



Members of the Rathmines Folk Group in full voice during the 6pm Mass



Pics: John McElroy

Kevin McNamara, on the founders of the Folk group.

The Folk in Rathmines

Last weekend saw the anniversary of the Rathmines Folk Group, which has been an integral part of Sunday Mass in the Dublin parish for 35 years. **Paul Keenan** reports.

It is estimated that by 6pm on Sunday evening last, when they took their usual slot at the evening Mass, the Rathmines Folk Group will have been seen by nearly two million people. The audiences will have seen and heard the group perform at any one of the multitude of venues that extend invitations every year on foot of the group's fame, or in the church where the musicians and vocalists have not missed a Sunday evening Mass in the 35-year history of the group.

Despite such success and renown for its performances now, founding member Kevin McNamara remembers the initial resistance to the group's foundation.

"It was formed at a time when there was still strong conservatism in the Irish Church," he points out. "One publication said it was a 'disgrace' to have guitars near the cross."

Kevin goes on to praise the vision of Fr Mick

Walsh, the late Rathmines priest who saw the use of music in RE classes in schools as having something to offer the Mass. "It was Fr Mick who invited the first musicians and singers in to be part of the Mass," he says.

And whatever about the levelled criticisms of such an action, the novel idea proved a success from day one.

"The six o'clock Mass was never full back then," Kevin goes on, "but very quickly after the musicians arrived, the numbers grew."

So too did the group's membership. The loose affiliation of volunteers that turned up each week soon hit thirty. "We keep it at that now," Kevin explains, "though there is a waiting list for membership today."

The 30 — one lead guitar, a bass, two acoustic, a violinist, flautist and twenty-two singers backed by electronic percussion — now form not just a suc-



cessful folk group, but, Kevin asserts, an integral part of the liturgy celebration each week.

"The role of the group is to be a component to the overall liturgy," he says, "with the reading and sermon guiding where the weekly songs should come from and what they should

say." Kevin speaks of the "team effort" between priests and musicians weeks in advance of every Mass to coordinate the right musical accompaniment to readings and sermons. Then, of course, there are rehearsals to think of. "The group practises every Wednesday evening for two hours, and

then in the final hour before every 6pm Sunday Mass."

In-between times, the group finds time to share its music with others beyond Rathmines. There are regular slots at hospitals, hospices, prisons, and other parishes where fledgling groups are eager to learn

from the 'masters'. A mark of success can be found also in the group's selection last year to represent Ireland in RTÉ's live broadcast across Europe to celebrate Pentecost Sunday.

After thirty-five years growth, can the formula sustain? Kevin is confident. "The success of our Mass in attracting record numbers to attend and participate in the liturgy for the past 35 years is the fact that we make the Mass relevant to young people. Our songs reflect happenings and feelings in people's lives and our aim is to connect with the congregation and make them part of the Mass."

"Where other parishes may be experiencing a decline in young people attending Mass or showing no interest in the Catholic Church we see the opposite."

Surely reason enough to celebrate.

www.rathminesfolkgroup.org



Members of the folk group pictured in Rathmines