

Fr. Eric Willett who had been Head of the Rosminian School in New Zealand became Rector in 1986. Holy Cross School, no longer needed, was sold and the Institute renovated and turned into a Social Club and the Presbytery and Sacristy entirely refurbished. Frs. Bill Jackson, Tony Bennison and Bernard Rumsey were curates here and parishioners were devastated when Father Bernard died in a road accident.

Bro. Jim Furlong, a Rosminian for 50 years, assisted in the parish up to the time of his death and Fr. Tony Furlong was an enthusiastic curate with the youth of St. Mary's.

Eugene Coqueral, a popular figure at St. Mary's, has been a valued assistant in the church and presbytery. Fr. Philip Scanlan succeeded Fr. Willett in 1994. He was a well-liked Rector and parishioners were sad when he was moved in 1999.

Fr. Neal Murphy became Rector until the Autumn of 2001 when he left after a short, enjoyable period at St. Mary's.

Fr. Joe Mullen had the unenviable task of ending the relationship between the Institute of Charity and St. Mary's. Not easy, many are sad - many asking why? But it means that Fr. Joe Mullen, Fr. Jim McKnight and Fr. Nettiiaus will be the last Rosminians to serve at St. Mary's.

Now the Rosminian presence at St. Mary's is at an end. Their achievements over 155 years have been immense. These able, holy, dedicated priests and brothers inspired by their founder, Antonio Rosmini, have devoted their lives for our spiritual advancement. We offer them our thanks and prayers and good wishes for the future.

We welcome with joy and gratitude our new Parish Priest, Fr. John Kelly and his assistant, Fr. Matthew Hemson. We pray that they will be happy with us in Newport

THE ROSMINIANS IN ST. MARY'S, NEWPORT

1847- 2002

Historical Notes by Edward Curran
prepared from previous publications
by the author and actual letters and
diaries of the Rosminians.

Bishop Brown (Welsh District) asked the Rosminians to establish a mission in Newport.

In June 1847 Frs. Hutton and Signini travelled by coach, first to Gloucester arriving at 4.30 p.m., then on to Chepstow arriving 4.30 a.m. They called on Bishop Brown in Chepstow who wished them well in their new parish.

This is what they found - 'The church in an unfinished state, is extremely cold in winter, and no means of warming it. There is sufficient work for three priests. There is a place three miles off containing 300 Catholics (37th Regt. sent here because of the Chartists). The minister gets 10/- (50p.) a week for attendance at the barracks. The Regt. is bad on point of observance of religion.' The Duke of Wellington wrote to the Rosminians asking them to provide spiritual care for the troops who were almost all Irish and Catholic.

The population of the town is now between 17,000 and 18,000. The Catholics form the most influential body; the bank, the press and the docks are in their hands. The Medical Officer of Health and the Town Clerk were also Catholic. 'The head parson is a Puseyite and responds well to Catholics.'

Fr. Hutton described the congregation as poor and an Irish one of the lowest grade - drunken, ignorant and superstitious. Most had just arrived from Ireland. The local paper reported that these poor people 'were seen daily parading our streets; men, women and children, without shoes or stockings, begging at shops and houses.' Often denied the opportunity to practise their faith in Ireland they needed re-evangelising here.

Cardinal Manning observed that their drunkenness was a symptom of radically wretched lives. He said "If I were an Irish 'hodman' I should be a drunkard."

My great grandmother, Ellen Curran, was attending St. Mary's in 1847. She was twenty six and had been a widow for two years. Her husband died of one of the infectious diseases raging in the town

There were many problems in families at this time - women at risk, fighting, going to law accusing one another of perjury and the most dreadful crimes, widows wanting protection and wives deserted by their husbands.

Sunday evenings saw dreadful fights among the Irish, stabbing one another, and battles between the Irish and the Welsh, then coming to ask the priests to procure bail. Whole streets of the Irish never coming to Mass or church on Sunday. Men and women calling for the priest, instead of the doctor, asking him to lay his blessed hands on parts of the body through the superstitious notion that this will cure their ailments.

Father Hutton and Father Signini visited the fever hospital with a doctor and saw dead and dying men, women and children all huddled together without curtains. 'What a scene! How to hear confessions, administer the sacraments. The yard full of hungry, the half-starved, the weak and the famished, craving charity. What can we do with our limited means?'

'A third priest is needed and he must be Irish, and a sturdy one, and must be able to speak Irish and lecture them in Irish after the first Mass on Sunday.'

It is evidently the work of all respectable members of the congregation, and even others, to form an acting committee to take off the priests' hands all the strain and bother of temporal affairs.

'Father Signini is already ill with a fever (a form of typhoid). Poor fellow - he has been quite out of his mind - in a delirious state. He was soon invalided but, thanks to the Provincial, dear Cavalli arrived quite safe this morning.' (July 1847)

Fr. Dominic Cavalli was Rector here for 43 years, repeatedly risking his life by unselfish and undaunted service to the sick.

Father Richardson came in 1857. He founded the 'Holy War' to combat drunkenness. There were 2,500 members who were told that moderation was the aim of the movement.

In July 1858 the funds were never so low. We are getting the altar painted and it will cost £45 - all of which I have to beg. (Fr. Cavalli)

By 1859 the town is getting worse; many people out of work; many going to Cardiff. One fourth of our congregation has left.

