

**HOMILY ON THE OCCASION OF THE RE-OPENING OF THE  
CHURCH OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY, KINGSCOURT.  
SUNDAY 5<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2012. FIFTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, YEAR B.**

*Teach Pobail Dé* is the Irish for a church building – the house of God’s people. For 140 years this church has been the place of worship for the people of God in Kingscourt parish. Within its walls, families and friends have gathered for the happiest and saddest moments of their lives. It has also been *Teach Dé*, God’s house, a sign of God’s enduring presence among us.

Although Kingscourt parish’s early Christian roots lie in Enniskeen, this is actually the third church to be built on this site. The first church was built here with mud walls, needless to say it didn’t stand for too long! Then in 1798 Fr James Bermingham built St Mary’s Church, but by the 1860’s in his history of the Diocese of Meath, Fr. Cogan described it as “*unworthy of the present age*” and he went on to say “*the patriotic and spirited pastor, nobly seconded by his faithful people, is determined to erect a church which shall uphold and perpetuate the fame of the parish.*”

The 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act passed by parliament in London, gave renewed confidence to the catholic people in Ireland who had suffered and lost so much under the Penal Laws throughout the previous 200 years.

Ireland of the 1860’s was a bleak place. Just 25 years had passed since the famine, emigration meant an ongoing drain of the young Irish, politics was struggling to cope with questions about Ireland’s sovereignty and nationalism. If we fast forward 140 years to today, some things have changed and some remain the same.

The pastor Fr Cogan was referring to in his history, was Fr Peter O’Reilly who in the poor days of the late 1860’s was bringing to life his dream of building a new church to serve the people of Kingscourt. We’re told that Fr Peter was very interested and involved in the national political scene, and that he always wanted to give of his best for the people of this parish. Given the economic landscape that surrounded him and his parishioners, it took immense courage on his part to even consider such a project. What spurred him on? Was it that he was on home ground, working as priest in the community in which he was born and grew up? Was it his own personal faith? Was it the faith of his fellow parishioners? Was it a desire to make a bold statement that Catholicism had at last emerged from the hedges and margins where it had taken refuge during its oppression and now at last it could blossom? I suspect the answer is all of the above.

Fr O’Reilly engaged a fellow Cavan man, William Hague as architect for Kingscourt’s new Church. Hague was only in his 30’s but he had already designed a number of public buildings, banks and town halls in this county and beyond. He became a prolific designer of catholic churches and work on the Cathedrals in Armagh and Letterkenny and St. Patrick’s College in Cavan and Maynooth College Chapel. In another connection with Kingscourt, the Church in Trim where Fr Farrell and Fr Henry have served and Mons. Heaney’s parish church in Tullamore are other examples of his work.

In 1897 he was architect for extensive renovations of Bohermeen church where Fr Gerry was ordained. In the 1860’s Hague won a competition to design the new Bishop’s House in Mullingar – no longer the bishop’s residence but my current home! So a lot of us have prayed or lived under Hague’s roofs in different parishes.

Hague’s neo-gothic design for Kingscourt church was in keeping with the style of the day - not only in Ireland but across Europe, the US and Australia. Sitting here we can just look and see the pointed arches that direct our eye upwards to the heavens, and gives the impression of great height.

When it was opened on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1872, our Church was dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This was a title that only became church dogma in 1854 and was the name chosen by Our Lady to identify herself during the apparitions in Lourdes in 1858.

As with most churches, there have been many renovations here down through the years. When the church was opened the sanctuary and altar were incomplete, these were later installed after Fr Peter died.

It was Fr Michael Marry who commissioned Evie Hone to design and install the magnificent Fatima window and windows over the sanctuary and later more stained glass from the studios of Harry Clarke.

In every church, the altar is the centre piece. The document on Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II tells us:

*“The altar on which the sacrifice of the Cross is made present under sacramental signs, is also the Lord’s table which the people are invited to share when they come to Mass. It is also the centre from which thanksgiving is offered to God through celebration of the Eucharist.”*

Growing up in Kingscourt in the 1970’s & 80’s my memories of this church differ a lot from older and younger people here today. The older parishioners still remember with affection the original sanctuary, which unfortunately was removed perhaps in a rush to be modern and in a misguided way to conform to the new liturgical norms of the Second Vatican Council.

