

St Mary's Church, Irvine

Rebirth of the Parish

The Rebirth of St. Mary's Parish

The rebirth of St. Mary's Parish, Irvine, can be traced beyond 1875 to 1862 and even, indeed, beyond that. Mass was said every two months in Irvine, probably in the King's Arms Hotel since 1822 when Father William Thompson was given charge of the Ayrshire mission. He lived in Ayr. From 1845 he was assisted by Father Thomas Wallace. He lived in Kilmarnock and he came to say Mass in Irvine on each fourth Sunday.

In 1853 he was succeeded by Father John McLachlan. In 1858-9 he bought a schoolroom and, according to the entry in the 1861 Directory, 'with a few alterations turned it into a neat and convenient little chapel' but when Father Keane arrived in Irvine in February, 1870 this was the building which horrified him so and led him to write so fully to Archbishop Eyre (see later). This schoolroom was known locally as the saltstores, which possibly explains all the chimneys Father Keane complained of. It was situated at the end of West Road at Bridgegate, where the British Linen Bank stood until it was demolished in 1973.

Mary, Patroness of Irvine

From acquisition of the saltstores Mass was possibly said in Irvine every Sunday. Like its medieval forerunner, which had been situated on the site of the Old Parish Church, the church was called St. Mary's, in memory of her who had been the patroness of the burgh of Irvine throughout the middle ages, and had been honoured in the yearly celebration of Marymass on 15th August, the feast of her Assumption and whose image even in 1875 was still engraven on the Seal of the Royal Burgh.

The rebirth of the parish can therefore be dated 1858-9 but it was in 1862 that Irvine received its own priest, Father William FitzGerald. Unfortunately this tremendous step forward does not seem to have given the satisfaction it should have done, for at the same time the administration of Ayrshire was reorganised and Irvine was attached to North Ayrshire, mainly evangelised from Paisley. Thus Irvine Catholics lost their connections with Ayr and Kilmarnock. Father FitzGerald was a curate in Dalry and lived there at first even when he was given charge of Irvine. In addition, Kilwinning was added to the parish of Irvine, to the deep disappointment of the Kilwinning Catholics who had themselves hoped to form an Independent parish. Father FitzGerald was only twenty-six and newly ordained when he was given charge of this very wide and difficult mission. It was this arrangement which Father Keane blamed for creating the sad state of affairs he found when he arrived in 1870:-

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and zealously, so much so that when he was unable to pay for a cab to Kilwinning he walked there on Sundays -three miles- returning here in time for Mass at 12 o'clock. 'What should be done in my humble opinion is to retrace our steps to 1862.'

In 1868 Father FitzGerald was replaced by Father Osmund Maguire, a distinguished Passionist. In 1869 he opened a school for fifty pupils, the first Catholic school in Irvine since the Reformation, but it did not last long and in general he experienced the same difficulties as Father FitzGerald. In 1870 he was moved to a Passionist monastery in England, and Father Thomas Keane arrived in Irvine. From 1859 he had been parish priest in Barrhead, where he is buried, and in 1861 he had opened a new church in Neilston. He had also built two new schools, at Nitshill and Neilston. Hence when he came to Irvine at the age of forty-four he was already an experienced parish priest.

Father Thomas Keane 1870-1879

Condition of Parish (1870)

Upon his arrival in February 1870 Father Keane wrote to Bishop Eyre about the condition of the parish of which he had just taken charge....

The chapel measures 36 x 23 feet and is altogether too small and most unsuitable for a Catholic place of worship. It has no cross but is well supplied with chimneys having so many as three, so that it is known among Protestants as the lum i.e. chimney kirk; it cannot be enlarged, if it were thought advisable to enlarge so small a building, as one gable forms the boundary, while the other gable stands only a few feet from some little houses; moreover, the ground so rapidly descends at this end, forming a little valley, that an addition would be most expensive. So great is the fall that under this end of the chapel there is a house of two apartments, the ceiling of which looks about 11 or 12 feet high.

