

ST FLANNAN'S OF ZILLMERE: ONE MODEL OF THE EMERGING CHURCH

6 April 2004

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St Flannan's Parish, Zillmere, was founded in 1954, a short time before Vatican II, and was influenced as much as I was by the great council. We were both on a steep learning curve and this, no doubt, influenced my writing.

The Second Vatican Council 1962 -1965 was a great watershed in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Its effects on the parish of St Flannan's were profound and transformed the life of the parish from a traditional Latin rite run by a traditional Irish priest to an Australian rite guided by home grown priests. The change was stark, swift, frustrating, exciting; bewildering to some but refreshing to others. It was time for a change; in fact the change was long overdue.

The story of the People of St Flannan's begins on Sunday 12 April 1953 when the first Mass was 'said' by Fr Michael Brendan Greene,¹ in an old farmhouse, in the new parish. From the start it was an immigrant parish, a 'league of nations', as Fr Greene called it. Native Australians made up the majority with large groups of Irish, Italian and other New Australians who were largely 'Displaced Persons' from the aftermath of World War II in Europe.

Set in a semi-rural environment there were a lot of small farms which were being subdivided for housing. Being on the edge of the city, the land was cheap and the Housing Commission was building streets of new houses. The parishioners were ordinary working people raising families, so there were plenty of children to fill the soon to be built school.

¹See Postscript to this Paper (Page 166)

Australia was going through a period of full employment and recovery after World War II and people were looking forward to a, hopefully, long period of stability and prosperity. Times were good, the Korean War was over and World War III had been avoided. The consumer revolution was just beginning and families were getting such things as refrigerators, radios, gas stoves, some even had a telephone, and a few had cars. Most people depended on bicycles and public transport.

As for the Catholic Church it went on much the same as it had for centuries. Latin was the official language of the Mass, the Archbishop had been in office since 1917, many of the priests were Irish and most parishes had a primary school staffed by nuns.

Parishioners went to monthly Confession on Saturdays and monthly Communion on Sundays, often in a Sodality, the church was full of children, evening devotions were held on Sundays, the many said the Rosary at Mass, St Patrick's Day was celebrated with a concert, women wore hats in church, everybody wore their Sunday best to Mass.

Everybody knew how the parish ran because as children they had been brought up in a similar parish. The new arrivals from overseas soon adapted to the Australian ways and people settled into the familiar routines.

Fr Greene had been ordained in 1938 in Ireland and went to Rockhampton Diocese before coming to Ipswich in 1952. He was a plain spoken man who had no illusions about himself, the 'what you see is what you get' type. He had been trained to run a parish and that was what he set out to do. He had a problem; he was probably an alcoholic but that didn't stop him. Together with the enthusiastic support of the local people he set out to build a parish based in a paddock with a very old house. And they succeeded.

However, first they had to build a church that could double as a school.

They bought ex-wartime American army buildings at Holland Park, demolished them, transported them to Zillmere and re-erected them using voluntary labour. A builder was hired to put the roof on and the place was filled for Mass on Sundays and school on week days. The pews, secondhand from somewhere, were used by the children as desks while they sat on the kneelers.

The teachers were Holy Spirit Sisters from, what was then Aspley, now Carseldine. The Sisters wanted a school to train teachers for the missions in New Guinea and other places while Michael Green wanted the Sisters to teach the children. It worked well and four Sisters, two of them from the USA, started on 29 March 1954. After the opening Mass they promptly shut the school as the toilets were not finished but they started again the next day with 132 children and the school is still going 50 years later.

When the Sisters moved into the old house on the property, Fr Greene moved out and into what was the old harness and feed shed. This was his 'chicken house' and he stayed in it till the presbytery was built. Later the old shed served as a small classroom, for small children.

The parishioners performed miracles working on the buildings; digging the septic pit, scrounging materials, raising money, borrowing money, mixing concrete, painting, etc, etc. They were ordinary workers in factories, offices and homes with a few professional builders supervising and directing. On 28 November 1954 the blessing and opening of the Church, Hall and Presbytery took place. All this in under two years; it takes one's breath away.

