



Link between Ardoyne and

Holy Cross Church in Ardoyne was the setting on Sunday as Gareth Thomas made his Final Profession as a Passionist. **Brian McKee** reflects on this special event in the life of the parish, the first such ceremony in 20 years

MARCH 14 1967. It had taken a full six months of meeting every Tuesday afternoon, mastering the pronunciation of the strange Latin words: Confiteor Deo omnipotenti; beatae Mariae semper virginiae; Et cum spiritu tuo.

A time then spent shadowing the older altar boys, as we learned when to stand up; sit down; kneel; use a thurible; how many times you could get away with ringing the bell without upsetting the priest; how to undo the golden garment during Benediction without strangling that same priest.

Then, finally, the day of the 'big test' arrived.

It was a ritual faced by every altar boy in Ardoyne – the day to prove you could serve Mass on your own.

The test was 10am Mass in the upstairs oratory of Holy Cross Church.

Fr Dominic and Fr Denis were the hoped-for celebrants. While some priests were better known for their lack of delay in celebrating Mass, these two men were gentleness and patience personified – just right for the nervous altar boy waiting to gain his 'medal' that entitled him to serve Mass alone.

I passed, and ran back to Holy Cross Boys' School with the prized bronze medal in hand.

What was it about these priests in black habits with the strange white signs?

The Passionists, founded by Saint Paul of the Cross in 1720, came to Ardoyne in 1868.

We knew they were different. While others called their priest by their surname, we were on first name terms with ours, and such wonderful names they were: Alphonsous; Ailbe; Honourous; Ultan; Conrad; Fernando; Marcellus.

As altar boys we got to know the characteristics and quirks of each one.

What was it about these priests in black habits and white signs that somehow got under the skin, and seemed to draw a deep loyalty from the people of Ardoyne?

Whether it was in the rebuilding of burnt-out houses; the construction of factories and jobs; the walking down riot-torn streets or accompanying children through waves of hatred on the way to school; the hours spent counselling and listening to stories of hurt and loss; we knew we were not just a parish; we were a Passionist parish.

We were proud of that. It seemed the Passionists were also proud of us – men who literally put their lives on the line to minister to a people in times of conflict and trauma.

There is a strange attachment between the people of Holy Cross, Ardoyne and the Passionists.

Maybe it was their strange habits that made them, and consequently

us, different from the rest of the diocese.

I think, though, it was more about their sheer down-to-earth humanity and the compassion that people received from those whom they considered as 'their own'.

As the white sign stood out against the black habit, so these men were a sign of hope when times were tough.

Last Sunday I attended the Final Profession of Gareth Thomas in Holy Cross Church.

It is hard to believe this was the first such occasion in almost 20 years.

A Final Profession marks Gareth's act of commitment to the Passionist Congregation for life.

What drew this big Welshman, who would not look out of place in a rugby line-out, and whose favourite food is chocolate, to this Congregation of the Passion?

At 31 years of age, why is this man

“We were a Passionist parish. We were proud of that. It seemed the Passionists were also proud of us – men who literally put their lives on the line to minister to a people in times of conflict and trauma

committing his life to a Religious Congregation with a strange habit, rather than pursuing his interest in history that he studied at the University of Wales?

Gareth told me of being raised in an Irish Catholic family in a working class mining area of South Wales, very connected to the local church.

Going to Mass as an altar boy was as normal for him as playing rugby or going swimming.

“My experience though was of a cold and dark church, that I both loved and feared at the one time,” he says.

At the age of 14 his grandmother became seriously ill and was in hospital for several weeks before her death.

“At this time a friendly priest and my RE teacher encouraged me to pray,” he says.

“I started reading the scriptures, particularly drawn to the stories of the Passion and here I discovered God, holding my hand.

“This was a God who wanted to come close. I became thirsty for this God who revealed himself to me as a loving God.”

The death of his grandmother had



a profound influence on the future direction of Gareth's life.

“After her death I felt God prompting me to share my experience with others, to tell people who have experienced this cold, dark and distant God that this is not me,” he recalls.

After initial studies for the diocesan priesthood, Gareth found himself

drawn to a life of community.

He spent a year working with asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow with the Jesuit Volunteer Community.

“I was living near a Passionist church in Glasgow. One day I went into the church and on a beam above the altar saw the inscription ‘We Preach Christ Crucified’,” he says.