This house is tenanted and sometimes the cries of the children from below ascend and are audible amidst the devotions and preaching above. The entrance is through a sidewall, the porch is only 4 x 6 1/2 feet, and therefore too small for the door-keeper who must in consequence stand in the doorway of the vestry. The vestry measures 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 feet, and cannot be enlarged as its sidewall forms the fence and the end wall reaches already to a window. Its size and position render a fireplace impossible, it's very cold, and the cold is increased by its being so near the entrance. How Confessions can be heard in it during Winter I do not know: probably they must be given up for a time.

Along the other side-wall of the chapel there are dungpits and privies belonging to the little houses already referred to emitting in the Summer especially a foul odour, which is sensibly felt by the congregation. Against this side-wall also blocking up the altar window there is a coach-house...Altogether it is a most inferior and unfitting house for Catholic worship. There is no schoolhouse.

The priest's residence is rented and is now about a furlong from the chapel to his great inconvenience. Less than one in five go to Mass. Only one hundred and thirty eight or one in seven and a half made the Paschal Communion within the prescribed time, although unusual facilities were afforded by my hearing Confessions once a week during Lent in Kilwinning and at the other stations where they had never before been heard. It may be supposed that the advent of a new pastor ought to have created some religious excitement, according to the old saying that a new broom sweeps clean...

There were no sodalities to foster and propagate devotion and I experience greatest difficulty in introducing them. As the effect of this I may mention that although this feast (All Saints) and its Indulgence were announced by a great flourish of trumpets by me and only two persons have gone to Holy Communion today and last Sunday. My house to house visits have been frequent and I am amazed how seldom promises to come to Mass and Confession are kept. This is most strange to me. I find about eighty apostates or quasi-apostates amongst the three hundred and fifty Catholics of Irvine Town....

There is deep discontent on account of the little progress the Mission has made. Opened eight years ago it has not advanced, rather it has retrograded... There were only three sets of vestments, two of them scarcely fit for use, and one alb, the chalice of tin, of which the plating is now worn away; the gas in the chapel was cut off by the Gas Co. as the price has not been paid for two years; and in the cottage there were only four pairs of blankets and two pairs of sheets..'

He later that year commented to the Bishop that the reason for the state of the Parish on his arrival..

'The plan advocated in 1862 was fundamentally defective and the working out of it has been a miserable failure partly because perhaps of the original defect. Father FitzGerald worked hard and zealously, so much so that when he was unable to pay for a cab to Kilwinning he walked there on Sundays –three miles- returning here in time for Mass at 12 o'clock.

His proposal to the Bishop was... *'What should be done in my humble opinion is to retrace our steps to 1862'* and.. *'Although I do not think that the condition of the mission is hopeless, yet I think it requires extraordinary efforts to save it.'*

Progress

Father Keane began those efforts immediately. He reckoned that in Irvine town there were three hundred and fifty Catholics, seventy in the village of Bartonholm, one hundred and twenty at Annicklodge, seventy at Overton, sixty at Doura, three hundred in Kilwinning and eighty at Fergushill. He opened Sunday schools for the children in the different areas and started a number of sodalities, including a branch of the St. Vincent de Paul Society for the relief of the poor because, he said, the Catholic poor in Irvine were 'The poorest of the poor'. He aimed at having a church-school and manse on Kilwinning Road. Although he did not achieve this aim, he did

succeed in buying St. Winin's Hall in Kilwinning in 1872. Kilwinning was detached from Irvine in 1878 at the restoration of the Scottish hierarchy but until then each Sunday Father Keane gave out Holy Communion in Irvine at 9am, said Mass in Kilwinning at 1015am, gave a sermon after Mass, returned to Irvine for Mass at 12 and again gave a sermon after Mass, and of course he was fasting.