In 1862 money is getting more and more scarce every day. Just imagine getting 12/- (60p) at the door last Sunday after High Mass. The average used to be 36/- (£1.80)

Fr. Cavalli to Provincial - Last Sunday night (December 1862) we had a bit of fun. It might have been serious. A thief got into the house during Benediction. I happened to be called out of the church for a sick call and at once heard a voice in one of our rooms. I locked the door and called Bro. George. We went in and caught him under the table in the dark. The villain! We let him go but fear of the police made him leave the town (he is a child of Erin).

Bro. George Clarkson had been head of St. Mary's Boys' School since 1850. Mr. Morell, H.M. Inspector, in 1862 commented "This is one of the few boys' schools I visit with unmixed satisfaction. I have to praise the valuable service of conscientious and capable teachers." Brother George was offered a post as Inspector at £100 a year, rising to £200. He chose to remain with the boys of St. Mary's.

Fr. Cavalli wasn't too keen on Brother George growing a beard. He says Father General would not approve. Bro. George says that with all his work in the school he has not time to shave and would rather use the time to meditate.

In 1855 Catherine Brown died, aged 88. She lived in Chepstow and was buried in Newport Cemetery - she was Bishop Brown's mother.

Fr. Cavalli writes: Fr. Nedelec (a Breton) is to leave for another mission - pray keep him afterwards. It would be too bad to send him back here. Were he less disagreeable it would be different. China is the place for him (he wants to go there).

Again Fr. Cavalli writes: Fr. Perrin doesn't like Newport. I think his heart is in Cardiff. He has to study for his sermons here. I will not allow him to preach nonsense and blow up the Irish.

August 1863 - Yesterday I was telegraphed from Cardiff. Fr. Bruno had such a fearful attack of cholera. A little more would certainly have caused his death. Fr. Bailey will go down to help them.

In 1867 typhus fever has returned to this place. It is now six years since a retreat was preached. Could we have a mission with Lockhart or Furlong?

'Fr. Signini is going to take Fr. Richardson's place. He will need three or four weeks to learn his duties. I must announce next Sunday that his sick club must be wound up, his bank closed and all parties call for their money - the 'Holy War' cease and his band give up their existence. Fr. Signini will be greatly missed in Cardiff. He was the only one who could hear confessions in Irish.'

Fr. Richardson (March 1892): Dear Fr. Cavalli died very calmly at 3 o'clock on Sunday afternoon. The Bishop came to see him and promised to pontificate at the Requiem and to preach. Poor Brother George feels very much his loss, they had lived together so long and I am afraid he will not stay long behind him.

In 1862 Fr. Michael Bailey arrived at St. Mary's. He was a man of action, he spared no effort physical or mental in the cause of Catholic Education and his work upon the School Board was of immense and lasting value to the Catholics of Newport.

He was responsible for the building of St. Mary's, St. Joseph's, Maindee, Holy Cross and St. Michael's Schools & St. Michael's Church. In his last illness his sister wrote that the doctor thought his condition was so low he could die at any moment. 'He sinks into a coma then rallies but he cannot express himself. He is thinking of the schools and tries to talk to the doctor and nurses about them.'

Fr. Hickey became Rector in 1904 and remained for 22 years. He knew his people thoroughly and in particular his care of the sick was admirable. He built the Presbytery and was later Provincial of the Order.

In 1905 Bishop Hedley of Newport addressed the Fathers of Charity of Newport and Cardiff on the 50th Anniversary of the death of Antonio Rosmini: 'To him and the sons he inspired, Catholic England was indebted to a great degree and more so in the Diocese of Newport than elsewhere.'

Fr. Ernest Hill left St. Mary's to become Rector of St. Michael's in 1922. Writing to the Provincial in 1925 he states that 'I have £13,200 for a new school. I have seen Dr. McGinn and he said I have overtaxed my heart. I have tried to visit 2,000 of my parishioners. This together with organisation, supervision of various societies and the collection for the new school is increasingly arduous. The thought that people were not visited has been a source of great anxiety to me. When I try to put a spurt on I seem to get knocked out for a time.' He died at the age of fifty-two. The new school was named The Father Hill Memorial School.

Fr. Trevor Hughes became Rector in 1926. He had been Provincial for ten years. A holy, self-sacrificing priest, a loyal son of Monmouthshire. Fathers Hart, Honan and Fowle were curates at this time.

Fr. John Colbert succeeded Fr. Hughes. He was assisted by Frs. German, Stokes and Honan during the period of the Second World War.

Frs. J. Kelleher, G. Scott and J. O'Dwyer commenced their ministries in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Fr. O'Dwyer worked with a thriving Legion of Mary Praesidia in the parish. Visiting parishioners, arranging talks for non-Catholics and collecting school money were among their activities.

Fr. Tom Lenane arrived in the late 1950's and Frs. Manning and Brennan assisted him. The condition of the church was giving cause for concern and Father Tom set about the task of reconstruction with his customary enthusiasm. New benches, new floor, old confessionals removed and the stained glass renovated. He was also involved in establishing new Catholic parishes and schools in the town.

Father Chris. Smith, energetic and enthusiastic, was here at this time and has returned on more recent occasions. Fr. Gilbert Jones succeeded Fr. Lenane but left for Cardiff in 1970. In his quiet way he was a tower of strength - kind and sympathetic.

Fr. John Daley, a devoted hospital and sick visitor, came in 1974 and Frs. A. Hamson, Tom Driscoll, Tom Kearns (Provincial) and Fr. Guise also served at St. Mary's. Fr. Huyshe died in 1977 after twenty-two years service, admired and respected by all. Fr. Peter Eedy succeeded Fr. Farmer and set up the first Parish Council here. The sanctuary for some years had been found to be too small so it was extended into the church by fourteen feet. Frs. Cuddihy, Rayner and Tynan also served in the parish.