, next to a stunning and beautifully maintained (with all the perks which go with that) Israeli Settlement. We must continue to pray for this part of the world and do all we can to support this holy of Holy Lands or face the likelihood of one day waking up to the realization that there are no more Christians in the Holy Land. The parish swapped buying its altar wine a little while ago to that supplied by the Holy Land as one way of assisting them financially. However, this has led one or two in our community to complain about the taste of the new wine – I would say that we all have it in us to put up with the taste of the wine if it can do so much good to our fellow struggling Christians.

Next year we will be running our next overseas pilgrimage which will be to Rome and Assisi and we hope that these trips will continue into the future every couple of years. On a social note, it was great to see another full house at our annual parish meal, and we thank those who once again organized a fantastic evening.

We have spent time debating and researching the benefits of twinning with an overseas parish which would give us the opportunity to forge lines of communication with them, get to know and understand them and their community, and offer, in due course, financial aid. Fr Arbo agreed to host a meeting for interested parishioners to come along and find out more and discuss ways of taking the project forward, and we are grateful to both parishioners who turned up! As a result, we decided that a twinning project could adversely affect the monies raised through the Lenten Project, and no one had the appetite to have that happen. For now, this idea has been shelved, but we must pay tribute to The Lenten Project team which has, as always, worked so hard, and they must be congratulated on raising another superb amount of money, made even harder again this year due to the economic situation of the country and individuals. Thank you also to all those who supported the various events.

The spiritual and prayer life of the parish is, and must remain centre to our existence as a Catholic. The liturgies this year have been carried out with much thought, grace and reverence by all involved. We currently have nearly 1300 people attending Mass at the weekend, and weekday Masses continue to be very well supported, as is holy hour on Fridays.

The Sacramental Programs have been run well, and our thanks must go to all of the catechists involved. The First Holy Communion Programme this year has some 70 young people preparing to receive our Lord for the first time, there were 42 in the Confirmation course which benefitted this year from a brand new programme, and as always, it was a privilege for all present at the Easter Vigil, to witness the climax to the journey of all those who had been part of the RCIA program for the last few months.

Let us remember the many organisations in the parish who work tirelessly week in and week out for the good of our community: from those involved with the liturgies of the Church, the cleaners, catechists, prayer groups, musicians, servers, welcomers, those working with the youth of the parish, the school, finance committees, maintenance committee, and everyone who helps in any way, large or small. OLI is a large organisation, so we are grateful to everyone for their contribution.

Our primary school is not only an incredibly important asset to the parish as a whole, it is an integral part of the triad which is so vital to the passing on of the faith to future generations: that of Church, Family and School. We wish the school, teachers, parents and children every success in all their ventures over the coming year.

The fabric of the church building and grounds takes a great deal of looking after due to the large volumes of people who use it and the Council would like to thank the members of the Maintenance Committee for all of their efforts. I am sure Richard will be mentioning in his presentation work which will be carried out in the coming months to the presbytery and Old Chapel, so I will leave that to him. The RDJ Room has been tidied, and received new paint and decoration, along with new curtains which has made it a more pleasant room to use for all sorts of activities.

Our young people are a very important part of parish life. We have already mentioned the school and the catechetical programmes, but let us not forget the Children's Liturgy and Young Peoples Group. The Children's Liturgy goes from strength to strength and we are grateful to Elspeth and her team for all that they do. The Young People's Group, now known as Odyssey, is for school years 9 and over, and has a membership of over 50 using the group regularly, and the catechetical time held at the end of each session facilitate their continued journey in faith, and once again, they will have a weekend Advent Retreat on the first weekend of Advent to further deepen their relationship with God and his Church. It is very exciting that a younger Junior Youth Club started a few weeks ago for those in school years 7 and 8. This is a great addition to all of the youth or young people related activities within the parish and we wish them every success with their venture. A huge vote of thanks must be passed on to all of the leaders of all groups for their commitment to our young people.

In the coming year, The Council will continue to support the parish clergy in line with its newly revised Constitution. We hope to have a reflection day in the autumn, and consider various topics including the subject of stewardship and how to help people become disciples in their own parish. We will report back to the parish next year at the AGM, but in the meantime, and in the interests of greater transparency, minutes of our meetings (along with the Liturgy Committee) are now published as they happen on the parish website. To also aid transparency, we are grateful to Chris for re-writing the Parish Handbook which will go back into use at some point this year.

We must pay tribute to Elaine who runs the Parish Office with so much skill, patience, and organization. There is a sign above her desk which reads along the following lines: *"Do you want to speak to the person in charge (a picture of Fr Anthony), or the one who knows all the answers (picture of Elaine)?" - she certainly does!*

We are, of course, very fortunate in this parish to have four ordained ministers who work tirelessly for the good of the parish. Deacon Al does so much for the parishioners of the parish from visiting the sick and housebound, to preparing those for baptism and so on, and I know he is a great support to Fr's Anthony and Arbo. We thank Al and Trudie for all that they do for us.

Earlier this year we had the unique and all too rare opportunity to attend an Ordination and a First Mass. We congratulate Fr Nicholas and offer him our heartfelt thanks for the help and assistance he has given within the parish in his time here both as a deacon, and priest.

Some would argue that we have a shortage of priests in this diocese (not in this parish!), and throughout the country. I am not sure I subscribe to that: what we have is a shortage, and indeed crisis, in the numbers of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The Church must do more to reach out to young men and women by assisting parishes and schools in fostering vocations for the future in new and proactive ways. However, in so speaking about the priestly ministry, we are reminded that in this parish we are fortunate to be blessed with two priests who have given their lives to the service of others. I know I speak on behalf of the whole parish when I say that it is a huge privilege to have the opportunity of witnessing their ministry, and on behalf of the whole parish, I would like to extend a huge thank you to Fr Anthony and Fr Arbo for all that they do for us and assure them of our love, prayers and support in the year to come.

Given by Andrew Richardson, Chairman of the Parish Council, at the AGM on 11th June 2013