

RASHARKIN CHURCH CENTENARY

Sunday's Joyous Event

INSPIRING RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES

Sunday was a memorable day in the ecclesiastical annals of Rasharkin when, to mark the centenary of the dedication of St. Mary's Catholic Church—dedicated on 20th September, 1846, by Most Rev. Dr. Denvir, Bishop of the Diocese—priests and people united in a religious celebration in honour of the completion of one hundred years' continued service in the sacred edifice which has held hallowed memories for succeeding generations.

Solemn High Mass was celebrated by Very Rev. J. M'Mullan, B.A., B.D. (President of St. Malachy's College, Belfast), who is a native of Rasharkin, and inspiring scenes of religious fervour were witnessed among the crowded congregation who had come that morning from Finvoy, The Vow, Ballymoney, Kilrea, Rasharkin and adjacent districts to take part in the ceremonies.

The special preacher was Very Rev. Father Columban, O.F.M.Cap., D.D., Ph.D., L.S. Script., Ard Mhuire, Cashelmore, County Donegal, another distinguished son of the parish of Rasharkin, which has given many priests and pastors to the service of the Church. Speaking in the precincts of St. Mary's, 'neath the shadow of storied Drumboican Hill, associated in tradition as the birth-place of Saint Olcan, Father Columban delivered an elevating sermon particularly appropriate to the occasion. He dwelt especially on the significance of the church as the dwelling-place of God and, recounting the history of the erection of the Rasharkin edifice, mentioned the selfless labours in that connection of Rev. Peter M'Mullan, whose name would ever be linked with that of Rasharkin and St. Mary's Catholic Church.

The Centenary ceremonies were tempered with regret among the Rasharkin parishioners that Most Rev. Dr. Mageean, Bishop of Down and Connor, was unable to attend owing to a prior engagement. His Lordship, in a message read by Rev. M. M'Laughlin, P.P., Rasharkin, conveyed his congratulations to the people. For Father M'Laughlin in particular Sunday's notable event, which coincided with Michaelmas Day—was a source of deep satisfaction, representing a unique religious achievement in the history of the parish which will long live in the memory of all clergy and laity, who participated in it. Since he came to Rasharkin several years ago, St. Mary's parish priest, who is a native of Killebo, County Down, and a grand-nephew of a former Rasharkin clergyman, has worthily followed in the footsteps of his predecessors, one of the marks of his zeal being the complete painting of the edifice.

In honour of the occasion the Gertrighey Flute Band paraded on Sunday morning in brilliant summer-like weather from Rasharkin Parochial Hall to St. Mary's Church which had been gaily decorated with streamers and bunting by the members of the local St. Vincent de Paul Society. The pleasing scheme of interior decoration was carried out by Miss M'Garry, P.E.T., Rasharkin.

SOLEMN HIGH MASS.

From a comparatively early hour in the forenoon large numbers assembled in the church for the Solemn High Mass, the deacon being Rev. C. Agnew, St. Malachy's College, Belfast, Rev. James M'Affee, S.M.A., sub-deacon, and Very Rev. J. Byrne, P.P., V.P., Larne, Master of Ceremonies. Rev. Father M'Laughlin, P.P., Rasharkin, presided. Suitable hymns were rendered in an excellent manner by the choir under Miss Margaret Down, whose sister, Miss Eileen Down, B.A., was organist. In addition, Gounod's immortal "Ave Maria" was pleasingly sung by Mr. Francis O'Brien, P.E.T., Aldergrove, a native of the parish, and "Panis Angelicus" similarly rendered in an inspiring manner by a visiting vocalist of wide repute.

INSPIRING SERMON.

In the course of his address, Rev. Father Columban said that one hundred years ago St. Mary's Church became a holy place set apart solely for Divine Worship. It was fitting, indeed, that this occasion should be honoured with special celebrations and religious rejoicings, and priests and people were assembled there that day to give visible expression of their sincere gratitude to God, before His own altar, for all the priceless treasures of the True Faith. A church was the House of God and His real dwelling-place, and how many thousand times had Holy Mass been offered up in hallowed St. Mary's for the past one hundred years as, with their priests, successive congregations united with Jesus Himself, their Chief Priest and the Hope of common humanity.

This was surely the House of God, but it was also the Gate of Heaven, for it was there that they could find the entrance to everlasting peace and eternal glory. Amidst the toils and trials of daily routine in their work-a-day lives they sometimes found it difficult to concentrate on God, but the open door of their church invited as to a haven of Heavenly peace where they could visit Him who was all-powerful and ever ready to hear and help them. Several people were raised by Christ in Palestine from death to life, but who could number the countless souls so resurrected during the past hundred years in that church. Yes, everything in the church brought them irresistibly to God. That parish church of theirs was the scene of their most hallowed memories and, within those sacred walls, they found recollections which were the holiest and purest in their lives.

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.

Proceeding, the speaker dealt with the history of St. Mary's, and said that though Ireland had won emancipation some 17 years before the church was opened a century ago under Rev. Father M'Mullan, that was as yet too short a time for their Catholic people to recover from the dark days of persecution. The church in which they were met that day replaced an old one which had been nothing of architectural beauty. It was commenced in 1788 by Father Alfred Brennan then parish priest of the immense parish of Rasharkin which, much larger than it was today, included parts of Finvoy, Ballymoney, Dunloy and perhaps other districts as well. The little church of that time was called the "Bee Hive" and was not finally completed until about 1796, when Father M'Mullan became parish priest. In the adjacent graveyard the mortal remains of Father Brennan were laid, and on his tombstone was inscribed that marvellous inscription—"In God is All." Realising the truth of that, Father Brennan and his persecuted people at that time laboured hard to build the "Bee Hive" in whose roofless walls Father M'Mullan celebrated Mass. Prior to that there had been no church, and God could only be worshipped on the crude Mass Rocks, many of which were still to-day pointed out in their parish and also in the Vow. Rev. Father M'Mullan received most of his ecclesiastical training in Seville.

Other great pastors associated with Rasharkin included Rev. W. M'Cartan and Rev. H. Green and, of the remainder, some were happily present that day, but the older ones had gone to their eternal reward. It was fitting, therefore, that on this great occasion they should think of the past generation who had made their church possible.

Concluding, Father Columban congratulated the priests and people of the parish on that great day's celebrations.

The ceremonies concluded with Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament given by Very Rev. Father M'Mullan.

Addressing the congregation afterwards, Father M'Laughlin also conveyed his congratulations and read the letter from Most Rev. Dr. Mageean tendering felicitations to priests and people on the centenary event. Father M'Laughlin voiced Rasharkin's regret that their Bishop could not be with them, but said they could be sure his Lordship was with them in spirit.