



# PARISH IN FOCUS

## Stranorlar Parish Diocese of Raphoe



Stranorlar Parish Youth Prayer Group



Baptismal Preparation Team members, Aisling Duffy and Josephine McClean, visiting parents John and Marie McPhilemy in their home to prepare them for the baptism of their daughter, Lucy

Our parish, in the Diocese of Raphoe, consisting of approximately 1,200 families, covers the twin towns of Ballybofey and Stranorlar and surrounding area. We are located in the centre of Co Donegal on the busy N15 route between Donegal and Letterkenny. The parish church of Mary Immaculate is one of the finest and best appointed of its kind in Donegal. It was built in 1867 and stands on the banks of the river Finn overlooking the two towns and the beautiful Drumboe Woods.

As the notice board outside our church states, we are a faith-filled community seeking to live the gospel more deeply. Working in close collaboration with our two priests, Fr Kieran McAteer PP and Fr John Joe Duffy CC, we strive to be a parish of outreach, welcome and inclusion. While our efforts sometimes fall short, it is always our primary goal.

Within the parish we also have the Sisters of Mercy who contribute much to the life of the parish. In 1994 their original residence in the parish was turned into The Family Enrichment Centre catering for the pastoral needs of individuals and families. They provide counselling services to deal with various issues such as bereavement, relationship difficulties, marital separation, alcohol abuse and depression. Also, people who have low self-esteem or who feel there is more to life than what they are experiencing, can be helped.

In 2011 our parish moved from a process of Parish Development & Renewal (PDR) which had been in existence for 14 years to the model of a Parish Pastoral Council (PPC). The

provision of a meeting place for parish groups and for parish social events was seen as a priority by the PDR group. Their vision became a reality in 2004 with the opening of our new parish centre. This building, located beside the church, has brought new life to our parish and community. It contains four meeting rooms, one of which is a conference room, and one which caters for groups of up to 100 people and includes a fully equipped kitchen. It has become the meeting place for all our parish ministry groups and is also extensively used by local voluntary and community groups. The Parish Centre also provides refreshments after parish services and funerals. It caters for all age groups, from the Parent and Toddler Group, to the Friday Club (social club for older people).

The Parish Pastoral Council has been in existence for over two years. In line with the procedure which we have adopted, half the membership is now stepping down and training for new members is currently underway. While progress can sometimes be slow, much has been achieved over the past two years.

Youth involvement in parish life was a PPC goal for the first year and much progress was made in this area. A parish-based coordinator for the John Paul II Awards was appointed and a youth Mass was initiated. We also have a youth prayer group which attracts around thirty teenagers each week. The weekly meeting consists of music, rosary, scripture/teaching, games and the essential cup of tea and chat. We have gone through peaks and troughs over the

years, with young people moving on to third level and leaving numbers low at times. We have combatted this by organising pilgrimages, social outings and guest speakers to keep things fresh and interesting.

We write to pupils in our local secondary schools inviting them to take up the Ministry of the Word in our parish. Each year a number respond to the invitation and young people from 3rd, 4th and 5th Year have served us well over the years.

Endeavouring to find ways of reaching out to people who no longer have any contact or very little contact with church is a goal the PPC found difficult to meet. Early in 2013 the decision was made to set up a Parish Outreach Programme. This programme commenced in September 2013. It involves 12 teams of two lay people, plus the two priests, doing house visitation. Over time we hope to visit every home in the parish. A gift bag containing a candle, a directory of parish and community services and a house blessing is presented to each household. The Outreach Coordinator assigns the houses to be visited by each visitation team. A letter from the parish priest is hand-delivered to each house a week before the visit. The purpose of the letter is to inform the household that the visit will be taking place and to put aside any concerns they might have about such a visit. While the purpose of the visit is to reach out and make a connection, we also ask each household for their views on how we might become a better parish and how we as a parish might be of service to them. Good

preparation of the visiting teams was seen as vital to the success of the undertaking. As a first step, an outside speaker was invited to help us pray and reflect on the proposed undertaking. A training session was then organised. On-going prayer and frequent re-grouping of the visitation team is built into the programme. Visitation was suspended for the months of December and January and will commence again in early Spring as the days get longer. Feedback to date is very positive. Addressing the issues and responding to the needs we are encountering on these visits will be a major challenge.