“I had a deep sense then that this was what I was being called to do; to proclaim the crucified but joyful God”

Why the Passionists though? “I saw the people coming away from this church with smiles on their faces, and thought that these men must be doing something right.”

the Passionists



■ **CALLING:** The final profession of brother Gareth Thomas CP in Holy Cross Church Ardoyne on Sunday
PICTURE: Mal McCann

The final prayer of the Profession Mass on Sunday spoke of the Passionist as one who would “embrace the burden of the burdens of the people”.

As the Cross was put on Gareth’s shoulder, and the Crown of Thorns was placed on his head, I reflected on the different church experience since

the last Final Profession Ceremony almost 20 years ago.

Today we were witnessing a man making a commitment “to bear the burden of the burdens of the people” in full knowledge of the difficulties within the Church, a Church that was both crucified and crucifying.

That took some courage. I thought

that Gareth’s grandmother, and St Paul of the Cross, would be proud of this man from the Welsh Valleys.

■ **Brian McKee works with the Passionists at Holy Cross Parish in Ardoyne, north Belfast, and Tobar Mhuire retreat in Crossgar. He is the director of Seedlings, a consultancy on pastoral renewal.**

Diocese to hold inaugural congress

Down and Connor will hold its first Diocesan Congress in the Waterfront Hall next week, writes **William Scholes**

A **LANDMARK** in the life of Down and Connor will be celebrated next weekend when the inaugural Diocesan Congress is held.

It is the latest stage in the Living Church exercise which started in 2011. It sought to consult with the lay people, clergy and religious to identify priorities for the diocese.

More than 3,000 people took part, with lay participation, supporting the clergy and hospitality emerging among five core themes. Faith and worship and passing on the faith were the other themes.

Bishop Noel Treanor set up a Living Church team to, first, increase lay involvement and, second, to work out what could be done to address the five main themes.

A third leg of the stool was to organise a diocesan congress of lay people and clergy, a first for Down and Connor.

The congress will be taking over the Waterfront Hall in Belfast next Friday and Saturday.

The Friday event is a manifestation of the ‘passing on the faith’ priority, with 1,800 year-eight pupils plus teachers from across the diocese gathering “to hear the message of the gifts that God has given to them and the gift that each young person is for the diocese”.

On Saturday around 1,500 lay people and clergy will come together to hear speakers, including commentator Breda O’Brien, and take part in seminars and workshops hosted by Fr Peter McVerry, Church of Ireland Bishop of Connor Alan Abernethy, Elizabeth Davies, Jim Deeds and John Colgan.

The theme of the day will be



‘Our Church, Our Community, Our Commitment’ and a diocesan pastoral plan will be launched. Fr Alan McGuckian, pictured, a Jesuit, is director of the Living Church project.

“Co-responsibility” between lay people and clergy was at the heart of Living Church, he said. It is also the reason that rather than hold a large, one-off Mass on the Sunday of the congress, every parish in the diocese would be celebrating its own Mass and focusing on the pastoral plan. Fr McGuckian said the congress was a “staging post” rather than the end point, and that the pastoral plan would move the process forward by setting goals for the diocese over the next few years.

“The plan has arisen directly from the concerns expressed all across the diocese in the past three years,” he said.

The further development of parish pastoral councils was central to making ‘co-responsibility’ a deeper reality, and the focus of the whole exercise was “to discern the will of God”, Fr McGuckian said.

Concert to be held

A SPECIAL ‘Celebration of Faith’ concert will be held in the Waterfront Hall on the Saturday evening of the congress weekend, September 28.

The concert aims to tell ‘the story of the Church’, opening with a haunting Hebrew chant from Cappella Caeciliana.

Also performing will be The Priests, the choir of St Peter’s Schola Cantorum and Irish traditional singer Eamonn O Faogain accompanied by Patrick Davey, Loreto McAuley and Mairead Forde.

Fr Alan McGuckian said: “At the end

of the congress day it will be great to gather and celebrate and music, song and dance really help us get in touch with the vibrancy of our faith.”

The concert will also include a newly-formed youth choir featuring pupils from across the diocese and dancers from St Louise’s School

■ **Tickets cost £20 and are available from www.downandconnor.org/livingchurch, Veritas DRC in Donegall Street, Belfast and through the Living Church office on 28 9069 0920.**