

Granaghan Parish retreat a blessed time for all

by Rosemary O’Kane, Photographs by Seamus Lagan.

THE Granaghan Parish was greatly blessed by the presence of Sr Perpetua McNulty, Fr Paschal McDonnell and Geraldine Brolly, from Thornhill Ministries, who had been asked by the parish priest, Fr Charles Keaney, to lead a retreat from Sunday, February 24 until Wednesday, February 27.

It was made clear from the start that this was to be a retreat not a Mission, in the old sense of the word, so parishioners were a bit unsure what to expect at the beginning. The theme of the retreat was ‘Threads of Healing and Hope’ and this was developed into threads of belonging, meaning, forgiveness and serenity.

Morning Mass was followed by a short period of prayer and on the Tuesday there was the Morning Prayer of the Church, with participation from various parishioners. There was also an opportunity one morning for the Sacrament of Reconciliation with Fr Paschal.

On the first night, a centrepiece was created by parishioners using symbols representing some of the threads binding them together as a faith community and this remained in place throughout the retreat.

Forgiveness and acceptance were the themes for the second night and on the Tuesday there was a special prayer vigil of healing.

At the start of the retreat, parishioners were encouraged to write their mothers’ and fathers’ surnames on an altar cloth. During the liturgy of healing, these names were read out and then the cloth was carried to the front and used to dress the altar before Mass at 10 pm. It was a very beautiful and moving experience listening to the names of those who came before – the names were threads connecting parishioners to their community, their family members and members of Granaghan faith community through the ages.

The final session of the retreat was based around serenity and trust, and holding on to the threads which connect our parish to the Lord.

Throughout the retreat, there was a palpable sense of faith and holiness, and a willingness to participate, from the children in the school who were joined by Sr Perpetua and Geraldine to explore expressing their faith through music, stories and meditation, to the congregation in the church, and it was obvious that the Holy Spirit was at work.

Heartfelt thanks were extended to the team from Thornhill Ministries for leading us in this very special time of prayer, and everyone got a chance to express their appreciation and chat about the experience over a cuppa at the close of the retreat.



Granaghan Parish reaping the rewards as...

Re-energised Fr Keaney reflects on priesthood and importance of sabbatical

DELIGHTED at the success of the Thornhill Ministries led retreat in Granaghan, parish priest, Fr Charlie Keaney described it as "a time of healing and nourishment". Saying that there was time for Adoration, Anointing, Confession, and Contemplation, as well as the celebration of the Eucharist and Prayer of the Church at the start and end of each day, Fr Keaney added: "It truly was a gift of the spirit time and, hopefully, we all now have more vision of each other and will have more involvement in day-to-day parish life. We have been restored!"

Having taken a much-needed sabbatical in 2016, after over 40 years in the priesthood – 13 of which were spent as parish priest of Dunboe, Macosquin and Aghadowey – Fr Keaney returned from that "restored" and able to bring a new energy to his role since as parish priest of Granaghan.

Reflecting on his path to the priesthood, the only child of the late Charles and Kathleen Keaney, Coleraine, recalled growing up in a home where faith and prayer were important. In addition, he was taught in St John's Primary School which was run by the Loreto nuns at the time, so faith was a big part of school life.

"I was an altar server from the age of nine in my parish church, and I loved it," said Fr Keaney, who went

on to attend St Columb's College in Derry as a boarder.

"St Columb's," he pointed out, "was known then as the minor seminary and prayer was a big part of life there. We had daily Mass and visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and night prayer.

"So, I grew up surrounded by prayer. Religion was a very strong part of my life and when I was considering the priesthood, it occurred to me that perhaps I should be a missionary priest, but I was told that the Diocese needed priests. I wasn't sure, however, I decided to give it a go and it worked out."

Fr Keaney was ordained on June 1, 1975, in St John's Church, Coleraine, and went on to minister in: St Eugene's; Our Lady of Lourdes, Steelstown; Sacred Heart, Omagh; St Finlough's, Ballykelly; Buncrana; St John's, Coleraine; and now St John the Baptist, Granaghan (Swatragh).

Commenting on his sabbatical in 2016, when he retired as parish priest of Coleraine, Fr Keaney said: "It wasn't that I was living at some distance from my vocation, as I was busy, engaged and attentive, but somehow I was running on automatic; I was running on empty.

"I was doing what St Charles Borromeo had warned his priests against – I was so involved in the needs of others that I was

neglecting my own well-being, spiritually and otherwise. So, I knew I was long overdue a sabbatical. Diocesan priests are very bad at taking time out because of the nature of the ministry and the decreasing number of priests, but it actually improves their ministry by giving time to reflect."

Fr Keaney booked a sabbatical programme by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in San Antonio, Texas, that had been recommended to him and it turned out to be one of the best experiences of his life to date.

Advertised as a programme for the seasoned pastor, Fr Keaney said that it focused on the four key aspects of the biblical Sabbath – ceasing, resting, embracing and feasting!

"I knew the programme was

going to be good," he recalled, "when I looked at the schedule and the lecturers, but it far exceeded my expectations. There was a generosity of time and space to refocus, to achieve more balance and integration in life.

"I returned from my sabbatical with a new attitude, strong trust, a gentle confidence and a fresh approach."

The programme included an eight-day guided retreat, a day of recollection every few weeks, and a faith sharing group once a week. They celebrated Mass as a group three times a week and joined the rest of the community on the campus for the Eucharist at other times.

"At weekends, we went around the parishes to attend Mass," recalled Fr Keaney, "and with

Mexican, African and American Masses amongst those to choose from, it was great to experience the various liturgies."

Amongst the group of missionary and diocesan priests and religious on the programme with him were about five Irish people, including Fr Paddy O'Kane, PP Holy Family, Ballymagroarty, and others from Australia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Canada and America.

The classes covered such areas as theology, spirituality, the environment, health and well being, and scripture, and Fr Keaney was delighted that Fr Ron Rolheiser OMI, the president of the Oblate School of Theology there, was one of the lecturers on the programme.

Highly recommending the very

balanced programme and the taking of a sabbatical, the 69-year-old described his five months in Texas as one of the highlights of his life: "It is good to meet new people and discover new ideas, and become energised, renewed and refreshed."

He remarked: "St Paul says always be happy in the Lord. We are redeemed and we should look redeemed."

Looking back on his priesthood, Fr Keaney said: "It has been challenging at times but it is worthwhile. I am glad that I made that decision all those years ago. I love the pastoral work, meeting people, visiting the sick, preaching and visiting the schools. I just live an ordinary life and I feel very blessed with my vocation and my family and friends."

