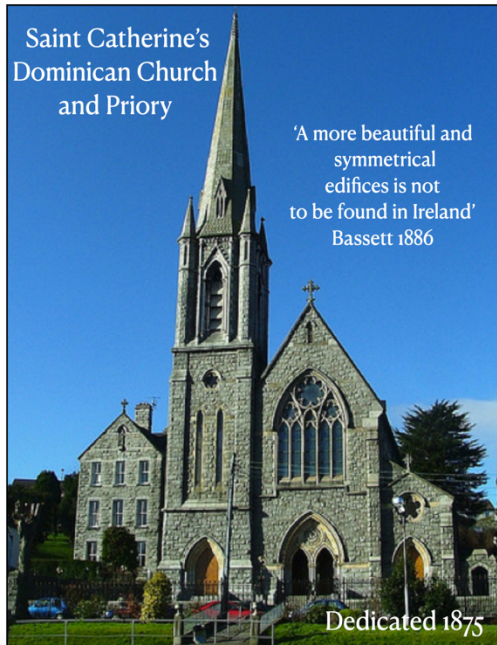


The Dominicans in Newry 1871 - 2021



Newry in the 1870s

In the 1870s, after the faltering fifties when trade on the inland canal had drastically declined, Newry was a town on the rise. In 1866, the *Dublin Builder* referred to Newry picking itself up 'in a manner few could have anticipated ten years ago'.¹ The value of property was 'magnified to an extent almost unprecedented in a country town'.² The reason for this prosperity was 'the erection of linen mills, in which numbers find employment at remunerative wages'³ to the west of the town, mainly in Ballybot. The railways, the Albert Basin, the 1850 Ship Canal and the linen mills were ensuring 'the survival of Newry in the age of stream'⁴. The *Woods Almanac* of 1868 commented upon a new spirit of optimism in the town, 'without any charge of egotism the People in Newry may take a large share of credit to

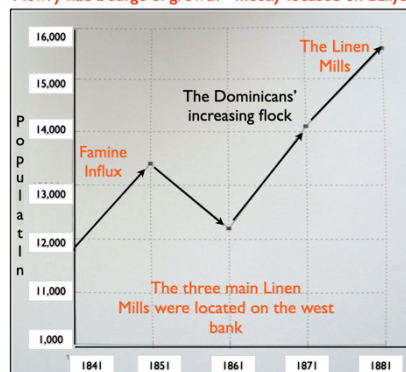
themselves for the general improvement occurring in the town'.⁵

Along and around Queen Street (Dominic Street) and Bridge Street small mill houses were being squeezed in beside the larger residences of mill owners and the better off. Other streets, like Thomas Street, were built to house mill workers, dockers and sailors. In Ballybot there was social mixing, with the many poor sharing the main streets with the few rich. Not so along the Downshire Road, to the east of the town, where in 1844 the Marquis of Downshire built a low density, garden suburb for the gentry, clergy and businesspeople.

Thus, in May 1870 when the congregation filed into Newry Cathedral to hear four Dominican Priests give a mission, and chant *Parce Domini*, the town was prospering and expanding from 12,000 in 1846 to over 15,000 in 1881. The Dominicans so impressed the congregation that a deputation asked Bishop

Leahy to invite the order to Newry. With a rising, mainly catholic population there was need and the bishop, a Dominican himself, trice lobbied, agreed. The deputation promised Dr. Leahy that the people of Newry would support the friars. They would not be a burden on

Newry Population 1841 - 1881
Newry had a surge of growth - mostly focused on Ballybot



¹ *Dublin Builder*, 1 Sept. 1866.

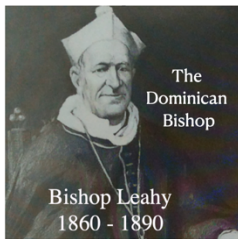
² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ E.R.R. Green, *Industrial Archaeology of Co. Down*, (Belfast: H.M.S.O. 1963), p.61.

