

## **A Short Account of St Cecilia's Parish Hamilton on the Occasion of Its Centenary**

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On Palm (Passion) Sunday, April 13<sup>th</sup> 2014, St Cecilia's Parish Hamilton celebrated its centenary; the church had been blessed and opened by James Duhig DD, the then coadjutor to Archbishop Robert Dunne, the first Archbishop of Brisbane; the actual date was April 5<sup>th</sup>, Palm Sunday 1914. The Centenary Mass was celebrated by the current Archbishop, Mark Coleridge, with a number of concelebrants including the then parish administrator, Bishop-elect Michael McCarthy, former parish priests, members of the Society of the Divine Word who cared for the parish for almost twenty years (1994–2013) and priests associated with the parish. They were assisted by a deacon from Nigeria. Over two hundred people including many former parishioners were present at the Mass and at the afternoon tea which followed in the former primary school—now used as a parish hall.

A papal blessing, now framed and placed in the church, was received from Pope Francis. A commemoration booklet entitled *A Fine Centenary: St Cecilia's Church Hamilton Celebrating 100 Years* collating the reminiscences of many parishioners and produced by a family in the parish, was distributed, and

a prayer card compiled by the former parishioner, Fr Morgan Batt, was made available.

Hamilton parish is on the inner north-eastern part of the city. Commencing near Breakfast Creek, it follows the Brisbane River to its mouth; passing through the hilly and the flat terrain of the area meeting the parishes of Bowen Hills, Clayfield and Hendra. It is actually quite a diverse parish; with high class residential areas around Hamilton Heights and less prestigious streets around the actual church property on the corners of Hants, College and Windsor Streets. Bordering Brisbane Airport, it has a large industrial area and includes the small locality of Pinkenba.

The area occupied by the Hamilton parish is important in the gradual development of the northern part of the city. European settlement began in Brisbane with the arrival of convicts, the year after John Oxley landed near Breakfast Creek (1823). What is now known as Kingsford Smith Drive (formerly called Hamilton Road) was partly constructed by convicts and, during that era, Eagle Farm was the site of the Female Convict Factory. The Hamilton area grew gradually after Brisbane was opened to free settlement (1842), but it appears that the Great Flood of 1893 spurred its development. A railway line which had originally stopped at Ascot was extended beyond the old Breakfast Creek Bridge (now replaced) to reach the former Doomben terminus at the junction of Lancaster and Nudgee Roads in 1939. We should note that three race courses, Albion Park, Eagle Farm and Doomben are in, or close to the parish. Brisbane Airport started as a field for an aero club in the mid-1920s.

The Pinkenba area was originally agricultural land. Wharves from Racecourse Road Hamilton to Pinkenba were constructed and alongside them there was an industrial area which

contained an oil refinery on Bulwer Island and, for a time, a cotton ginnery. After World War II this area reached the eastern side of St Cecilia's church at College Street.

This background is important to an understanding of how Hamilton parish developed, and throws light on its present condition. Archbishop Duhig in the company of Mr Grice, the grandfather of the fifth parish priest, Fr Peter Grice (1978–85), bought the property which, in 1913, was approximately at the centre of the residential and agricultural area. However, because of demographic changes, this property—which was enlarged by the purchase in the 1920s of the current presbytery—is now on the fringe of the residential area. In a locality which is close to the city and at least four neighbouring parishes, this situation affects the place where people choose to attend Sunday (and weekday) Masses. Furthermore, the inclusion in 1984 of part of the former parish of St Christopher's Breakfast Creek, has added an area that is quite removed from St Cecilia's property.

Construction of the new church of St Cecilia commenced in December 1913; and took almost four months. It is a wooden church with a belfry adjoining—the bell can still be rung—and is unique to the inner city area. It has been extended twice; the major extension being the addition of the sanctuary and two sacristies in the 1920s. Two confessionals (one now used as a Marian Shrine from 1980) were added by the third parish priest, Fr Denis O'Rourke, in 1956. In the late 1960s extensive modifications were made to the front entrance and to the sanctuary appointments following the Vatican II revision of the liturgy. It appears that St Cecilia's was one of the first parish churches in the archdiocese to be renovated to suit the revised liturgy. It was completed by Easter 1968.

