

ST. MARY'S, NEWPORT

The Faith remained alive during the whole of the penal days in secluded parts of Gwent. In 1675 the Anglican Bishop of London reported that there were only two Papists in Newport. St. David Lewis who died for the Faith at Usk was arrested at Llantarnam in 1678. In 1778 twenty Catholics took the Oath of allegiance in Newport as a result of the Catholic Relief Bill.

In the year 1809 the Rt. Rev. Collingridge, Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, sent Fr. William Barnes to Newport and he said Mass in the upper room of a house on the corner of High Street and Market Street.

A small chapel was built in 1812 on the site now occupied by St. Mary's. Mr. John Jones of Llanarth generously gave the land, and the stone for the building and £500 as an endowment. It was opened in November 1812 before a crowded congregation. Fr. Haly served the new chapel from Usk and was succeeded by Fr. Edward Richards O.S.F. who came every fortnight. About 1822 Mr. Jones of Llanarth built a house adjoining the chapel. The additional land was given by Sir Charles Morgan for a nominal rent for 99 years. Fr. Richards was succeeded by Fr. John Burke.

In 1828 Fr. Burke gave up his parish at Usk and came to live in Newport, so St. Mary's Parish actually dates from the 29th August of that year.

Father Patrick Portal, who had been serving Cardiff, Merthyr and Pontypool simultaneously succeeded Fr. Burke. His devoted work in South Wales shortened his life and he died before his fortieth year.

Father Edward Metcalf a Yorkshireman, ordained at Ampleforth arrived in 1836. He had been chaplain to the Mostyn family in Flint and while there translated "Garden of the Soul" into Welsh for his congregation.

There were now 1,800 Catholics in the town and it was necessary to provide a larger church. In 1837 Mr. J. J. Scholes of London prepared the plans for a new church and schools. During this time Mass was said in the old barn (still standing) opposite St. Woolos Church. In November 1839 the Chartists passed by and ordered the builders to stop work and join them. They refused.

St. Mary's Church is in the purest Gothic style of the 13th Century, the interior recalls the Lady Chapel of Salisbury Cathedral. The original design included a spire but this has never been added. The cost was in the region of £2,500.

The Consecration and opening took place on November 11th and 12th 1840. Bishop Collier sang Pontifical High Mass in the presence of 800 including 'leading individuals in the Protestant religion and respectable dissenters.'

The Church had been built with money raised through public subscription as a result of the indefatigable exertions and untiring zeal of Father Edward Metcalfe and the pennies of the poor Irish immigrants.

Fr. Davison O.S.F. came to assist at St. Mary's in 1841 and the local paper the Merlin records his devotion to the desolate poor of the town. In a few months he contracted typhus and died in February 1842. He is buried in front of the gates of the sanctuary of the church.

In 1843 Father Metcalf was removed to Bristol and he was succeeded by Fr. Baldacconi who began the building of the schools at the back of the church.

At the request of Fr. Brown, Vicar Apostolic, Fr. Antonio Rosmini agreed to the Fathers of Charity taking charge of St. Mary's in 1847.

In June 1847 Fathers Hutton and Signini arrived but within a short time both were stricken with ill health. On July 9th 1847 Fr. Dominic Cavalli came to assist and Fr. Rinolfi became Rector. In July 1849 Fr. Cavalli became Rector of Newport a position he held for forty-three years. On three occasions during his long life he was on the brink of death from fever but each time (to the relief of all) recovered. One who exercised great influence over the boys of the Parish was Brother George Clarkson known by all as Brother George. He was master of St. Mary's School for thirty-three years.

In 1862 Fathers John and Michael Bailey two brothers came to the Parish. John was of a quiet and studious nature and his expert skill as an architect was invaluable to his brother in the building of St. Michael's in later days. Michael was a man of action and boundless energy - devoted to the cause of Catholic Education. He spared no effort in this direction and his work on the School Board and Board of Guardians was of immense and lasting service to the Catholics of Newport.

In 1874 a peal of eight bells was placed in the tower of St. Mary's and the Angelus was rung for the first time on Lady Day - 25th March of that year. This was a result of the efforts of Father Richardson who was assisting in the Parish. He served the community through his work on the Newport School Board and the Board of Guardians.

In 1871 the Catholic population was now 4,300 and it became necessary to plan the building of another church. In 1870 three cottages were purchased in Pill and in these premises began the labours of Fr. Michael Bailey which resulted in the opening of St. Michael's Church in 1887.

The development of Catholic Education was now the objective of the community. In 1892 when Fr. Cavalli died there were one thousand children in Catholic Schools and in ten years £30,000 was spent on providing these facilities.

Fr. Bailey died in 1904 and shortly before, Fr. Daniel Hickey came to preach a mission and at the close of which referred to the inadequate accommodation for the clergy in the old presbytery. As a result the present presbytery was built and opened in 1906.

Fr. Hickey became Rector in 1904 and set about improving the interior of the church.

In 1913 a new Lady Altar replaced the original altar which was the gift in 1845 of the 37th Regiment stationed at Newport. In 1921 the stone panelling with painted decorations was added to the Sanctuary and the Sacristy corridor built. At the same time St. Patrick's Altar and the War Memorial Tablet were placed in the Church.

Fr. Hickey was succeeded by Fr. Trevor Hughes a native of Gwent and deeply versed in the lore of his native Monmouthshire. In 1936 owing to ill health Fr. Hughes retired and was succeeded by Fr. John Colbert who served the Community as Rector for over twenty years.

The Centenary of the opening of the Church on November 11th 1940 was marked by celebration of Solemn High Mass sung by Father Provincial of the Order of Charity, the sermon being preached by Fr. Martin Dempsey C.M.S.