Of course Fr Greene always intended to build a 'proper' church of brick later! Maybe he was joking - maybe. Meanwhile the Sisters lived in the old homestead and even taught classes on the verandas, underneath the building and out under the huge Camphor Laurels.

School continued in the parish hall until October 1958 when the first three classrooms of the school were opened and blessed; again voluntary labour did the building. Enrolment reached 270 children.

The year of 1964 was one when the pace of change increased:

- On 19 April the new brick convent was blessed and opened, the Sisters at last had decent accommodation – only took 10 years.
- In June/July English replaced Latin in the Mass and the pre-communion fast was shortened to one hour.
- On 13 August, Fr Michael Green was killed in a motor accident on Gympie Road. The parish was in shock.

On 6 September, Fr Martin Doyle was appointed the new Parish Priest for St Flannan's and the pace of change continued. In January 1977 Fr Brian Heenan followed to be succeeded in January 1991 by Fr Ashley Warbrooke. Fr John Kilinko, the present pastor was appointed in September 1996.

It is noteworthy that Fr Kilinko is the first parish priest to be completely on his own; no assistant priest, no sisters and no pastoral worker; however there are two part time secretaries making up 80% of a full time one.

All of these priests, helped by younger assistant priests, Sisters and seminarians, continued the seemingly endless changes; they treated the laity as co-workers, encouraging them, inspiring them and providing a continuous source of new ideas. The laity proved willing workers.

Over the last 50 years one thing that clearly emerged is the constant change, spiritually and physically, in our Church and Parish. Changes such as:

- the Church as the People of God, rather than the command hierarchy of past centuries;
- the primacy of conscience;
- the development of doctrine;
- human rights and especially women's rights;
- Mass which was said, and heard, to the dialogue Eucharist, which is celebrated and prayed together;
- Latin to English;
- the Tridentine Mass to the new order;
- many priests to one or none, and nuns from many to none;
- the laity doing what 'Father says' to working with Father and taking responsibility;
- the development of the 'sensus fidei' where the assent of all the People of God is needed for the reception of matters of faith or morals – with the spectacular rejection of parts of *humanae vitae*;
- Confession to Reconciliation. the rise and fall of the Third Rite;
- the fall in the size of families and the disappearance of most of the youth and many of the older ones;
- the growth of Parish Councils and Finance Councils;
- the informal but deeply reverential nature of the Eucharist;
- the emergence of the Catholic school as a 'parallel church';
- etc. etc. - but through it all we had begun to see who Jesus the Christ was and is – that is one of the greatest changes of all.

Many of the changes listed above are the easy ones, the stroke of a pen type; the Pope signs on the dotted line and we all change because for centuries that is what we were trained to do.

Outsiders marvelled at the rapid changes that such a big multi-national organisation made in a few decades. But changes, such as the first three, represent changes of behaviour and belief. They take more time and provide plenty of room for debate, and that is another thing with which the modern Church has to come to terms.

Another huge change took place with the school which grew and grew. Approximately 16 new brick classrooms and a library were added between 1967 and 1978. Over the years, Government funding for schools increased from practically nothing to very substantial amounts. Without this funding the schools could not function. Workplace Health & Safety laws, discrimination legislation, child protection laws, educational curriculum, teaching methods and school technology change continuously.

The table on the following page gives some idea of the changes that are still taking place in the school.

1. The enrolments at the School follow the usual demographic cycle – rising as the young population of the parish rose and falling as the population aged.
2. In 1954 the teachers were all Sisters; by 1958 there were 8 Sisters teaching and with 3 others in auxiliary positions; by 1964 the first lay teacher appears; by 1978 there were 20 lay teachers and 1 Sister.
3. 1980 was the peak enrolment.
4. In 2002 the opening of the Pre School, as well as a small number of pupils from the Nudgee International School and children from newly arrived Sudanese families, have helped to stabilize the enrolments for the moment.