⁵ T. Woods, *Newry Almanac 1868*, p5-14.

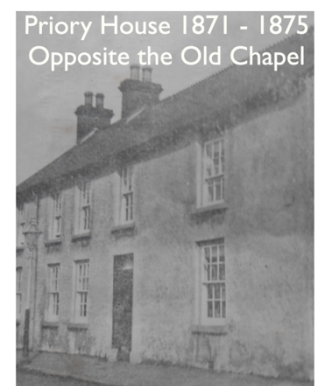
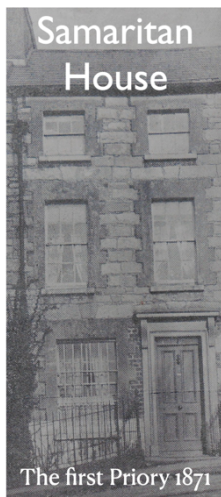
the parish. This was to be the case over the next 150 years. Not surprising since the Order of Preachers always depended for sustenance on 'the good will of its listeners'⁶.



The Dominicans Arrive

On the 7th March 1871 four Dominicans, three priests and a lay brother, arrived in Hyde Market (Samaritan House in St. Colman's Park) to a house prepared for their comfort by the administrator, Fr. O'Hagan. Mr. John Quinn, a hardware merchant from Margaret Street, provided good quality cutlery and some ladies provided clandestine charity.

'...but much more has passed unnoticed - the silent ministry of charity, which no monument could record, written by angel's hands in the Great Record, when the good ladies of Newry came in the dusk of the evening to the Fathers' residence in Hyde Market ... and in covered baskets, into which the prying eyes could not gaze, brought...the necessities of life for the Fathers whom they began to revere.'

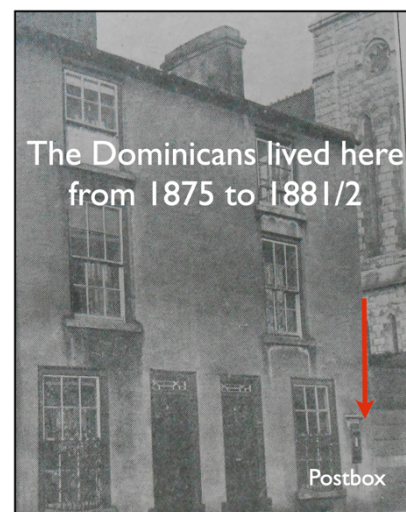


The Newry Dominicans were then and are now, the only ones in Ulster. When, after three months they moved to the Hermitage, Priory House on Upper Chapel Street, opposite the old chapel, the good ladies of Newry continued to support the friars. Further support came from Father C. H. Conlon preaching a charity sermon for repairs to the house and the chapel. The Dominicans were well liked and successful in their ministry. With the town continuing to expand the need for a new church and priory increased. But

where should they be built?

Some, concerned for the welfare of the Dominicans, suggested they should move to the 'fashionable locality to the north where their opinions might help to promote friendly relations between the aristocratic inhabitants of the quarter and the less aristocratic elements of the town'. The Downshire Road was deemed preferable to Ballybot, 'as only the poor live there.' This was not entirely true but because of industrialisation the West Ward was the most populous part of the town, with the greatest need for the pastoral care.

The Dominicans made plans to be with the poor. Again, not surprising since the mendicant orders historically sought to engage with the



⁶ A. Labatt, C. Appleyard, *Mendicant Orders in the Medieval World* (2004) website https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mend/hd_mend.htm (accessed 7 Feb. 2021).

world and its paupers; to preach and to teach. For example, Carlingford's Dominican Abbey (1304) was sited just outside the densely packed, medieval town. In contrast, the Cistercians (Charter 1157) had come to the banks of the Clanrye seeking self-sufficient solitude; seeking to pray and toil; seeking to turn their backs on the world.



