

After a century of caring, Good Shepherds Derry continue to be led by the love of God



THE Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd has celebrated the Centenary of its arrival in Derry with a special Mass in St Columba's Church, Waterside.

The Sisters, led by Superior, Sr Myriam McLaughlin, had a warm welcome for the many parishioners and friends who joined them for the Mass, which was concelebrated by Bishop Donal and the priests who have served in the Waterside Parish over the years.

The Good Shepherds first came to the City of the Oaks in 1919, when three members of the congregation, Sr Ita Rice, a grand-niece of Blessed Edmund Rice, founder of the Christian Brothers, Sr Agnes Quinlan and Sr Sacred Heart O'Connor arrived following an invitation from Waterside parish priest, Fr Walter O'Neill, and with the approval of the Bishop of Derry, Most Rev Charles McHugh.

Both the city and country were in turbulent times then. Just after the First World War, and three years after the 1916 Rising, the Good Shepherd Sisters arrived in Derry two years before Northern Ireland was partitioned from the rest of Ireland.

Fr O'Neill had recognised the need of a Good Shepherd Home to care for women and girls in the city who were in need and, for the first 50 years, the Sisters were mainly involved in institutional care, so their ministry was within the convent grounds. They branched out from residential care from the early 1970s onwards and became more closely involved in parish activities in the Waterside and beyond.

Sr Myriam expressed the Sisters' deep appreciation for the wonderful support received during their first 100 years in Derry, from the bishops, priests and people of the Diocese, especially the parishioners of Glendermott and Ardmore.

In his homily during the Anniversary Mass, Bishop

Donal pointed out that the Good Shepherd Sisters had first come to Ireland at a time when the Irish Church was rebuilding after Catholic Emancipation.

"As well as Irish foundations," he noted, "Ireland was blessed with congregations of young idealistic women and men flooding in mainly from France and Italy. Despite the Famine, this was a time of growth and development. Newly industrialised towns and cities were throwing up not just factories but a range of social problems - and there was an increasing need for educational opportunities."

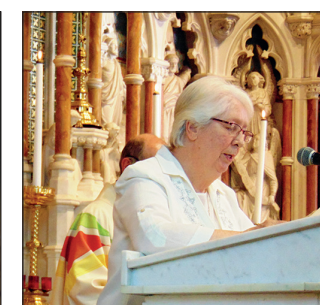
"That is where the Good Shepherd Sisters had always been at their best. It is where generous hearts were moved by the Gospel and by the love of God to do something for some, even if they could not do everything for everybody."

He stated: "Society is so often structured in such a way that the poor are viewed as an embarrassment and should be neither seen nor heard. In that way, they don't disturb the calm of the rest. It may theoretically be sad when they die of disease much earlier than the rest - but we can be tempted to see their premature deaths as more of a burden on the health system or as a result of their own folly. And being invisible or unimportant in society is one of the things that actually contribute to premature death. It kills the spirit."

Highlighting that the Good Shepherd Sisters have borne witness to the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who goes in search of the lost sheep, in many ways, working especially with women, Bishop Donal spoke about how they "sought to offer safe accommodation to those who were living far from home and to young women in situations where their families were unable or unwilling to look after them".

He continued: "They have worked with the world of female exploitation, whether that of prostitution or of trafficking. Women continue to be used and abused all around the world. And there is still a desperate need, not just for those who will help them but also for those who will love them and tell them that they are precious and beautiful in God's eyes, even when they feel battered and bruised, both in mind and in body."

Remarking that a centenary like this was "an important opportunity to both recognise Church failures in the past and to celebrate the prophetic role of Good Shepherd Sisters in Derry", Bishop Donal said: "Nowadays, women dedicated to the love of God and of the poor are an unwelcome stone in the shoe of



those who would trumpet the benefits of social change, but be blind to those who still pay the price for the success of the strong.”