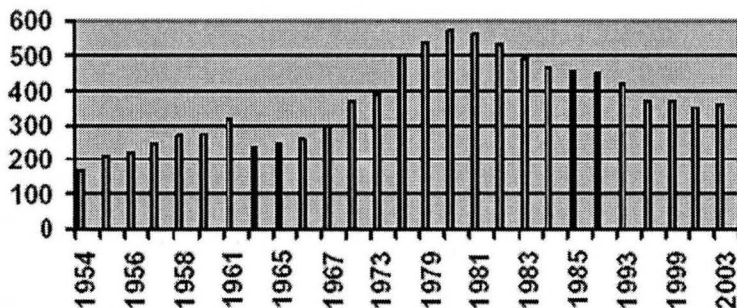
Table Showing Changes in the School

| DATE | PRESENT | | | ENROLLED | | | F/T TEAC |
|--|---------|-----|-------|----------|----|-------|-------------|
| | B | G | Total | B | G | Total | |
| 1954 3/11 School opened with Grs1-4 | 63 | 82 | 145 | 71 | 96 | 167 | 4 |
| 1958 21/11 Grades 1-8 11 Sisters : 8 Teaching 1 music 2 in the house | 99 | 156 | 255 | | | 269 | 8 |
| 1964 7/4 Grs 1-7 , Year 8 t'ferred to Sec'dary 5 Sisters-1 Lay | 85 | 134 | 219 | - | - | 233 | 6 |
| 1969 11/9 Grades 1-7 5 Sisters-3 Lay | 176 | 190 | 366 | - | - | 368 | 8 |
| 1978 1 Sister-20 Lay <i>Church Bulletin</i> 5/8/79 | - | - | - | - | - | 535 | 21 |
| 1980 - Approx 21 classes (Ken Hall Principal) | | | | | | 570 | |
| 1990 | | | | | | 450 | |
| 2003 Pre School Opened 29/4/02 | | | | | | C260 | |

School Enrolment Decline

The graph on the following page, taken from the School Enrolment file, clearly shows the rise and decline of school enrolments. Note the following:

Enrolments at St Flannan's 1954 - 2003

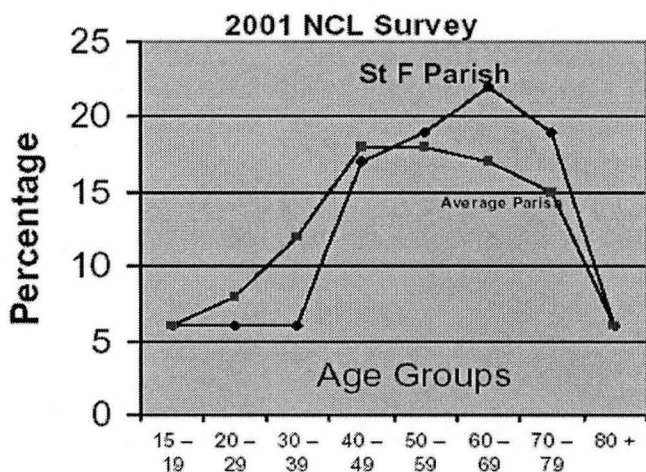


- The sudden drop in enrolments after 1961 was caused by the state-wide transference of Grade 8 to the Secondary school and as such was a 'one off' event;
- New schools opening at Geebung, Aspley and Albany Creek reduced new enrolments;
- The figures for 2002/3 are boosted by:
 - Approximately 40 pupils attending the new Preschool which opened in June 2002;
 - Eleven Sudanese pupils from newly arrived families attending the school and the Brisbane Catholic Education Office is providing a special language teacher for 10 hours per week to help them;
 - Three overseas pupils from Nudgee International School.

The ageing of the parish is reflected in the enrolment figures for the school. While the Zillmere and surrounding areas were growing with new, young families moving in because of cheap land, the enrolments grew. As the area became more settled and the existing families aged, the supply of children began to decline. This is the normal demographic cycle effect and now shows up clearly in the decline in enrolments and the preponderance of over-50s in the Mass attendances. The once young parents are now grandparents and their children have moved on.