Our Baptism Preparation Programme has been in existence for 10 years. We have seven teams of two who visit each family on the occasion of the baptism of their child. They have made over 800 home visits to date and this has been a great help to parents in their understanding of the sacrament. Each year, for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, we write to all the parents who had a child baptised during the year and invite them to a short service which includes a blessing for the family. This is a beautiful, well-attended and noisy service. Refreshments for all are served in the Parish Centre afterwards.

As part of our sacramental preparation for First Communion and Confirmation we have used the *Do This in Memory* and *You Shall be My Witnesses* Programmes. This year we looked at the *Bridge* Programme for First Communion. We liked the idea that the *Bridge* Programme was a much more parent-based programme but we have adapted it to include child participation too. We are running it over four nights – two before Christmas and two in Lent. We invite parents and children to the Parish Centre on the same night. The parents are worked with in one area and the children are in another room with the Children's Liturgy Team. To date, we are very happy with the uptake by parents. We plan to continue using *You Shall be My Witnesses* for Confirmation.

As part of The Gathering, the PPC organised an ecumenical service in our church on St Patrick's Day. We celebrated only two Masses that day and the ecumenical service took place at 12 noon. Our church was full and the sermon was preached by the Church of Ireland minister.

To celebrate the opening of the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin a huge amount of work went into an open air mass in the local GAA stadium. This was very successful in that over 3,000 people attended, including priests and people from adjoining parishes. It was a memorable day in the life of our parish and the sun shone brightly on everyone that day in June.



Candle presented to households as part of the Parish Outreach Programme

We are blessed in that so many of our parishioners have volunteered their time and energy to serve in our parish ministry groups. Our active groups are:

- St Vincent DePaul
- Social Services and Care of the Aged
- Children's Liturgy Group
- Legion of Mary (Senior and Intermediate)
- St Joseph's Young Priests Society
- PTAA
- Building and Maintenance Group
- Baptismal Preparation Teams
- Eucharistic Adoration Group
- Parish Pastoral Council
- Funeral Catering Group
- Social Committee
- Parent & Toddler Group
- Church Collectors
- Foreign National Support Group
- Third World Group
- Graveyard Committee
- Outdoor Environment Group
- Communications Group
- Finance Committee
- Ministers of the Word
- Parish Centre Committee
- Music Ministry
- Ministers of the Eucharist
- Church Environment Group
- Church Cleaning Teams
- Church Money Counting Team
- Parish Fund Raising Committee
- Hospitality Group
- Youth Prayer Group
- Altar Society

All our ministry groups are brought together at least once a year for prayer and reflection. At these meetings we sometimes invite a guest speaker to help us reflect on our ministry, and to offer encouragement and motivation. Part of these evenings is devoted to communicating parish initiatives and seeking the help and involvement of all in meeting parish goals. All are encouraged to be creative and to 'think outside the box'.

Our Ministers of the Word & Eucharist also come together as a group three times a year for prayer and reflection. Our parish has an active music ministry which ensures that music is provided for all liturgical events during the course of the year. The Filipino Community have recently taken responsibility for music at the 11.00 am Mass once a month, as have the newly formed youth music group. The children's choir provide music for the monthly children's Mass. The Diocesan Music Commission organises a music seminar each year and this year the venue was our parish and a large number of our choir members and musicians attended the seminar given by Ian Callanan. All music groups come together for the major liturgical occasions like Easter and Christmas.

Our annual liturgical celebrations include:

- A Novena for the Dead over nine nights at the beginning of November. A scroll listing the names of the parishioners who died during the year is placed in the sanctuary for the month of November. A scroll listing the names of parents, brothers and sisters of parishioners who died elsewhere is also placed in the sanctuary. On the last night of the novena, family members carry a candle inscribed with the name of the deceased to the altar in memory of their loved one.
- For the Feast of St Brigid, we hold a prayer and cross-making service in the Parish Centre. This is very popular with young and old and prizes are awarded for the best cross made by a child. This is a difficult one to judge and every child is rewarded for some aspect of their effort.
- Each year, on New Year's Eve, we hold a service in the church. This is also very well attended and everyone retires to the Parish Centre afterwards for refreshments and festive punch.
- On the First Friday in Lent we hold our parish fast. We sign up to abstain from food from 8.00 am until after the evening Mass in solidarity with people around the world who are hungry every day of the year.
- In June, each year, we have a special afternoon Mass in the church for the sick and housebound. Refreshments are served afterwards.

Looking to the future, we pray that as a parish we will be able to renew and adapt and seek new ways of living the gospel in this part of Co Donegal.