Ballybot

In 1875, through the kindness of the above John Quinn, 'who owned a quarry field at Ballybot,' the Dominicans moved to numbers 35 and 37, Queen Street (The Lectio Centre in Dominic Street). The quarry face is to be seen outside the church, behind the high altar. The lease on the quarry field was 999 years at a rent of £20 per annum. The foundation stone was laid on 23rd May 1873.

The church's exterior is built from Newry Granite, 'with dressings of Dungannon stone'⁷ – a good example being the image of a dog, surrounded by the Rosary above the main door. Traditionally, the Dominicans were known as Domini Canes, the Dogs of Our Lord, because Dominic's mother, Joan, had a dream where a white dog leapt from her womb, 'holding a torch and setting the world on fire'⁸. It is said Saint Dominic received the Rosary from Our Lady. Alas, the Dungannon sandstone is not as durable as the granite and there are signs of differential weathering around the church, especially evident in carved figures etc. Inside the church the columns of Aberdeen Granite have a Sicillian marble base and are capped with Dungannon sandstone. The internal gothic arches, in the nave, are made of Bath limestone.



On the 17th of October 1875, the church was dedicated by Dr. Leahy, the Dominican Bishop who had invited his order to the town. The Dominican church is dedicated to the Sacred Heart and St. Catherine of Sienna who in a vision received the Sacred Heart. They are remembered with statues on either side of the high altar. Bishop Leahy dedicated the nave and the aisles. The tower and spire were not completed until June 1884, when a large cross was placed on top of the spire by Father Cranfield, in 'stole and surplice.'. Obviously, a man with a head for heights. The architect was George Ashlin (1837 -1921) from Cork. The Archiseek website highlights another Cork connection, 'the cost of the building up to dry course level was the gift of a Cork benefactor',⁹ the Hegarty Family. The Dominicans' Provincial, Father Conway, celebrated high mass and Doctor O'Carroll O. P. coadjutor Bishop of Trinidad preached the evening sermon. The



⁷ *The Irish Builder*, 15 Feb. 1875.

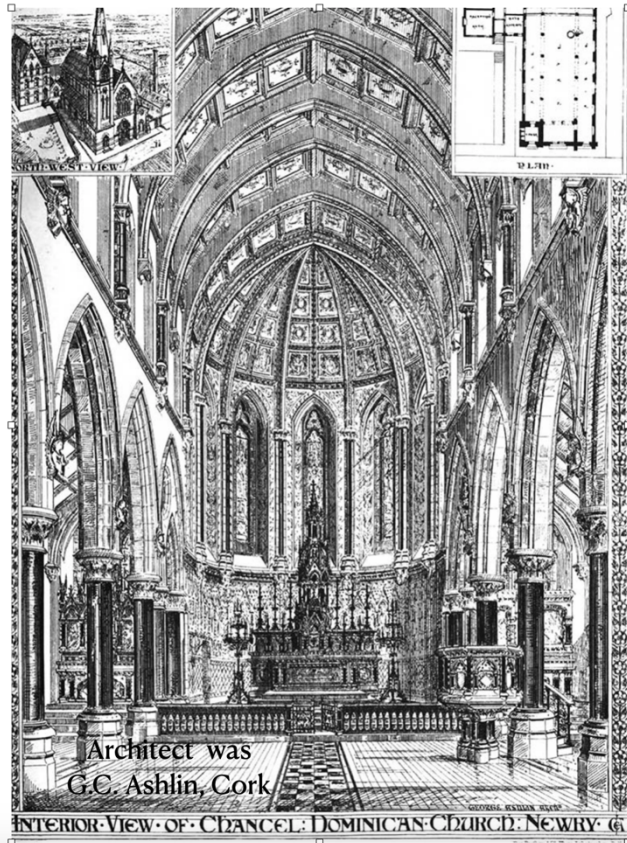
⁸ M. Courtney, *Saint Dominic, A Dog and Devine Fire* (2019) website <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/st-dominic-a-dog-and-divine-fire-16424> (accessed 7 Feb. 2021).