Albert Hall

In January, 1873 he estimated that there were nine hundred Catholics in Irvine. A year later he still seems to have had no prospects of finding a new church and so he tried to make the saltstores look a bit more like a church by removing the offensive chimneys and erecting a stone cross. This sale of the Albert Hall in 1875 may therefore have come as a surprise. He collected as much as he could from his parishioners and raised £45-11-0. The cost was £481-9-10. The Albert Hall could seat only two hundred and eighty but it was better than the saltstores, and so Father Keane negotiated to buy it and the little house beside it. For this he borrowed £500 from his friend, Father Chisholm and he sold the saltstores for £455. On 26th September, 1875 he proudly opened the new St. Mary's and his own manse beside it. A new ciborium, still in use in 1975, commemorated the event.

On 26th September, 1875 the excited Catholics of Irvine bumped and jostled their way across the far-flung tracks from Perceton and Annicklodge, from Girdle Toll and Doura, from Overton and Bartonholm and through the cobbled streets of Fullarton and Irvine to crowd into their new church in West Road. It was a red-letter day in their lives and even more, perhaps, in the life of their parish priest, Father Thomas Keane, who in his five years in the parish had fought against overwhelming odds to bring spiritual vitality to his flock. The new church was not a new building, for his parishioners could not afford that. It was the Albert Hall, still in existence in 1975 and known as the Tivoli, the Ritz Theatre and, at present, The Irvine Meadow Social Club.

As Father Keane led his guest-speaker, the famous Jesuit preacher, Father T. Williams, first Rector of St. Aloysius', Glasgow to deliver the opening sermon, he could feel justly proud that at last he was able to give to God, on behalf of the parishioners of Irvine, a place of adoration that, if certainly not a palace, was considerably better than the previous chapel in which the people's prayers and his own sermons had mingled with the cries of the next door neighbour's children and had been uplifted by the stench from a nearby dung heap. Perhaps, as he listened to Father Williams' words of congratulations, Father Keane's thoughts recalled his horror when he had first come to Irvine in February, 1870 and had seen where his parishioners had to worship. Perhaps too his mind reverted to the statement he had soon afterwards made to his archbishop.

As the 1876 Directory said, '*By the purchase of the Albert Hall and adjoining house, the Catholics of Irvine have secured a much larger and more convenient place of worship than they formerly possessed*'. By 1879 the new church had been extended to seat three hundred and

twenty. A man of culture- he owned a personal library of five hundred books- Father Keane also started a lending library and reading room.

One cannot recall the celebrations of 1875 without also rejoicing over the progress of the parish since then. Father Henry Murphy succeeded Father Keane in 1879 and although he remained here only one year he immediately applied himself to trying to build a school, but in fact he did not succeed.

As Bernard Aspinall records in his contribution to "The See of Ninian"(ISBN 09522431 1 X),...

'Father Keane had believed about a third of his Irvine flock were virtually lapsed Catholics, 80 out of 250. That appalling state of affairs he rectified. He visited every house even miles from his home, won the respect of all denominations and greatly improved the chapel: he redecorated and added stations of the cross. Two years later he opened a parish library and reading room. Confraternities of Christian Doctrine, Rosary Society, Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the St. Vincent de Paul Society developed. Between 1866-67 and 1871-72, the number of Easter communicants increased from 250-592, conversions rose from three to twelve and the number of baptisms rose from 37 to 66. More revealingly the number of marriages of two Catholic partners rose from 1:7.4 to 1:1.2 weddings and the number of baptisms of children with both parents Catholic rose from 5 out of 37 to 54 of 66 couples. It may reflect Keane's outlook, a larger growing pool of potential Catholic partners and the aftermath of the First Vatican Council and a general sharpening of religious sentiments.'

The Church School

His successor , Father Ambrose Graham, continued his attempts. He was successful. He not only built a brand new school but made it in such a way that it was also a brand new church! As many of our senior parishioners remember from their schooldays, it was the building which is still our present church. The 1884 Directory contained the following description of its opening:

'A new Chapel-School was solemnly opened here on 10 June, 1883, the feast of St. Margaret. It is pleasantly situated in West Back Road, in a field acquired some time ago by the pastor of the congregation, in order to further the movement recently set on foot by the bishop of Galloway to provide adequately for the spiritual and educational wants of the Catholics of North-Ayrshire. The style of architecture is early English and the interior is partitioned off so that it can be utilised as a day school.

