

150 Years of Mercy in Ballyshannon

150 years of Mercy involvement and ministry fanned out across the diocese of Raphoe from its foundation in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal on 30 April 1867. The Anniversary celebration commenced with a Mass of Thanksgiving in Sr. Patrick's Church on 29th April 2017 with Bishop Boyce, as principal celebrant and concelebrating priests from the parishes where Sisters worked. Members of choirs from these parishes joined with St. Patrick's choir, under the direction of Sr. Concepta Murphy.

At the request of Bishop Daniel Mc Gettigan, Raphoe, and backed by a legacy from local businessman, Mr. Stephens, towards the building of a Convent, six Mercy Sisters came from Kinsale in 1867, to serve the many needs of the poor, sick and uneducated people in Ballyshannon.

Fr. Desmond O'Donnell OMI, homilist and past pupil, drew attention to the 'exile' nature of the journey Sr. Ignatius Mc Carthy, first Superior in Ballyshannon, and her companions took. Within three weeks of their arrival, they opened their first school, conscious that education is 'the great poverty breaker'. The Sisters, consumed by the mystery of God's love for all and the pressing needs of the poor, began their ministries of Visitation, education and care of the sick.

Fr. Cathal O' Fearrai PP, said at the end of mass, that it was difficult to put words on "what we feel in our hearts", especially words of "gratitude, thanks and appreciation". Bishop Boyce and Harry Lloyd, chairperson of the parish council, presented Sr. Monica McCormilla with a scroll acknowledging the Sisters' spiritual, humanitarian and educational services and contributions to the parish and the diocese over the past 150 years.

Following the Thanksgiving Mass, all were invited to Dorrian's Hotel for refreshments. Tasty food was in abundance and conversations were rich. Local historian, Anthony Begley concluded the evening with a slideshow presentation on the context of life in Ballyshannon in 1867. Anthony referred to a report from a British medical journal that sent a team to examine Irish workhouses in 1895. They said of the Rock workhouse run by the sisters since 1890: "Mother Superior's keen enthusiasm for the cause of poor, forgotten workhouse inmates was indeed refreshing", and called their visit to the workhouse "the first cheerful experience since the beginning of our commission in Ireland". Iron bedsteads replaced sleeping on the floor and a little bag on each bed held soap, a comb and brush. "It was a revelation of the possibilities of an Irish workhouse under humane and enlightened management", the committee concluded. He spoke of the skills passed on to local women in lace, crocheting and woodcarving. 84 local women exhibited their work at the Irish Art Industries in the RDS in Dublin 1n 1907.

Anthony concluded his presentation by drawing attention to the ministries and places throughout the diocese where Sisters served: Donegal Town, Stranorlar, Glenties, Dungloe, Letterkenny, Tory Island, Falcarragh, Gaoth Dobhair, Ballybofey, Drumkeen, Portnoo, Rossnowlagh, and abroad in Montana, Africa and Peru.

The 150th Anniversary celebrations concluded and in Fr. Des words: "I am delighted as all of us are to say 'thank you' to God for the great miracle of that day in 1867 when six mercy-filled women became exiles in Donegal".