Telling the Good Shepherd Sisters that he sees the present time as “one more God-given opportunity for you as female religious to re-propose your vision”, the bishop added: “There is now such a fear of the future and a realisation that consumerism offers a very hollow hope. Young people – following in the ideas of Pope Francis and Laudato Si – are recognising that our unsustainable use of resources to make more and more that may be embellishing our present but is destroying their future.”

“The bank crash of the last decade has shown us the hidden power of the unimaginably strong. The economic message may encourage our illusion of freedom but it ignores the fact that we are also prisoners of unseen hands who dictate what choices we have. The unseemly antics of many politicians offer pathetic role models for how to resolve differences in the service of the Common Good.”

“When key social concepts such as marriage and sexual identity are reduced to ‘what I feel is right for me today’, it is no surprise that the centre cannot hold. Freedom can too often be an excuse for irresponsibility – and women so often are the ones who literally are left holding the baby”.

Witness

Remarking that the strength of the Church has always been in its ability to let people hear the divine call to generous risk-taking idealism in the service of others, he continued: “We have been at our weakest when the focus has been on our institutions rather than on those who most needed love. The recognition of our failures can be an important act of humility – but the acceptance of that truth should enable us to be set free so as to witness in the present. The danger is that a preoccupation with the past will hobble us today and make us unable to speak into the modern realities.”

“The new elite do not wish to hear words of criticism. If we can be tied up in knots as regards our past, we can be prevented from speaking prophetically about today. But there are too many people who are unseen, missing and not missed. They need those who will bear witness by their lives to the Good Shepherd”.

“Religious congregations are at their best when they are courageous and prophetic,” said Bishop Donal, adding: “When the charism becomes too institutionalised, it can lose its taste. Your presence was for many years built on a hilltop on this side of the river. You are at your best when you are salt to the earth and light to the world. You are at your best when you are at the fringes and not at the centre”.

Remembering all those who began the work in Derry a century ago, and those who have walked in their footsteps, the bishop said:

“Many of those decades were difficult. The present time offers new challenges as numbers and energy levels fall. We thank God for the lives that were enhanced by your ministry.”

“We are blessed by the faithfulness of those who have ministered here and pointed to heaven. And we pray for the grace to wait in this fallow time for a new outpouring of generous followers of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. That will come in God’s own good time – for a society without generous idealists is its own worst enemy”.

In her Post Communion address, Provincial Leader, Sr Ethna McDermott, from Derry, opened with the words of their foundress, St Mary Euphrasia - “Our Institute was founded by love; you were led here by the love of God. O let us proclaim it aloud!”

She told those gathered that the Derry Centenary celebration coincided with preparation for their Province and Congregational Chapters, as they review the past and plan for the future, both in Ireland and worldwide.

“We are living in a time of rapid change,” said Sr Ethna, adding: “Many people now believe that the Church is irrelevant. We face challenges associated with our own diminishment, the fast pace of technological progress, Brexit, climate change, and so on. The future is unfolding in ways that are unpredictable, but our Congregation continues to be led by the love of God.”

“We participate in the Church’s mission together with the people of Derry, in light of Laudato Si’, in which Pope Francis urges us to dialogue with people of other religions ‘for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity’.

“We collaborate internationally, particularly in Europe, to respond to international issues, such as human trafficking and forced migration and offer hope in the midst of despair. It is fitting that today’s celebration coincides with World Day for Migrants and Refugees. The people of Derry continue to offer significant support for Good Shepherd projects worldwide.”

“On this joyful occasion, we give thanks for having been ‘drawn by the love of God’ to journey with the people of Derry. As we look to the future, we trust that Jesus the Good Shepherd will continue to guide and accompany us. I am proud to be from Derry and for our sisters to be associated with Derry”.

To mark the occasion, Sr Noreen O’Shea, Limerick gave a presentation which looked at the founding years of the Good Shepherds in France, its expansion around the world, and the inspirational spirituality of the congregation.

And she drew it all together by quoting world famous poet, Seamus Heaney: “Even if the hopes you started out with are dashed, hope has to be maintained”.