One portion is designed to serve as an infants' classroom, suited for seventy-six pupils, the other as a mixed school, accommodating two hundred and fifty. As a Church, the building was intended to seat four hundred, but by throwing in the classrooms the accommodation will be almost doubled. The seats are in the form of folding desks, and serve both as seats for the church and as writing desks for the children. Separate entrances are provided for the Church and school.

The presbytery is a substantially built two-storey house, connected with the vestry by a corridor. In a niche in the facade of the Church has been placed a well finished statuette of Our Lady, venerated in Catholic days as the special Patroness of the Church and Burgh of Irvine. Messrs. Ingram, Kilmarnock designed the buildings, of which the Marquess of Bute defrayed about half the entire cost.

The opening services, presided over by the Bishop were attended by large congregations. Father O'Reilly, SJ Glasgow, preached in the morning, and the Rev. Dr. Toner, Newcastle on Tyne, in the evening. The music was admirably rendered by the choir of St. Margaret's, Ayr. On the next day, 11th June, the school was opened in the presence of the Bishop, and 170 children were enrolled under the charge of two certificated teachers.'

Interior

This new building was 100 feet long and 34 feet across. There were two-side entrances, where the confessionals are now, that on the right being the entrance to the church and that on the left the entrance to the school. The east gable wall, where the entrance is now, had three oblong windows in it. The sanctuary at the west end was partitioned off by a curtain. In each section there was an open fireplace. The whole building was lit by gas, from triform jets along the side-walls, including the walls of the sanctuary. The school desks were placed lengthwise down the building during the week and on Fridays the older boys had to turn them round across the building so that they faced the sanctuary. Thus they became seats for Sunday morning. After Benediction on Sunday evening they were replaced ready for school on Monday.

The sanctuary was decorated with a large picture of the Crucifixion, which had previously hung behind the altar in the Albert Hall. Outside there were two playgrounds: the boy's between the church and West Road; and the girl's beside the church and behind the house towards the Low Green.

Exterior

The school received a grant from the government according to the number of pupils on the register who had the requisite number of attendances. This grant paid about half the expenses for the upkeep of the school. The parishioners had to pay the remainder. The erection of this new church-school did not solve all Father Graham's problems. The new building was remarkably cold and the stoves smoked abominably. It became difficult to find and retain teachers. During the next five years from the opening of the school to Father Graham's leaving for the diocese of Cleveland in Ohio, America on 20th August, 1888 there were at least five different headteachers and a staggering turnover of assistants. His successor, Father John Woods, arrived on 12th October, 1888 and experienced the same difficulties until 1891 when he engaged Miss Christina Cooney as headmistress. For the next eleven years the school enjoyed the stability and discipline necessary for education to take place and the Inspectors were eloquent in their praise.

In the meantime, in 1897, Father Frederick Letters had become parish priest. He stayed here until 1911. From 1902 he also, as the manager of the school, had the worry of trying to maintain a permanent staff and in addition the Inspectors were beginning to find fault with the buildings:- *'...the premises are not at all well adapted for school purposes. It would be a great advantage educationally if the managers could see their way to provide a more suitable building.'* (Inspectors' Report, August 1905). The managers could not any more than they could see a way to providing teachers. Between 1902 and 1906 there were five different headteachers and frequent changes amongst the assistants, and by 1905 the roll was one hundred and eighty.

Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny

In September, 1906 Father Letters invited the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny to take charge of the school. The first Head from 1906 to 1909 was Sister Aloysius. Sister Agnes took her place in 1909 and with the exception of one year in Stranraer in 1917 she remained in Irvine until illness forced her to retire in 1919. Her place was taken by Sister Anthony, until her resignation on 23rd March, 1921. Shortly afterwards the sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny left Irvine. They had lived in Bar-Loch, two houses away from the church in West Road and in particular their Superior, Mother Clemence had been well known and liked in the town. She spent much of her time taking soup to the sick. Finally she caught a fever herself and died. The parishioners collected for a baptismal font for the church as a memorial to her. Old parishioners also remember Sister Salvius, the cook, Sister Christina and Sister Aglaia whom, as children, they called 'Sister Gladeye'.

