

*MIKE CASEY, a former parishioner of the Holy Name, recalls the pioneering work of those far-sighted, dedicated and diligent Catholics whose dream of having a church of their own came true exactly 50 years ago*

Anyone over 50 must be uncomfortably aware that younger generations bracket them in the same league as black-and-white films, kiss-me-quick seaside hats and typewriters.

So it is with some trepidation that this relic of the past dares to offer a few thoughts about those doughty pioneers who in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century decided that their suburb of Leeds ought to have its own parish and strove mightily to bring their dream to fruition.

It was the prodigious efforts of that largely anonymous, single-minded band of crusaders – parents, friends and oh-so-close fellow parishioners who encouraged youngsters like myself ‘to muck’ in (often with much heel-dragging on our part) – which ensured success.

In the inevitable minor role reserved for teenagers, I was in the privileged position of spectator in those early days. Just 14 years old in 1949 when I arrived with my parents and siblings in Ireland Wood from the Christ the King parish, I had neither the responsibilities nor sense of obligation of my seniors.

I was content to swan along in the juvenile pond of St Michael’s College, immersed in school activities while vaguely aware of parents infected with the fund-raising urge while my sights were targeted on a career in newspapers a few years hence. My contribution to the Holy Name’s history really ought not to be mentioned in the same article as one honouring the pioneers. I blush at my arrogance. But my role, low-key and undistinguished though it was, must be mentioned to validate my observations of those dear souls who bequeathed so much to parish and diocese.

Oh, I was a proud altar boy, serving Mass for numerous priests in unusual locations – at the Lawnswood Arms, the Adel Community Centre in New Adel Lane, in a bedroom of the first parish priest, Fr Thomas Power, whose presbytery was a semi-detached house in the Spennithorne Avenue, and eventually in the more conventional setting of the present church.

Until the parishioners chipped in with that home, Fr Power lodged with Fr Kevin Scannell at St Mary’s, Horsforth, often walking through Clayton Woods to perform his duties in his own parish.

His constant companion was his dog Vic, who must have relished those outings through the woods. Priest and dog really were inseparable. My abiding memory of both is the pair of them on our 1956 wedding photograph. Talk about togetherness! During daily Mass, Vic would lie prostrate just outside the sanctuary, trotting dutifully behind his master down the aisle after the service.

I’m not sure that everyone shared my affection for the unkempt black mongrel, especially if Vic trotted into a parishioner’s home dripping wet on Fr Power’s weekly visit.

Indeed, my sister (Mrs Geraldine Fisher) reminds me that Mother’s love for dogs was severely tested once when she handed Fr Power a plate of chocolate fingers – a

rare treat in those days of rationing – only to see her visitor share them with his canine companion!

Con Gordon, a one-time colleague on the Yorkshire Evening Post, devoted a column to Vic and his successor, Monty. He wrote: “Architecturally, Vic was within the church but in spirit he wasn’t. With two good exits close at hand he could always vanish in a moment and pretend he had never been there. Over the years he vanished less and less. He was content if he could lie there, humbly, with his head on his paws and watch Fr Power. He managed to establish, not a eright, but a privilege in the matter.

“The then Bishop Heenan, making a visitation, was once waiting, robed, at the west door of the church. Vic appeared beside him in the porch and looked up inquiringly, as if to say, ‘This my master’s church and what are you doing here?’

“The Bishop looked sternly down at the dog as if to say ‘It is my Master’s also and what are you doing here?’

“Vic recognised authority. He reached up and licked the Bishop’s hand. The Bishop was touched by this humility. He bent down and patted the dog’s head. Fr Power, watching the incident, breathed again.”

The history of the parish has been well documented, notably by another former colleague on the Post, the late Geoffrey Halton, who reported that the first collection recorded by Fr Power in 1951 was £5 .10s, which would not have paid the rent for a couple of council houses at that time. The need for fund raising – the quicker the better – was immediately apparent as the target for building a church was £12,000.

With that daunting task, the parish throbbed with industry. Or so it seemed when, from the privacy of my bedroom – no television sets or videos there in those far-off years! – I often heard the hum of whist-drive and bingo chatter and unofficial committee meetings in the sitting-room below.

Parochial affairs were very homely, mostly friendly, single-minded gatherings with everyone’s energy devoted to the common cause. It was not all sweetness and light, of course. No committee can avoid friction, but temporary fall-outs were quickly cast aside once a course of action had been decided. Then it became full steam ahead.