⁹ Archiseek, *Architecture of Down* website <https://archiseek.com/2015/1875-st-catherine-of-sienna-dominican-church-newry-co-down/> (accessed 7 Feb. 2021).

morning sermon was preached by Doctor Croke, Archbishop of Cashel, an ardent nationalist whose name is commemorated in Croke Park. He was a Young Irelander with Drumalane's infamous John Mitchel, a Land Leaguer with Monaghan's Gavan Duffy and a Home Ruler with Parnell - before Kitty O'Shea.

The Peoples' Support

Just as the people of Newry came forward to support the building so also, they contributed



to servicing the debt and the finishing and fitting out of St. Catherine's. From 1877 to 1884, a group of gentlemen undertook district collections across the town to help reduce the debt.

Mr. Henry McCrink, from Dromintee whose family were undertakers on Merchants' Quay, installed the seating. In 1878 Miss Rose Connor donated £300 for an altar to St Joseph. Designed by Messrs. Ashlin, it was 'beautifully executed by Messrs. Pearse' from Great Brunswick St., Dublin. James Pearse was Patrick Pearse's father. In 1880 John Quinn again dug deep into his pockets and provided funds for Our Lady of the Rosary's altar. He would later quench, 'the prior's insatiable thirst for an organ'. It cost £800 from Connacher of Leeds. He also provided the stained glass in the semi-circular apse and over both side altars.

A bequest from a local businessman provided the money for the convent or priory and the foundation stone was laid on 14th May 1881. When the will was challenged a five-day bazaar in April 1882 raised £2,300 and the building was completed. Railings were added to the front of the church.

In 1883, the Scillitan marble pulpit was provided by Pat McDonald's lifesavings, in memory of his wife. The original plans appear to show it on the north side. It was built on the south side. It is now on the sanctuary with its base incorporated into the post Vatican Two altar.

In 1886, the Pieta at the door of the northern Isle was installed and, from Holy Thursday the following year, members of the Holy Name Sodality kept vigil at the sepulchre during Holy Thursday night, a practice that ended with the military curfews in the next century.

In 1887, high up on either side of the nave carved Dominican saints were added. In 1895, in memory of their generous brother the Quinn sisters replaced the temporary high altar, at a cost of £1240.

By December 1899, the Dominicans in Newry were debt free. The town had kept its 1821 promise made to Bishop Leahy. £20,000 had been raised mainly through the generosity of the people of Newry.

Dominican Catholics

On 4th of August 1906, with the building complete, the Church of the Sacred Heart and St Catherine was consecrated by Dr. Henry O'Neill, the Bishop of Dromore. To mark the occasion the Quinn sisters cancelled the £20 annual lease and provided the garden in front



of the church, complete with its railing. A plaque on the statue of Saint Catherine in the garden commemorates the gift and the consecration of the church. A condition of this gift was that 'no building would ever be erected there'. The garden would be maintained for several years by the dockers of Newry.

With the return of cotton to the world market, in the years

after the defeat of John Mitchel's slave owning Confederacy, Newry's linen mills went into a slow, painful decline. In small houses, lit by flickering gas, heated by a coal fire and with an outside toilet, Ballybot families took solace, each evening, in the Rosary. Work in the docks was on an insecure daily basis. Under strict conditions, with small wages and long hours the mills, including Richardson's in Bessbrook, employed mainly women. Mill workers heading for Bessbrook would begin the day at 7 am Mass in St. Catherine's¹⁰. Work on the ships was dangerous and many families were bereaved when the little steamers failed to return to the Albert Basin. 'Between 1902 and 1910, six relatively new steamers foundered'.¹¹ The pastoral support of the Dominican friars was needed and they, in their white habits and black cloaks, were a constant sight on the streets, bringing solace to the poor, the ill, the dying and the bereaved. Such was the bond between the people and the friars that the Catholic residents of Ballybot were known as Dominican Catholics.

