

Mass of Thanksgiving Feast of the Epiphany 6th Jan. 2012.

A schoolboy was trying to persuade his father to come to his school's Nativity Play. After all, he said " I am playing the part of one of the three kings and my job is to bring Frankenstein to baby Jesus. That boy would not be only one in failing to understand what this feast was all about. We all struggle to grasp the fuller implications. The word Epiphany means appearance or demonstration. We can have, for example, demonstrations in relation to: new cars, show-houses, flowers or cookery that give us a glimpse or a preview of what we might expect. Today's feast gives us a glimpse of what the birth of is all about and what His mission in life was going to be. The story of the Magi tells us that no-one is excluded from the word of God. There is room for all of us. No one is a foreigner. There is a phrase that James Joyce used in one of his writings; " Here comes everybody " and indeed it is everybody that is welcomed to God's grace and love found in Christ. The task of the Church and the reason for its existence is to bring that message to the whole world. Countless individuals, both religious and lay have responded to that call. We think of the various religious groups and Orders who have enriched the message of Christ with their own special charisms.

Today we pay tribute to one of those Religious Orders; The Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of St Paul The Apostle. Ever since they came to this parish in 1927 they have had a profound presence in the schools and community of Kilmallock. They have been the jewel in the crown of our educational heritage. With the retirement of Sr. Teresa they have ceased their direct links with the schools of the parish.

The Order itself had its origins in France. It set up a foundation in England with Selly Park, Birmingham as the Mother House. This happened in 1847 and in the following years there was rapid expansion with numerous convents and schools being set up. The Sisters were devoted to educating the poorer children. The plight of these children has been well documented and highlighted, especially in the novels of Charles Dickens; children at an early age being forced to work in farms and factories during the Industrial Revolution and who now, through the work of the Sisters, were given a chance of an elementary education as well as getting a simple grasp of their faith. Also, many children of Irish emigrants to England after the famine benefitted from the absolute dedication and support of The Sisters. Why did the Sisters come to Ireland and to South Limerick in particular? It is believed that the move was prompted by the then Bishop of Limerick, Thomas O'Dwyer who had a sister in the Order. He travelled to Selly Park. He wanted the Order to set up a Convent in Kilfinane. It was hard to say "No" to him!

The Sisters came in 1903, quickly built a Primary School and later on a Secondary Boarding School. At the request of the Parish Priest of Kilmallock, Canon John Begley, the Sisters came to Kilmallock in 1927 and followed the same pattern of providing Primary and Secondary Education. Thousands of girls throughout Co. Limerick and further afield owe their Secondary Education to the Convents in Kilfinane and Kilmallock. It is remarkable that over one hundred girls from this region joined the Order. As well as that, over one hundred sisters resided, at one time or other, in the Convent here in Kilmallock. In their overall philosophy, the first commitment of the Sisters was their concern to ensure that all children got a decent Primary Education

and that they were instructed in the faith. Their deep-rootedness in the community, their sense of Pastoral care towards the disadvantaged allowed these goals to be made more easily attainable.

The Foundress of the Order, Mother Genevieve Dupuis, a lively and spirited Parisienne who lived to 90 years of age, once wrote to her Sisters, “ I value the gold of your charity. “ This charity, based on their faithfulness to Christ, has always been the driving force behind their vision and the hallmark of their heritage. Today we mark the end of a golden heritage and tradition, but like the mustard seed that is planted, it will never stop growing. We all owe a deep sense of gratitude to the Sisters of St Paul and in particular, to all the Sisters who have worked in this Parish. We thank them for their defining influence in the community and for their inspiration amongst their co-educators. The future of Education in this parish is in good hands and we look forward to the future with confidence. Sr. Teresa, along with her colleagues will continue to reside in the Parish and will continue with their good works. Obviously at some stage there will be a final farewell but we all hope that it will be a long, slow goodbye.

Canon Fitzmaurice.

P.P. Kilmallock.

6th January 2012.