Until the church-cum-parish hall was built in 1953, the most used meeting place was Fr Power’s Spennithorne religious HQ. Another much-frequented venue was the Myers’ home at St Michael’s College playing field, where Jim was groundsman.

Eighty-five-year-old Eddie Moran, a key figure in the SVP and an ace money-raiser through the Football Pools for more decades than he’s willing to admit, recalls that at a time when the cost of fuel was prohibitive and in short supply it warmed more than one’s body as Jim tipped buckets of coal onto a fire which was as wide as the wall of an average home of the period. The Jesuits must have winced at the size of their heating bill for that Cookridge outpost of their Leeds empire. Still, the huge cheque they received for selling those playing pitches alongside Hospital Lane for housing development eventually was ample compensation.

Raffles, dances, bazaars, bingo, garden parties, Christmas Fayres ... any method of parting the populace from their hard-earned money was considered acceptable.

The powers-that-be even dragooned such unenthusiastic creatures like me to collect cash from parishioners on their doorsteps once a week, even though the same folk also contributed to the plate handed around at Sunday Mass. A double whammy, I suppose you'd call it nowadays! The miracle was that no-one complained.

One survivor of Fr Power's happy breed told me recently: "It's difficult to explain the team spirit in those early days. It was a case of all for one and one for all. No-one ever looked for praise. No-one wanted their name in lights. We all got on with our allotted tasks under our well-loved Fr Power, happy to be part of a wonderful team which month by month saw its ambition edge closer to its inevitable conclusion – a church of our own."

It's important for us to remember those pioneers in our prayers in this anniversary year – nay, constantly remember them. As well as pointing the way ahead and bequeathing such a treasure to the Catholics of this windy suburb, their example is an inspiration for their successors. Fifty years is a mere blink of the Almighty's eye, an unimportant milestone in the great scheme of things. Yet it is a wonderful opportunity for us to reflect on those who handed on the torch.

It's taken a long time for me to reach that conclusion. I was too busy for most of the half-century since the newly-installed Bishop John Carmel Heenan instructed Fr Power "to get on with it" as he handed the miner's son his churchless parish in 1951. Dear Fr Power, who died suddenly in 1964 after courageously keeping his cancer a secret from his people, unflinchingly accepted a work load which would have been too much, I imagine, for those in the South Yorkshire mining community from which he sprung. I knew him for over 20 years and even in his more relaxed moments he never complained that his reward for building one church – in Barnsley – was to be handed a similar monumental task at the age of 46.

His undoubted talent was his ability to mix with anyone, professional or artisan, shop worker or clerk, retired folk and youngsters. He injected the indispensable team spirit which fleshed out the dreams of his flock.

Looking back half a century, I count myself fortunate to have been a bit player in that incredible communal effort. I hope all those survivors who performed heroic slaving for their beloved Holy Name will forgive me if I select at random this recollection of one of his dear, departed colleagues by Eddie Moran to illustrate the selflessness typical of those pioneers.

Eddie recalls: "I knew Frank, a future Knight of St Gregory, better than most. After all, I worked alongside him and my dear old pal Paddy Costello in the pools room three nights a week. My, he knew how to raise cash! He was a real gentleman but he knew how to get stuck in on menial tasks. What he did for the SVP was breathtaking. Yet what sticks in my memory is the sight of Frank on his knees scrubbing floors to make rooms habitable for the homeless. What a man! Yet there were scores of busy bees like him in the parish. Wonderful folk."

Sadly most of those dear people – parents, friends and scores of countless toilers in that mid-20<sup>th</sup> century vineyard – have passed on. They went to their well-earned rest happy in the knowledge that their selfless labours had left their successors

plenty to cherish – church, school and parish hall and clergy and parishioners cheerfully building on their inheritance.

Good souls like Frank McGlennon, Jim and Winnie Banks, Leslie and Hilda Pickersgill, Louis and Margaret Cogan, Paddy Mullen, Denis and Joan McCarthy, Jim Myers, Laddie Allen, Tom Cass, Dick Sheridan, my parents Ada and Percy Eales and scores like them gave decades of service to the Church.

Happily, other originals like Leslie and Jo Henry, Mrs Rene Emmett, Mrs Esther Cass, retired dental surgeon Mary Cogan (surely the longest-serving parishioner, having arrived in 1937 as a schoolgirl), and Eddie Moran are still in the parish. They deserve all the thanks and recognition that will come their way at the celebrations scheduled for September 23.