Present Parish Profile at St Flannan's

Note that the National Church Life Survey graph below shows only the active parishioners, i.e. those who regularly attend Mass at St Flannan's.



St Flannan's parish is shown on the 'diamonds line'. The average parish is shown on the 'squares line'. The graph clearly shows the age structure of the active parishioners compared with similar parishioners in the average parish in the survey. The 'diamond line' charts the percentage size of each age group in the parish. The 'square line' charts the percentage of each age group in the average parish of the whole survey.

St Flannan's shows:

- A definite deficit of young people aged between 15 and 39, compared to average parish;
- A clear surplus of people aged from 50 and over, compared to the average parish;
- These are clear signs of an aging parish; many of the young people are not active.

This is further shown in the following figures on our Children's attendance at church (15 years and older):

| Still Attend | Attend Another Catholic Church | Do Not Attend Any Church |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 37% (43% Australian Average) | 7% | 55% |

Unless this trend is reversed the parish is in danger of being unable to finance its existence.

If the young people are not attending, then their children probably will not attend either, and so the situation worsens.

Mass Attendance

The following table and 2 graphs look at the Mass Participation Rate for St Flannan's and the Archdiocese. Both show a decline in the 1990s.

The Table 1 shows the Mass count taken at the above dates for Zillmere and the Archdiocese.

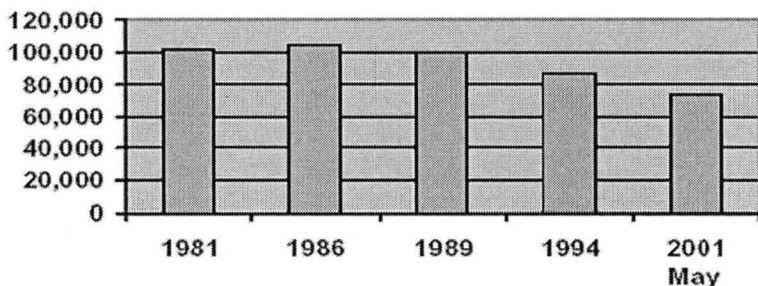
The % Rate is the proportion of Catholics regularly attending Mass.

Table 1: The Mass Participation Rate

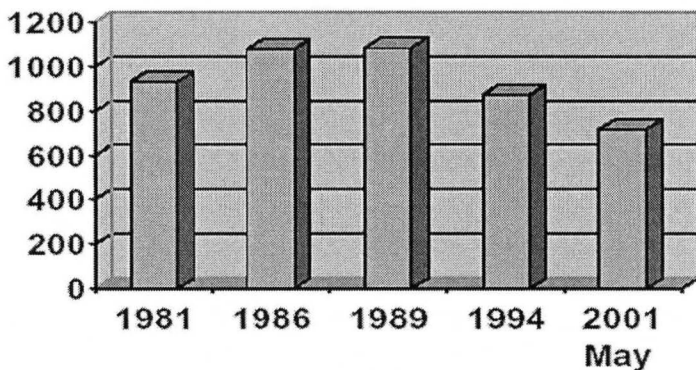
| YEAR | ZILLMERE | ARCHDIOCESE | AUSTRALIA |
|-------------|----------|-------------|-----------|
| 1981 | 932 | 101 702 | |
| 1986 | 1 078 | 103 874 | |
| 1989 | 1 083 | 99 633 | |
| 1994 | 870 | 86 924 | |
| 2001 May | 717 | 73 927 | |
| 2001 % Rate | 15% | 13.3% | 15.9% |

Source: ACBC data released April 2002

Mass Attendance St Flannan's



Mass Attendance St Flannan's



At the present time, there is no obvious explanation for the sudden decline in Mass attendance from 1989 on. The Catholic population of both the Archdiocese and St Flannan's has risen during the above time period.