Why was the church dedicated to St Cecilia? The folklore of the parish suggests that the first pastor, Fr John Gowan, asked

the people about a parish patron. One parishioner suggested St Cecilia because it was her mother's name. It is interesting to note that the descendants of some of the original families of 1913–14 still live in the parish. A former parishioner now deceased, Mrs May Macdonald, recounted how she and other ladies scrubbed the inside of the church prior to its opening and blessing. Mrs Macdonald and her late husband Leonard were foundation parishioners. Some of the family regularly attend Mass here. The iron gates were built in the 1990s as a memorial to Leonard and May.

There are four buildings on the church site. We have already noted the addition of the presbytery; this is the third one. The second was destroyed by fire on Assumption Day, 1923. It was located on the corner of Windsor and Hants Streets opposite the present hall. The destruction of this building precipitated the serious decline in health and early death of the first parish priest, the Irish born Fr John Gowan (1914 – 20<sup>th</sup> December 1923). The first presbytery opened by Archbishop Duhig in August 1914 was the large house constructed, about 1880, behind the church. The Sisters of Mercy staffed a primary school in the parish from 1917 and in 1918, this house which was extended, became their convent. The parish school which in late years was administered by the Brisbane Catholic Education Office closed in 1981 because of a decline in enrolments. The building was used by the Deanery as a refuge for emergency accommodation and, in 1995, it was renovated to become the parish hall. (A demountable building known as the Activity Centre was constructed in 1977 and removed to Geebung parish in 1993.)

It may be well to note here the presence of various religious and others involved in the parish. In the 1980s, the convent served as the novitiate and pre-novitiate of the Sisters of Marcy who

remained at Hamilton until January 1990. Three other religious congregations/orders have made a contribution to the parish.

In the 1930s the Sisters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (OLSH) conducted a primary boarding school in College Street (opposite the church). During World War II they left this site and it became for over five years the first locale for Villanova College—a boys' school now at Coorparoo (from 1954), staffed by the Hermits (Brothers) of the Order of St Augustine (OSA).

The Discalced Carmelites (OCD) from Gregory Terrace regularly celebrated the 9am Sunday Mass or an earlier one from 1960–1984. In the 1950s priests from Banyo Seminary, including Mgr. C Roberts and Fr W McGoldrick, celebrated the 9am Sunday Mass each week and in 1958/59 the late Fr Guildford Lyons, whilst locum at Hamilton, conducted the Diocesan Appeal to build St Mary's Wing of the Pius XII Seminary.

It may well be appropriate to make an overall survey of the history of the parish in its first century. The title of the centenary memoir, *A Fine Century*, captures well an important aspect of the parish: that a major reason why it still operates—despite a sharp decline in Sunday attendance which became noticeable from the 1980s—is the resolute dedication of a small group of volunteers. Each year thousands of hours are done by them to keep the parish operating; without them its future is at best questionable.

We can divide the parish's history into two basic parts: the Irish Section (1914–1975) and from there on, noting that from 1986–93 the parish was merged with Clayfield and served from there, though Fr Owen Oxenham lived in the presbytery and, when his health allowed, officiated in the church from March 1987 to his death in November 1991. The 1960s saw great social changes in society and in the Church, following Vatican II,

1962–65. Dr Thomas Boland who supplied at Hamilton in the 1990s likened this Council to a 'major seismological event' and nearly fifty years later we are still experiencing the aftershocks.

The Irish period of 61 years is characterised by the personalities of the three parish priests concerned: Fr John Gowan, generous to the parish, the long-serving Fr Michael Stapleton who is still spoken of with reserve by older parishioners, and the pious Fr Denis O'Rourke. The reticence of many of the parishioners can be traced to attitudes expressed by these priests—even though Fr O'Rourke did try to implant Vatican II directions both pastorally in regard to a parish council and liturgically.

The period after Fr O'Rourke's tenure (1975 onwards) has seen nine other priests caring for the parish, including a number of Divine Word Missionaries who commenced to live in the disused convent from October 1990–c2009. They came from Australian, Vietnamese, Indonesian and Philippine backgrounds. Overall, this has been a period of decline; a major difficulty being that, in keeping with many other inner city parishes in Australia, we have not been able to attract on a regular basis, new and younger parishioners. We have few young adults or young families.

As St Cecilia's commences its second century this is the challenge facing it: to serve those who already attend and to attract and invite others to join them.