

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC MISSION AT LINLITHGOW

By Fr. Paul Kelly

The most authoritative account of the history of the parish is William Hendrie's *St Michael's Catholic Church, Linlithgow, 1893-1993*, published on the centenary of the building of the church. The mission (as it was before it became a parish) was first dedicated to St Joseph. It was changed to St Michael in 1887, though the school, built just before the church, was dedicated to St Joseph. These notes are derived from diocesan archives at present deposited in the Scottish Catholic Archives, Columba House, in Edinburgh, and from the valuation rolls in Linlithgow Public Library.

The Catholics of Linlithgow in the 1850s, as in other areas of West Lothian, were overwhelmingly Irish immigrants, who arrived in Scotland in great numbers after the Irish potato famine. They were poor and constituted indeed a church of the poor. The first priest in charge of the mission, the Rev Francis McKerrell, served from 1851-1853. His mission included Bo'ness and Bathgate. He lived in a rented house in Linlithgow Bridge. His successor, Andrew Dempsey (1853-1857) noted in his annual returns to the bishop that his charge of Linlithgow, Bo'ness and Bathgate measured twelve miles in area with a population of 1300 Catholics.

At first Mass was celebrated in a hired room. Francis McKerrell remarked in August 1852 on "the urgent need of a Chapel in the Linlithgow Mission. There at present the faithful are obliged to meet for worship in a most inconvenient room, destitute we may say of all the requisites for religiously worshipping God." The Catholic Directory for 1855 records that "Public Service" – the word 'Mass' would have been too provocative for the Protestant population of the time – was held every second Sunday at 9 and 11.30. On the other Sundays the priest had to travel to Bathgate for Mass. The parish accounts for 1857 reveal that it cost £26 "for driving to Bathgate for 52 Sundays." A separate mission was established in Bathgate in 1858.

The priest continued to live in a rented house until the present house was built in 1890. However, it would have been a substantial dwelling, which included a separate room for a servant. The parish accounts for 1886 show that £20 a year was paid for the rent of a house. In about 1880 it was £18. By 1886 the rent had gone up to £22.10s.

Rent also had to be paid for a hall in which to say Mass. In 1857 that rent was £15. By that date, according to the valuation rolls, the hall was located at 310 High Street (roughly where the Health Centre now is) and the owners of the property were “Mr Ritchie, Edinburgh, and Miss R.I.A. Spence”. Previously it had been a “tan yard and cutting shop”, also known as “Spence’s Tannery”. In 1876 the Baird Hall (now a private house at 224 High Street), which had been a sessional school since 1863, was bought for the mission. The new chapel could seat 250 people. The mission was now in debt. In 1880, James McCartney, now in charge of the mission, wrote to Archbishop John Strain: “After a good deal of struggling through very hard times, I have managed to be able to reduce the debt on Linlithgow Chapel by £50 more, which will now leave the debt at £300.” The Catholic population was then 525. By 1882 the debt was only £12.

The Catholic population was growing. In 1881, the Rev John Lee reported that there were 680 Catholics, of which between 250 and 280 came to Mass on Sunday. The only group in the parish was “The Living Rosary Society”. Clearly the Baird Hall, with seating for only 250, was no longer big enough and Lee’s successor, the energetic and gifted John Murphy, set about plans for building the present church. Further, there had been no Catholic school. This was built just before the church. The final stages of the building of the school and church were supervised by the Rev Donald Easson (1890-1898). The original chapel at the Baird Hall was sold to the Church of Scotland.

Easson was an energetic pastor. In 1898 he was appointed Vice-Rector of the Scots College in Valladolid. The college was in a delapidated state and Easson was not looking forward to his appointment. On 12 March 1898 he wrote to Archbishop Angus MacDonald: “The financial condition of the College must be already at breaking point.” He then began organising collections for the College in the Scottish dioceses. However, the bishops decided against this. In September 1898, Easson wrote again to Archbishop MacDonald from St Margaret’s, Ayr, where he had preached at the opening of a chapel at Annbank, declaring that he would travel to Spain the following May, even though he was by no means looking forward to the prospect. But he noted: “The collection that has been so generously responded to in this Diocese [Galloway] will go some little way to make the college habitable”. He died at Valladolid in March 1899, aged thirty-five. He had been a priest for twelve years, and for nine of them he had been the priest in charge of the mission at Linlithgow. There is a commemorative plaque on the wall of the church near the sacristy.