In 1911 Father Thomas Joyce became parish priest of St. Mary's. He was very active, renovating the Church, founding a branch of the Children of Mary and starting the Catholic Young Men's society, which successfully held the men of the parish together until the Great War broke out in 1914.

Canon Hogan

Father Joyce's successor was Canon Joseph Hogan. He arrived in Irvine on 9th May, 1918 and soon afterwards Father Dermott O'Reilly was appointed as St. Mary's first curate. In 1918 also the Scottish Education Act was passed. It stated that in future Catholic schools as others would be built and maintained by the state. The advantages were obvious: Catholics would be relieved of the burden of both paying the rates to build state schools, and finding the money to build, repair and supply their own schools, as well as paying the salaries of teachers, albeit with a small government grant. In future they would have a fair share of the rates. Schools which already existed could be handed over to the state and in future would be maintained, and many excellent schools were handed over, but as far as Irvine was concerned there was one grave problem: The school was also the church. Accordingly Canon Hogan looked around for land for a separate school and also for land and teachers for a secondary school so that Catholics could make use of the opportunities of higher education which were then being offered to them.

Passionist Sisters

Fortunately the Williamfield estate came onto the market at this time. Canon Hogan could not buy it, nor could the diocese, but while he was in Auchinleck Canon Hogan had worked with the Sisters of the Cross and Passion who had schools in Waterside, Birnieknowe and Ayr. On 29th September 1920, the feast of St. Michael, Canon Hogan went over to Birnieknowe and asked Mother Malachy, the Superior, to approach Reverend Mother General about the possibility of buying the Williamfield estate for the purpose of building and staffing two schools, a primary and a secondary. As a result, in October, 1920 the Congregation bought Williamfield. The convent opened officially on 5th April, 1921 and on the same day the Passionist Sisters began to teach in the primary school. Mother Malachy was the headmistress and Sister Alphonsus, Sister Mary Labre and Miss Mary T. Quinn, already on staff since 1918 (and on it until her retirement in 1945), were her assistants.

The secondary school, St. Michael's, opened in the convent on 7th November, 1921. Its first Principal was Sister Mechtilde Joseph. She remained Head until 1950 and continued to live in Irvine until her death in 1960. Her assistants were Sister Peter Mary, here until 1952, and Sister Frances, who taught in school until 1957 and continued to work in the parish from then until her death in 1971. At the same time several other Sisters joined the community to work in the parish. Father Keane's dreams of a school on Kilwinning Road had been realised in a way that far surpassed his expectations. In August, 1923, the new St. Michael's building was ready on the Williamfield estate and five years later, 1928, a new primary school was also built there. Sister Malachy continued to be its Head but when she retired in 1933 St. Mary's primary school became the junior department of St. Michael's. Sister Alphonsus however had special responsibility for the primary department until her death in 1940. In the meantime Sister Eugenius had come to Irvine in 1933 and from 1940 she had special care for the primary department until 1951, when she moved into the secondary. She remained there until her death in 1971. The Cross and Passion community, for fifty years comprising 15 to 20 sisters, made a substantial contribution to upgrading Catholic education and entrance to the professions.

Promoting the Cause for the Beatification/Canonisation of Mother Mary Prout, Foundress of the order.

You can join the movement to promote this cause by seeking favours in the name of Mary Prout using the prayer card below...

Elisabeth Prout was born in Shrewsbury(England) in 1820. Baptised in the Anglican Church, she became a Catholic in her early twenties. In 1851 she founded a religious community to care for the poor and abandoned, basing its rule and spirit on the teaching of St. Paul of the Cross, recognising that the Passion of Jesus is the great sign of God's love reaching out to those in pain. She died on the 11th January 1864 at Sutton, St. Helen's, Lancashire.

