

LYNCH'S FOLLY? by Jack McCann
Written for the Parish Magazine 1987

One definition of 'a folly' is 'a great useless structure'. Yet that is how the wiseacres of Ballymena saw Fr John Lynch's new Church of All Saints at the top of the town when it was dedicated in November 1860.

Fr Lynch had already overcome their bitter opposition to build a new Catholic school in Harryville in 1854 and as if to show that he thrived on protest, he built schools for boys and girls on the Cushendall Road in 1861. Unlike his objectors, he realised that the Catholic population of Ballymena would grow, would outgrow the modest Church erected by Fr Bernard McAuley on the same site in 1827. It has been said that the long and the short of Fr Lynch were his forty-two years as PP of Ballymena and two months as PP of Cushendall. The quick exchange of Ahoghill for Cushendall in October 1832 was contrived by the Bishop to bring Fr Lynch closer to Belfast so that he could also act as Professor of Classics in the new College of St Malachy which was to open in Belfast in November 1833.

Though Fr McAuley died in Downpatrick he is commemorated in All Saints by a stained glass window of St Bernard of Clairvaux on the Epistle Side. There too, marked by a small aspe, is the site of the altar of Fr McAuley's Church. In the apse is a brass tablet marking the grave of his successor Fr Daniel McGarry who is buried in front of the aspe. Next to the St Bernard window is one of Daniel the Prophet in memory

of Fr McGarry.

To complete our survey of the Epistle Side let's look at the four windows of St Brigid, St Bronagh, St Congal and St Malachy commemorating the Golden Jubilee of Fr McQuillan in 1901. I find it appropriate that our Church should have such windows. For what they lost in Glyns of Antrim following the Battle of Orra the McQuillans were eventually in 1602 granted the Tuagh of Glenagherty, the very land on which the town of Ballymena was to grow.

Turning to the Gospel side we find that the stained glass windows were donated by James McAllister, a leading figure in the commercial life of the town. His son Thomas was to be the last Nationalist MP from County Antrim in the old Stormont parliament. Fittingly the family residence on the Broughshane Road, 'Kenbaan', built in 1886 and called after the McAllister Castle on the Antrim coast, is today an important centre for parochial purposes.

My favourite window on this side is of St Patrick and was the gift of Fr Daniel Mullen of the Parish of St Mary in Norwich, Connecticut, USA. In photograph it would make a fine St Patrick's Day card from a parish in the shadow of Slemish.

The McAllister name appears again among the donors of the Stations of the Cross, among names like McVeigh, O'Boyle, O'Rawe, Moore, McConnell, Campbell, Walshe, Mackle, McKinney, Devlin, Hamill, all prominent in their time in the town. Bryan O'Rawe had a street named after him. To those who may think that All Saints is out of touch with the commercial life of Ballymena, may I suggest that our bell has a message. It was installed in 1893 by Fr Alexander McMullan who completed the bell-tower begun by his immediate predecessor Fr Lynch. The inscription on the bell reads: 'Glory to God. Prosperity to Ballymena'.

My father told me that the first funeral for which the bell of All Saints tolled was for a rector of St Patrick's Church of Ireland, Ballymena. Canon Rusk the present Rector confirms the story, again through folk-memory, that the cortege of the Very Reverend JW Murray, LL.D., Dean of Conor and a former Rector of St Patrick's, came from the old Rectory off the Cushendall Road into the town to the tolling of our bell and that the then single bell of St Patrick's took up the lament over the rest of the way to the Church in Castle Street, Canon Rusk informs me that the present peal of bells in their Church was installed in 1885 in memory of Dean Murray.

The walls, railings and entrance gates which surround All Saints were added by Fr McMullan together with two side altars, though the present altar of The Sacred Heart was raised to his memory by Canon O'Donnell who succeeded him in 1908. Fr

McMullan's ministry was exactly half of that of Fr Lynch – twenty one years. A Celtic cross marks his grave at Crebilly.

Canon O'Donnell was the first Parish Priest I personally remember. Before I was born he had built the present Parochial House. In the Church he installed the first heating system. His main aesthetic achievements are still to be seen – the marble pulpit, communion rails and baptismal font and the mosaic flooring within the sanctuary; and heard too – in our great Church organ. I remember the wheezy old harmonium compensated for by the rich voice of Susie McReynolds especially when she sang 'Adeste Fideles' at the first Mass on Christmas morning.

As I am dealing primarily with our Church building, I cannot dwell on Canon O'Donnell's enormous contribution in the field of education other than to recall that he brought the Sisters of St Louis to Kintullagh in 1924. He it was who gave us the now-demolished Parochial Hall which served the parish well for over sixty years. Canon O'Donnell is buried in the Church grounds.

During Canon O'Donnell's ministry a Ballycastle man, Fr McLister was curate from 1911 till 1917 but it was as Canon McLister that he was our Parish Priest from 1942 to 1958. He was therefore here during both World Wars. While his greatest moment was the opening on 24 May 1954 of the new Grammar School at Kintullagh, he was happy to see work commence on

St Patrick's High School in 1956, though he died before its completion. In the Church he had the clerestory windows re-glazed in leaded lights with cathedral glass thus greatly improving interior natural light, had the aisles re-laid in terrazzo and added the Mortuary Chapel: and for all to see is his decoration in mosaic of the sanctuary walls. His grave is in the Church grounds.

Canon McGrattan who came to Ballymena in 1958 was a great Church builder, as witness the modern but graceful Church of Our Lady Mother of The Church in Harryville and the lovely little Church of St Patrick in Crebilly. Still All Saints was his first love and his was the guiding hand in the Centenary Celebrations in 1960. All the clergy taking part in the ceremonies were natives of the Parish, something Canon McGrattan had in mind when he addressed the congregation:

'It speaks well for the virility of the faith in Ballymena that it has given so many to the service of religion both at the altar and in the cloister'.

Canon McGrattan completed St Patrick's High School and built the new Primary Schools at Kintullagh and Hugomont. He too rests in the shade of All Saints having died in 1978.

Our present Parish Priest, Monsignor Tumelty, has matched his predecessors in his care of All Saints and the Church ground which never looked better. The additional Church entrance on the Gospel side merges naturally with Fr Lynch's old blackstone showing us that the stone-mason's craft is still with us.

Externally, the Monsignor has made good the roofing eradicating damp which was a problem for years and has provided a spacious and much needed car park. He has also tastefully re-decorated the interior of the church.

Today he and his hard-working curates tend three Churches in a growing parish offering ten Masses to meet Saturday/Sunday needs, five of them in Fr Lynch's All Saints.

Some Folly!

Let's listen to an echo of those far-off days from John Gallagher our local poet when Fr Lynch was building All Saints:

'Next, the Catholic chapel, I hold it in view,
Where the Reverend John Lynch is our pastor so true:
God prosper his talent, his worth, and his fame,

He is my own pastor, I am proud of his name'.

And so say all of us!

Jack McCann