War and a Bizarre Bazaar

Acts of individual kindness have been a constant in the story of the Saint Catherine's. For example, Miss Mary Barry, a shopkeeper in King Street (Francis Street) donated the stations of the cross. The Quinn family's giving continued and the mosaics, by Oppenheimer, that cover the chancel and side chapels, were completed in time for the Golden Jubilee.

Before that the Dominican bore witness to the First World war, the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence. Redmond's National Volunteers went off to war and some did not return. The war meant a temporary prosperity for the mills. It also meant St. Catherine's suffered from soaring prices and



¹⁰ R. Quinn, Regina Remembers in A. Russell, (ed) *Newry Water Ships and Town* (Newry: N.M.D.C. 2016), P.97.

¹¹ S. Patterson, Fishers' Fleet in A. Russell, (ed) *Newry Water Ships and Town* (Newry: N.M.D.C. 2016), P.57.

it was the weekly pennies from mill workers that ‘came to the assistance of the Fathers’. The only Newry man to have fought in the GPO in 1916 was a Dominican Catholic, from Queen Street, Patrick Rankin. He cycled to join Pearse, arriving on the Tuesday of Easter Week, armed with loaves of bread¹². During the War of Independence, the Dominican was more directly involved in the conflict. On the night of the 11th/12th May 1919 a large force of IRA men raided Ballyedmond Castle. They were looking for guns from the 1914 UVF gun running. They included a contingent from Newry and the Irish Military Archives link St Catherine’s to the raid. Patrick Rankin wrote:

‘Our men were not idle. They went to the Dominican Church, Queen Street for confession on Saturday night and it was a great and edifying sight to see so many make their peace with God.’¹³

On this occasion, confession was not been necessary as all raiders returned home by 5 am. Less fortunate was Head Constable Kearney who, at 8:15 pm on Bloody Sunday, the 21st November 1920, was shot after attending devotions in the Dominican. He died from his wounds. After hearing the shots one member of the IRA party met a Cumann na MBan girl in Neednam Street (Patrick Street) and gave her his revolver. She secreted it upon her person. The couple later married.¹⁴

Occurring three years after the 1925 Golden Jubilee the 1928 fundraising bazaar was a ‘Bizarre Bazaar’. The Magazine included some humorous thoughts. The bazaar was a ‘time of lawlessness’ where the ‘purchasers’ were ‘the usual cheap crowd’. Avoid the Women’s Bazaar and just ‘let them fight it out’ as they glory, ‘in hating one another for the sake of the Bazaar’. ‘Many are called and few are workers’. Despite light-hearted cynicism the Jubilee and late bazaar were a success, with over 200 people giving of their time and effort.

The Cross and the Troubles

The wrought iron railing along the front of the church was removed during World War Two by the Pattersons¹⁵, the blacksmiths who made them. After the war they were replaced



by the same family. Something else that returned after the war was the large cross that now stands at the back of the Dockers’ Garden. Local historian Eamon Mc Ateer recorded that it used to stand on top of the spire. It later fell down and was replaced by the weather cock. Initially the cross was removed to Jack McCullough’s yard at the north of Merchant’s Quay. Jack was a Presbyterian who was friendly with Eamon McAteer. Between the two of them and with the help of a truck from the coal merchants, Moore and Dunwoody, the cross

¹² Irish Military Archives, P. Rankin, *Statement by Witness*, pdf 163.

¹³ Ibid, pdf 671.

¹⁴ Irish Military Archives, E. Fullerton, *Statement by Witness*, pdf 890.