PRAYER

Oh God, source of all life, your servant Elisabeth Prout responded to your call by bringing together a new family to welcome the poor and the abandoned, and to keep alive the memory of your love for all your children, show to us in the Passion of Jesus your Son. Give us courage to follow her example of living faith and untiring love. Through her intercession, grant us the favour for which we pray. Amen.

To acknowledge favours received contact

The Vice-Postulator of the Cross and Passion, 14 Oxford Road, Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. WF134JT, England.

Changes to the Church Building

The removal of the primary school from the church in 1928 had meant that Canon Hogan could make a number of changes. He had a wide doorway made in the east gable and he built up the door on the south side. In its place he put a baptistery. He had a choir balcony constructed at the east end, complete with a pipe organ. For many years Sister Mary Labre was the parish organist. A new holy water font was donated as were a number of stained glass windows, made in Belgium, which were placed along the sidewalls. In 1933 three lancet windows were cut in the west gable above the altar, donated as a memorial to Mr McCormick. Like the previous picture-hanging, they depicted the Crucifixion, as they still do! A confessional replaced the north entrance. The open fireplaces were built up; a central heating system installed; and the gas mantles replaced by electric lights.

One of the first major events in the renovated church was the first Mass of Father George McCafferty, ordained in June, 1932. About the same time Mary Convill entered the Notre Dame Congregation and Kate Diamond entered the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. In 1937 Theresa Rowe, like her sister, Margaret who in 1923 had been St. Mary's first Religious since the Reformation, also entered the FCJ Society.

Canon Hogan died on 30th April, 1936 and was succeeded by Canon Martin Meagher. He was already old and in poor health and he died on 28th December 1937. He was buried beside Canon Hogan in Knadgerhill cemetery.

On 14th January, 1938 Father O'Reilly returned to St. Mary's as a parish priest. The Second World War broke out in September, 1939. From 1943 Polish troops were encamped on the Burgh Moor. Most of them were Catholics and they had their own Polish Mass celebrated by their own chaplains, Father Bruzka and Father Gajdzik, in St. Mary's. When they left Irvine they made a huge brass candelabra which they presented to the church. It was lit by electricity and hung from the ceiling about halfway down the church until 1963.

At the beginning of the war, in October, 1939, a fire had destroyed all St. Michael's School except the gymnasium. A replacement building was out of the question and so secondary pupils moved in to the primary department and the younger children moved into the dining hall and the gymnasium. They stayed in the dining hall until huts were erected in 1941-42 and in the gymnasium until 1965, when the secondary school moved to a new building in Kilwinning and St. Mary's primary school regained its premises, its title and its own head, its first male, Mr W.Bennett. Sister Pauline, Principal of the whole school since 1950, moved to Kilwinning as Head of the new St. Michael's.

In 1950 Canon John Nicholas Murphy became parish priest. He remained in Irvine until his death on 1st December, 1955. Father Vincent Walker took his place as parish priest. By 1955 there were 1,550 Catholics in Irvine. On 30th June, 1957 St. Mary's rejoiced in its second Ordination, this time in the church, when Thomas McCann, B.Sc. became a priest. In 1962 Father Lawrence Byrne entered the Passionist Congregation and a few years later went to Botswana, Africa as a missionary.

The Fire and its aftermath- 1963....

On 8th January, 1963 the Christmas crib caught fire and caused considerable damage to the west end of the church. Father Walker arranged with the Education Authorities for Sunday Masses to be said in the school dining hall and, as in days of yore, older boys spent part of Friday afternoon arranging the altar and chairs for use on Sunday. After Evening Mass the congregation replaced the chairs and tables for dining-room use for the rest of the week. Masses during the week, funerals and weddings were said in the convent chapel. In the parish a committee was set up to organise money-making activities to pay for the renovation of the church, and for the next few months the parish was a beehive of activity with every organisation from Ladies' Guild and Men's Society down to Our Lady's Cadettes making their own contribution.

