

Diamond Jubilee of Consecration of Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, Bulwell  
Sunday 8 May 2011

you will take my advice, you will set to work at once to start three separate funds for each of these different purposes.”

The bungalow, which served as the first presbytery, was built in 1924. It was in this year that Fr. Vincent Denny came. He stayed in Bulwell until 1926 when he was replaced by Fr. Bowman Augustus Short. Born in Nottingham in 1893, Bowman Short was an altar server at the cathedral from an early age. After studies at the English College, Lisbon, and later at the Venerable English College, Rome, he was ordained to the priesthood in our cathedral on 15 August 1919. Fr. Short conducted his first baptism in Bulwell on 29 September 1926, his first funeral on 28 October, and his first wedding on 27 December. He was to remain here for thirty-four years until his death on 28 December 1960. Things were not easy for the young priest, who had come from the ‘relative’ luxury of a curacy at St. Mary’s, Derby, with its magnificent church and a Catholic population of some three thousand to the poverty of Bulwell, with a wooden hut for a church and a Catholic population of about five hundred! Things really were grim. On 18 February 1929, Fr. Short wrote to Bishop Dunn: “During the last few days, we have been living in what I should think must be one of the coldest spots in England. The water which I carry across to the church froze as I carried it across, while the oil in the sanctuary [lamp] has been frozen solid.” In a report written in 1937, Fr. Short noted: “When I was appointed to Bulwell just over eleven years ago, my assets were a plot of ground, an Army Hut Church (with not even the necessary equipment); an almost empty Bungalow, and in addition a debt of approximately £1,100 [roughly £52,500 in 2011], this being the outstanding debt on the ground and bungalow. There was neither Gas nor Electricity, in fact all lighting both in “Church” and “House” was by oil or acetylene lamps. My congregation on Sundays for Holy Mass was not more than 50 persons, and my income on the first few Sundays from the Parish varied between 15/- and £1.” [This is between £36 and £48 in 2011.] Like Bishop Dunn sixteen years earlier, Fr. Short was full of hope. “We can only trust” he wrote in the same report “that Almighty God will continue to give us the help in the future which he has so generously bestowed on us in the past ...”

That hope was not unrealistic; but God does not do the work for us. We have to do it ourselves. So it was that, for instance, the Poor Clare monastery, for so many years a power house of prayer and also of material support for the parish, was founded in the late 1920s. The debt owed to these contemplative nuns has not always been appreciated. Among many other things, the extern sisters, having been away from home from Monday to Friday collecting alms, often spent most of Saturday on their hands and knees polishing the church floor!

The parish hall was opened in 1932 and, on 27 July 1934, Bishop McNulty laid the foundation stone of the present church which was opened less than a year later, on 8 May 1935 – seventy-six years ago today. It was to take another sixteen years of hard work in fund-raising by priest and parishioners, and of unremitting prayer by the Poor Clares, before the capital debt had been completely cleared and this church was able – as reported in the Nottingham Catholic Magazine June 1951 - to be “dedicated for all time to the service of Almighty God. It was on this occasion that Fr. Short, in recognition of his unremitting zeal, was made an Honorary Canon of the diocese. His relatively sudden death, at the age of sixty-seven, on 28 December 1960 marked the end of an era. But the flame of faith in this part of Nottingham was to continue to grow; and so it has, and does.

When, as an altar server, I took part in the consecration of this church on 8 May 1951, little did I think that I would have the opportunity, sixty years later, to thank God publicly for the people of this parish of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, for the Poor Clare Sisters and for the priests who have served here; and confidently to ask his blessing on the years that lie ahead.

Canon A. P. Dolan

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On Tuesday 8 May 1951, it took about four hours to consecrate this church. Not surprisingly, the ritual was rather complicated, and I'm not going to attempt to describe it. Instead I want to tell you a little about what led up to the event the sixtieth anniversary of which we are celebrating today. Canon Sweeney, my predecessor as archivist of this diocese, noted that the foundation, in the early 1880s, of what is now the parish of Bulwell "was due primarily to the initiative of a working-class laity." Writing in the mid-1950s, he added that "[the parish] has retained this characteristic ever since. There are no names of wealthy benefactors to record in the history of the parish." (I have no idea whether this is still the case.)

In 1881, Mass began to be said in a house in Gedling Street, although probably not every Sunday, by the priest from Hucknall. Four years later, in June 1885, a disused building in Downing Street was rented on a seven-year lease for use as a chapel dedicated (note this) to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. An adjoining house was taken as a residence for a priest, although the first priest, Fr. Robert Dillon Browne, did not move into it until 1893. He was succeeded, the following year, by Fr. John Patrick Hogan, who also remained for one year. For the next three years there was no resident priest in Bulwell. Then four priests followed in quick succession. The last of these, Fr. Michael Callery, wrote to the Vicar General, Canon Baigent, on 21 June 1911: "Last Saturday six years ago I came to Bulwell and during that time I have known nothing but poverty and misery." Shortly afterwards, Fr. Callery left Bulwell; the chapel was closed and no Mass was celebrated there for the next two years. But the small congregation struggled on, their hopes "kept alive largely through the efforts of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace" who, from their convent in Mapperley, "gathered the children for instruction, and were mainly instrumental in securing the use of a little hall, in Hazel Street, for a Mass-centre in 1913." Other things were happening too. Mr. D. W. Marks of Logan Street wrote to Canon Baigent in April 1914 about the possible purchase of a plot of land on Ravensworth Road for a church, stating his conviction that "undoubtedly there is a big future for the Church in Bulwell" and adding that "If we can get a Church to call our own and pay interest instead of rent I am certain we shall never look back."

Nothing further was to happen for several years until, in 1919, Bishop Thomas Dunn began negotiations with the Duke of Newcastle's estate agent which resulted in the purchase, from the Duke, of one acre of land on Brooklyn Road in the parish of Basford. The sale was completed 21 June 1920. Several months earlier, the bishop had notified the estate agent that "rather a curious situation has arisen. A committee of Catholics of Bulwell, very keen to make a start, have purchased an army hut recently at Newark. ... They are anxious to start erecting it as soon as possible on the land at Bulwell." In reply to a query from the bishop, the estate agent advised that it would be possible to erect the hut before the sale of the land was completed provided that he (the bishop) would undertake to remove the hut and restore the surface should the sale not go through. This proved not to be necessary, and Mass was said for the first time in this hut on 7 November 1920. (The hut survived until at least the late 1960s. After it was no longer needed as a church, it was used as part of the school – from the mid-1940s – and later as a social club.)

One thing that comes through loud and clear during the first part, and indeed the whole, of this story is that a flame of faith had been kindled in Bulwell and, once kindled, although it flickered sometimes, it was never quenched. The Catholics of Bulwell had been doing a great job for some forty years by this stage, but there was still a long way to go. In a lengthy statement to the parishioners in March 1921, Bishop Dunn detailed the debts already incurred and the extent to which they had so far been paid off. He noted that: "the lavatories being now finished you will have the opportunity to use this temporary church during the week for social purposes" which, presumably, would raise money to pay off the debts. The bishop concluded his statement as follows.

"... I beg of you not to shut your eyes to the future because this mission [parish] will not be satisfactorily established until it has a permanent church, a priests' house and a resident priest. If