¹⁵ J. Patterson, *The Carter’s Story* in A. Russell, (ed) *Newry Water Ships and Town* (Newry: N.M.D.C. 2016), P.104.

was returned to the Dominican, sometime in the 1950s.¹⁶ Also, in the 1950s the street names around the church were changed. Queen Street became Dominic Street, King Street became Francis Street and Needham Street became Patrick' Street.

Other additions were the statue of Our Lady of Fatima in 1948 and the shrine to Saint Martin de Porres in 1963. Saint Martin's statue, looking meekly into the nave has long heard the pleas and thanks of thousands of Dominican Catholics. His annual novena is a major occasion in the prayerful life of the Catholics of Ballyot.

The 1960s saw the Dominicans' flock expand with the building of Barcroft Park behind St Catherine's. The 1970s brought the worst of the Troubles. On 15th of May 1974, Martin McAlinden, an ex-altar boy and member of the Official IRA was controversially shot dead in Ballyholland. Throughout the Troubles Dominicans were involved in helping people and in delicate negotiations with combatants, official and unofficial.



Traditional view reminiscent of pre-Vatican II

What time is Midnight Mass?

However, one event the Troubles could not stop was Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. It remained packed to overflowing and those who exited the pubs late had to participate on the steps outside. Other churches in the town moved the Christmas Vigil to 9pm with the result that often the phone in the Priory would ring with the question, 'What time is Midnight Mass at?'

Another feature of Christmas, much beloved by the people of Newry, is the Dominican Crib, famous since 1878. The Nativity scene older people remember, with nostalgic fondness, is Father Stephen Murphy's crib. They recall the two rotating swans and a nodding donkey. The Three Wise Men brought incense, embalming oil and gold for the Baby Jesus. Father Murphy's crib was just as likely to have a chocolate Santa riding around on an unseen

¹⁶ Newry Dominican website <https://newrydominican.com/dominican-cross/>

electric train set (The engine belonged to the writer). Father Murphy was no stranger to unusual transport. He came home from Trinidad in a banana boat. Perhaps, what thrilled the congregation most on Christmas Eve was, and is, the senior choir singing O Holy Night; sufficient to melt the most agnostic heart. The choir began in August 1875 in preparation for the Dedication in the parlour of Mr Lupton, the mill owner's house in Queen Street (Dominic Street). Previously it was the boyhood residence of Chares Russell, Baron Russell who defended Parnell and who, in 1894, became the first Catholic Lord Chief Justice of England since the Reformation. His sisters were high achieving Sisters of Mercy in Newry and San Francisco. His younger brother was a Jesuit and editor of the literary Journal, the Irish Monthly.

The 1970's saw the redevelopment of Thomas Street, Pool Lane and Dominic Street with Cleary Crescent, where Lupton's mill stood, being called after Father Cleary, a former prior and renowned preacher. As the Millennium approached, public investment in housing and infrastructure, the rise of retail and the development of locally inspired industry, like Norbrook, saw unemployment in the town fall and prosperity rise. Ballybot benefited.

Liturgical Flux

Urban change was matched by liturgical flux. Altar boys no longer had to 'learn 'Latin', the



congregation responded in English and a temporary wooden altar faced the people. There were lay readers. The confession boxes were redesigned and the troubled sinner, in light, could chat with a sympathetic confessor. The friar, in white habit and black cloak or clerical



suit became a less common sight. The Dominican priests looked more like the people they served. With the altar rails removed, Mass is now celebrated on a new marble altar, facing the congregation. Other major changes were that Saint Catherine's could host baptisms, weddings and funerals.

The kindness and piety of the Dominicans, priests and lay brothers, many returning from missions, inspired local boys to join the order – twenty-two priests and three lay brothers. The last was Father David Rocks O. P. On either side of the Millennium, four priors were Newry men: Norbert

Barry, John O'Rourke, Raymond Collins and Gerard Fearon.