At last the repairs were done, the renovations complete and the church opened again, although without the Polish candelabra and the pulpit. A new pulpit was erected. A new high altar of Creetown granite graced the renovated sanctuary and a baptismal font, also of Creetown granite, was put in a baptistery at the side of the porch. The rest of the porch was cut off by a glass partition. A new floor was laid throughout the church and new confessionals were made at each side. New Stations of the Cross were placed around the walls. A new electric organ was installed in the new choir loft. The tabernacle and two new carved wooden statues of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady were donated by the children of the parish in both the primary and secondary departments of St. Michael's. More than one person was heard to express the opinion that it had been the best fire there ever was!

In 1966 Father Walker moved to Prestwick and Father Thomas J. Murphy became parish priest of St. Mary's.

Effects of Vatican Council

In spite of the fact that the Second Vatican Council had ended only in 1965 its effects were already being felt, and all over the Diocese of Galloway, under the leadership of His Lordship < Bishop Joseph McGee, church interiors were being redesigned to promote the laity's more active participation in the liturgy. In St. Mary's the high altar was moved forward so that the priest could say Mass facing the people. To replace the tabernacle behind the high altar a new Blessed Sacrament altar, made of Creetown granite to match the high altar and the font, was constructed on the south side of the church beside the sanctuary, and the wall above it and across to the sacristy door was painted a deep rich blue to throw one's attention to the plain white of the sanctuary where the liturgy takes place. A new pulpit was placed at the north side of the church and the baptismal font was put in front of it.

From 1967-8 the car park was enlarged; extensive renovations were made in the 'Dyke' to make it a more suitable hall; and its basement was converted into Youth Club rooms.

Parish Council

The years since the Second Vatican Council have also seen changes in the organisation of parish life. To allow parishioners to participate more fully in organising parish activities a Parish Council has been established composed of representatives of various parish groups and also of elected candidates from the different wards of the town. Some of the societies were, of course, already in existence before Vatican II. The St. Vincent de Paul Society owes its origin in Irvine to Father Keane himself, and the Choir, Youth Group and Ladies' Guild are of long duration. The Ecumenical Group was started as an offshoot of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission in 1968 in direct response to the teachings of the Vatican Council. Other Groups however, the Entertainments Committee, the Ways and Means Committee are sub-committees of the Parish Council. Through it all the members of the various groups are in contact with each other and are able to work together, although in different spheres, for the good of the whole parish. The Parish Council invited the Irvine Town Council, which attended St. Mary's in 1970 and subsequently, on a Sunday following the traditional kirking in the Old Parish Church. In December, 1971 the Sisters of La Misericorde opened a convent in a council house at 53 Livingstone Terrace and played an active part in the life of the parish.

Irvine New Town

Irvine has also been developing as a New Town, so that St. Mary's Catholic population was then 3,000. Many of the new parishioners lived in Castlepark. From 3rd October, 1971 therefore, Redburn School was used as a Mass centre on Sundays. From 24th October however Castlepark school was found to be more convenient. Since such an arrangement was only temporary and a new church building fund was started. To try to raise money, garden fetes, bazaars and jumble sales were organised by the Parish Council with most generous help from a Sewing group meeting in Williamfield convent. Money was needed for St. Mary's too, as in 1972 a new floor

was put in the hall (the 'Dyke'), new curtains were hung and the walls were painted. In 1974 the presbytery was extended to provide additional callrooms and accommodation for the housekeeper was much improved. In 1973 a piece of land was purchased in Castlepark for the future church and in 1974 the construction of the chapel-house was started.

John Strawhorn, in his book, "The History of Irvine" (ISBN: 0 85976 140 1), records that...

'St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, under Father Thomas Murphy since 1966, was joined by St. Margaret's Oratory in Castlepark (1976) under Father Francis Moore, and a new parish of St. John Ogilvie Church at Bourtreehill. Each of these new congregations had over a thousand adherents of all ages, leaving St. Mary's with 2,200. The Sisters of the Cross and Passion, devoted to teaching and social work, moved in 1982 from Williamfield to Girdle Toll.'