St Flannan's is the story of what was a vibrant, growing, young parish which has now plateaued. The enthusiasm with which people took up the challenges of over 38 Parish organisations seems to have declined somewhat. There are still many willing workers but they are growing old and not being replaced by young ones. We have missed something somewhere. The young people are largely missing – to contact them is one of the great challenges that the Church faces.

However, one thing is clear - in a changing world the Church and Parish must be flexible, clinging to what is essential and throwing aside whatever no longer serves our mission to tell the good news of Jesus. As John XXIII, the beloved Angelo Roncalli, said 'We are not on earth to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life.' Just how far ahead his thinking was in those days is shown from the following remarks by Fr Peter Kerwick of Townsville who wrote in *The Catholic Leader* 5/12/1982:

When the bishops went off to Rome, many asked what they could possibly find to talk about. Everything seemed so cut and dried – so black and white. We were so sure of ourselves and so confident that everything was just as it should be. Those who were interested in the liturgy and knew something of the liturgical movement had their hopes – some even dared to hope that the Council would permit the use of modern languages in the Mass.

Further on Fr Kerwick contrasted the pre and post Vatican II church:

To many people, the Church meant bishops and clergy. Lay folk in Australia were always more or less involved in Church affairs, but most thought of themselves as 'helping Father'. Few were conscious that they were Apostles in their own right – that they were the 'People of God' and living, loving members of the family.

He wrote this in 1982, and in 2004, we can still say the changes have only just begun - again.

We are a renewing church – we are gradually feeling our way – we can no longer rely on Rome to guide us because we are a long way, culturally, from Rome – our way is to question and, if the answers do not satisfy or make sense, then we find our own.

Papa Angelo's guide:

in essentials – unity,
in non essentials – freedom,
in all things – charity.

Where do we go from here?

The previous 50 years have seen the rise and decline in the numbers of active parishioners. What of the next 50 years? Will the decline continue and the parish disappear, or merge with one or other of the surrounding parishes, or evolve into some altogether new form? What of evangelisation?

Over the last 2000 years the Church has transformed European society several times. Each transformation was partly driven, or led, by such groups as Martyrs, Councils of Bishops, Benedictine Monasteries, The Papacy, Religious Orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans in the Medieval period, the Jesuits and Redemptorists in the Counter Reformation period, the teaching orders in the Industrial Revolution period. Today all of these groups are still operating, and for the first time, the ordinary laity is becoming active in a leadership role. And the laity is literate, interested and questioning.

For the last 40 years the priests of Zillmere have been working to teach and encourage the laity to take up their responsibility for the parish and the wider community. The timeless work continues on into the 21 Century. A new church is emerging, an immigrant church, a multi-cultural church based on Jesus and his model of service, on toleration and equanimity. A practical Church, which can dialogue within itself and with the modern world.

Postscript
to
St Flannan's of Zillmere

Mr Rod Manning, (a retired Editor of *The Daily Mercury*, Mackay) who was a visitor at the meeting on 6 April 2004 when Mr O'Shea presented his paper, said he knew Fr Greene well. The Manning's wedding reception in April, 1964 had been chaired by Father Greene who, with a fellow Irish priest, Fr E.H. Fraher (then parish priest of Marian, near Mackay) had attended their nuptial Mass in Brisbane.

Mr Manning said that Archbishop Duhig had given Fr Greene some land; probably it had been a poultry run, at North Zillmere and had asked him to establish a parish. The priest had tackled the project with great vigour; organising working bees and co-opting community help from many sources.

Fr Greene had chosen the name St Flannan's for the parish because of its association with his native County Clare. He had been ordained after studies at the great Dublin missionary college, All Hallows. Occasionally he had spoken of spending time in France and certainly spoke some French and Gaelic.

Fr Greene had taken great pleasure in recalling Ireland's missionary role. He studied the failure of the Reformation in Ireland and strongly supported Ireland's independence from Britain. A print of a painting of St Brigid, the *Mary of the Gael* had hung in his study. Fr Greene could speak very quickly and had a great sense of humour. He had served in the Rockhampton diocese before moving to Brisbane.