The son of a local sea captain Father Barry, who lived until he was ninety-five, celebrated his first mass in St. Catherine's on 21st December 1924. He was a small, thin man with the voice of a preacher. During the Troubles the funeral bell did not toll as often as it might have because of the brave, unseen work of John O'Rourke who served a record three terms as prior. Raymond Collins was a kind, gentle man, raised in the shadow of the spire. At a time when another local priest brought misery to many, and shame to the town, Father Gerard Fearon's intellect cut to the message of Jesus, attacked clericalism and engaged with disaffected youth. Father Fearon was a man for changing times.

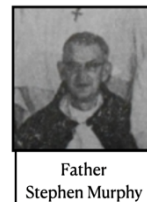
Changing Times

Changing times have witnessed the decline of the male Confraternity of the Holy Name and the female Confraternity of the Holy Rosary. The Holy Name Sodality was formed in November 1878. Its members, enthusiastic fundraisers, were the 'counsellors of the Dominican Community', collectors and stewards. In the nineteen sixties they met after Sunday evening devotions. The 1886 Pieta, where they used to keep vigil on Holy Thursday nights, was extensively renovated in November 2012.¹⁷



Formed on 29th of January 1877 the Rosary Confraternity met after devotions on a Wednesday night. Addictive TV series, the banning of the segregation of the sexes, the changing roles of women and the decline in reciting the family Rosary meant that the female Confraternity has ceased to exist.

Changing times have witnessed the transformation of the Angelic Warfare Sodality, the



altar boys, which was formed in the Old Chapel in 1871. In the 1960s, when Father Pat Tumelty O.P. was the head altar boy, there was a waiting list 'to get on the Altar'. A major reason for this was the walks and trips organised by Father Stephen Murphy, a kindly, knowledgeable naturalist. Today with much smaller numbers the altar boy is more likely to be an altar girl.



Changing times have witnessed continuity. On Sundays, the Junior Choir, singing at the 11am mass, and the Senior Choir, singing at the 12:15pm mass, both continue to add great value to worship in St. Catherine's.

Changing Times have witnessed new societies come to life; for children the Cygnets, Brigini, the Guides, and the Children's Liturgy; for adults the Lectio Divina. It was formed by Father Joseph Ralph in 2011 to engage in 'Sacred Reading'.

¹⁷ *Newry Reporter*, 21 November 2012.

‘Small communities reading meditating and praying the Scriptures in a way that nourishes encounter with the presence and work of God going on today in personal, family, social and political life.’

On St Patrick’s Day 2016, to mark the 800th anniversary of the founding of the Dominican Order, the Lectio Divina Centre opened in the old priory, numbers 35 and 37 Dominic Street. Here, many small communities, ‘reading to encounter the presence of God in the past and today’ meet for twenty weeks of the Church year, Advent, Lent, Pentecost, and Michaelmas.

Alas, Covid 19, the awful virus, did what war and depressions could not do. In the Spring of 2020, it closed the doors of St. Catherine’s to the people of Ballybot; but one thing it did not do was stop Midnight Mass at midnight on Christmas Eve. A smaller, pre-booked, socially distanced congregation was able to attend. Although the congregation was numerically small the audience was geographically huge as Midnight Mass was streamed world-wide, courtesy of the Internet. The internet has not only allowed people in America, Australia, the Middle East and elsewhere to join in every service from St. Catherine’s, it has enabled the sick and housebound in Ballybot to be part their beloved Dominican community.



Conclusion

Over 150 years, the Dominican priest and brother has been a constant on the streets of



Newry, and especially in Ballybot; visiting the sick, the lonely and the hurt. Their church has always been a place of solace. Today it is a place of joy as couples get married and children are presented to be baptised. Saint Catherine’s is a place for the grieving as family and friends say goodbye to those they have loved. No matter who you are, no matter what you are, no matter what your origins Saint Catherine’s welcomes you. It is a broad church.

Anthony Russell

The above article owes much to the editor and contributors in the 1928 Golden Jubilee Magazine.