So for most of my younger years, the space up here was empty, bleak, sometimes occupied by pots of ivy and occasionally by the choir.

When Fr Andy Farrell carried out work here in 1988, a new reredos was assembled with marble from Bohermeen and Killeshandra’s Holy Rosary Convent, and all were delighted with the return of furniture appropriate to the church.

I don’t think anyone knows for sure why Fr Peter didn’t get to complete the bell tower and steeple, some speculated that it was a problem with the foundations but not surprisingly, the common consensus was simply that the money ran out.

My late father once quoted a verse of unknown origin to me;

*“Kingscourt town of great renown, a church without a steeple”*

It was a harsh reminder that there remained “unfinished business” here.

Well now the church has a steeple! In keeping with Hague’s pointed arches, the new spire points to the heavens and invites us to raise our thoughts, our eyes, our minds and hearts upwards to God. No doubt it is a talking point far beyond the boundaries of the parish, in time to come I’ve no doubt there will grow an appreciation of the courage it has taken to complete today what was started 140 years ago.

Everyone has a soft spot for their native place and for their local church. For many people here today this is where we were baptised, where we first received the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion, and the Holy Spirit in Confirmation. Within these walls our parents or grand parents exchanged their marriage vows, here Fr Joseph O’ Reilly and I received Holy Orders and from this place we have buried our departed loved ones, neighbours and friends.

Sunday after Sunday for 140 years this community has gathered around the altar to listen to God’s Word and to be nourished with the Body and Blood of Jesus his Son in the Eucharist. We have come in quiet and private moments to be in his real presence or like Job in today’s first reading to seek his comfort, help and reassurance when the cares of life oppress us.

Job was a holy and devout man. Although he lost his wife and family and all had worked so hard for, Job kept faith in God. Faced with the reality of human existence, he struggled to understand, what is the point of life? He realised that life is short and passing and nothing we do can stop the passage of time, yet underlying and sustaining us is God's power, God's presence and God's great love for us.

In any congregation in any church you find the best of people who have endured the worst of suffering. How often we ask or hear others ask why do good people suffer? It's a question that has often been asked when a candle is lit at the shrine in here.

Jesus gave no answer to why we suffer, but by healing the sick and suffering who came to him, he showed us the importance of turning suffering into joy. Jesus never rejected or turned away someone who was suffering, he identified with them and helped them, nor will he reject those who come to this place to pray or ask for help.

A lot has happened since the doors of this church opened 140 years ago. We can only imagine the cares or concerns that have occupied the minds and hearts of those who have prayed here during world and civil wars, during depressions, recessions and times of plenty. One thing has remained constant – God's presence.

Today we gather to give thanks and ask God's blessing on the work carried out to preserve and renew this magnificent church given to us by our ancestors. We can be certain that they made great sacrifices in poorer days to ensure that Kingscourt had a church worthy of its great people. We owe them a great debt for such a wonderful legacy of foundation and faith.

St. Paul in today's second reading tells us that preaching the Gospel is a responsibility that we should accept without considering what it may cost us. Only then can we share in its blessings.

Ours now, is the responsibility to ensure this church stands for another 140 years, and with it the greater responsibility of handing on to the young the faith we received from our fathers and mothers.

In the next 140 years there will be new challenges for Kingscourt. We find ourselves once again in difficult times, but they will pass. More importantly we must ask what kind of community will come here when we are gone. Will today's children who are tomorrow's grand parents still come here and bring the new generations here with them? This is the "unfinished business" of our day.

St Mark tells us today, that the whole town came crowding round the door of the house because they knew who Jesus was. Today we share a challenge to make the love and person of Jesus Christ real and present for tomorrow's parishioners. Our lives outside these walls must reflect the liturgy we celebrate and the faith we profess within them, then we pass on what is most precious. Stones and slates are mere materials that stand around us, it takes faith and trust to turn them into a place of prayer and into a house for God's people – *Teach Pobail Dé*.

Fr Peter O'Reilly's remains are buried here in the church, I'm sure today he is smiling to see his dream fulfilled.

Fr. Padraig McMahon, Adm. Mullingar.