

The Folk Group Experience

How Some Young People Celebrate Mass

Folk Masses are one way of getting more young people to attend and participate more actively in church. Anne Dempsey spoke to those involved in preparing folk Masses in Rathmines and Greystones.

Rathmines parish has the longest running folk group in the country. Formed 25 years ago, the 30 member group has provided music and song at 6 o'clock Mass every Sunday since without missing a week. The initial impetus came from the Young Dublin singers at the local St. Louis School - and attracted some opposition.

"At the beginning, a lot of people were horrified at the idea of a folk group in the church," says Kevin McNamara, a founder member. "Maybe some still are and don't come to our Mass. There was controversy in the beginning and we were seen as liturgically incorrect. Then, so many people began coming that the church began to see the value. Our current parish priest is totally behind us.

"We offer a different type of music. We play a lot of the popular stuff that is not allowed in other churches. We have regular theme Masses. For example, the Simon Community might be having their annual collection. We work around this, and reflect it in the readings, the sermon and the music. We

would play songs like 'The Streets of London' and other appropriate music.

"We have had Masses on many such themes - AIDS, drugs, prisoners - with the same integrated approach. We might invite Fr. Peter McVerry to speak during a Mass on homelessness or on deprived young people, or have a prison chaplain give the homily during a Mass on prison and prisoners.

"We also fit the music to suit the readings of the day, whether it be the prodigal son or whatever. We have a huge repertoire of songs."

Popular

How popular is the folk group? "Six o'clock Mass on Sunday is absolutely jammed," Kevin says. "At the beginning, very few young people were coming to Rathmines church. Now we have a huge young following. From time to time we get letters from people who used to live here, or were students, and if they come back they come and see us. Also, we're going so long that some of the kids are now parents and bring their own kids. People sing along. We provide a separate leaflet every few weeks which includes a communion reflection. President Mary Robinson used to live up the road and come to the 6 o'clock Mass. She's been back a few times since she became president."

Usually, the folk group has no leader or conductor. "We didn't want that," says Kevin. "Everyone takes responsibility, and we manage to keep in time through lots of eye contact!

"At one time, we had a waiting list of 20-30 people. Now we take

the names and let people know when a vacancy comes up. We have had a through put of people over the years, but many of us have been involved from the beginning."

Group instruments comprise three unaccompanied guitars, one electrical lead guitar, one bass, one piano, electric keyboard, flute and percussion. The group has its own sound system and mikes. Setting up each week is a bit of a military operation as only the piano remains in situ, with the remainder of the instruments stored and needing movement and positioning each time.

Reasons for success

Why are they so successful? "Integrating the music with the messages helps to make the gospel more relevant. The whole thing becomes alive and people hear the gospel in a new meaningful way," Kevin says. With a repertoire of blues, folk and standards as well as tuneful hymns and liturgical songs, they offer the kind of music that is discouraged in other churches. McNamara thinks that narrow view is idiotic. "We have gone from having a half empty to a totally full church, so we must be doing something right."

Over the years the group's fame has spread. They have performed at Masses in every parish in Ireland. "We have a flat dweller's Mass once a year," says Kevin. "The sermon may be given by someone who has lived in Rathmines for a long time. Later, we would invite people back to the church hall for tea, and information on tenants' rights, informa-

tion on home security and general befriending."

And love stories don't only start at Zhivagos: "A lot of marriages have happened between people in this folk group," Kevin says, "including my own. I met my wife through the group." And presumably have gone on to make sweet music together.

Greystones

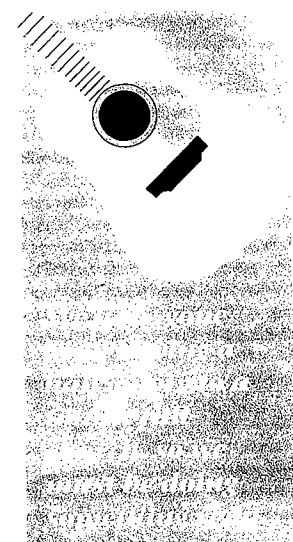
The Greystones Folk Group came into being in 1984. They play at 11 o'clock Mass each Sunday with a break during the summer. Led and consolidated by Brian O'Dubhghaill for 10 years, Patricia Tobin became musical director two years ago. Today there is a core group of 15 who collectively play guitar, bongos, bothran, flute and clarinet.

The repertoire is liturgical - mainly songs and melodies composed by the St. Louis Jesuits, John Michael Talbot, Jan Schutte, Irishman, Feargal King and others. A music group within the folk group choose the songs for each pastoral season. How enthusiastically do the congregation join in? "I don't think Catholics have a great tradition of singing in church," says Patricia. "Many people are quite shy. Though we've recently begun a new Lamb of God which people are singing.

"We get positive feedback. A lot of people come up to us at the end of Mass and say they enjoy what we do. Many parents take young children to our Mass also, I notice. I think folk groups got the go ahead in parishes as a way of bringing in young people and this worked for a time. But now I think we have to

find new ways of involving teenagers."

The folk group are busiest around Christmas and Easter and this year plan an Easter paraliturgy which will involve the young people in the congregation in a dramatisation with lighting and musical effects. Patricia says there is a strong emphasis on spirituality within the current group. "We practise on Tuesday nights, end with the Lord's Prayer and pray for intentions anyone might have. Before Christmas last year we went away for a day and a night to Glendalough with our curate Fr. Mark Haydon. We celebrated Mass together and morning prayer the next day. We plan to do the same before Easter. It's important to take time out to reflect on our lives." ■



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