



St Columb's Church, Waterside
MEMORIES OF ALTAR SERVING IN THE 1960s

During a recent short stay in Altnagelvin Hospital, my wife brought me some local newspapers to pass the time. I have lived away from Derry for the best part of 40 years and she thought I might enjoy getting back in tune with my native place. I came across a picture which had been sent to the paper by Fr Roland Colhoun of Waterside Parish. It was of a group of altar boys, parish workers and priests taken on an annual altar servers outing to Inishowen around 1962. I was one of the boys in the photo and was aged about nine years. Seeing the photo brought back a flood of memories from that period, when I was very happy growing up in the parish and privileged to have been an altar boy in St Columb's, Chapel Road. Because I was able to name almost everyone in the old photograph, Fr Colhoun subsequently invited me to jot down some reminiscences from that time. Here is my humble contribution for the history section of the parish website.



In those days, of course, the Mass was in Latin and young boys joining as servers had to learn the Latin responses from the outset – no mean feat when you're aged eight or nine. But the priests were very patient and the older boys were always a great support until the new server had settled in. Amazingly, after 50+ years, most of the Latin responses have stayed with me.

At that time the first Mass on Sunday was 6.30am. Many of the medical staff at local hospitals would have attended this Mass before going on duty. My home was in Violet Street at the lower end of Chapel road, a short walk to the church. I still remember the excitement of being allowed to go to on foot, solo, in the dark, with my surplice and soutane in my bag to be in the Sacristy for 6.15am. I don't think I have been as brave since then!

In those days the duties of the Waterside clergy extended to Ardmore, Enagh, Gransha Hospital and the Good Shepherd Convent on Dungiven Road. Servers were needed to assist at these liturgies. Being chosen to serve at the Easter Vigil in the Convent Chapel was the most coveted. It was known that when the Vigil had finished, the nuns would always provide supper for the visiting priest and servers. For the servers there was always a small supply of Cadbury's Crème Eggs to be taken home. These might be a common confection nowadays but I can tell you that, to a ten year old in the early 1960s, they were a very rare treat indeed.





Another outstanding memory of that time is the annual parish retreat, which was held in all the city parishes, usually in the first two weeks in May. The first week was for women and girls of the parish and the second week was for boys and men. The arrival of the “holy fathers” signalled a very busy fortnight for the altar boys. The church had to be readied for packed congregations. Every year we had to borrow large numbers of stacking chairs and benches from the local schools and halls to accommodate the large attendances. There were more early morning Masses to be served. We were also bound to attend the evening Devotions, consisting of the Rosary, a lengthy sermon and Benediction. I remember being intrigued as a ten year old as to why we were allowed to be present during the sermon on the men’s week but we had to leave the altar and the sacristy when the sermons were being delivered during the women’s week!



Through all these activities, of course, we were guided and overseen by the Church sacristan, for many years the late Liam McGuinness. Liam was always in the sacristy, at every Mass, Benediction or other ceremony, gently pointing out if we had missed something or got something wrong and not so gently if we had misbehaved! Of the seven years I served as an altar boy in

Chapel Road, I can’t remember once turning up for duty and finding Liam absent. Consistently present, Liam was a tremendous parish servant.

Yes, I have very fond memories of my time as an altar server in St. Columb's, Waterside. I have always regarded it as a privilege to have had the opportunity to have served Mass for so many wonderful and dedicated priests of that era and to have been able to witness at close hand some of the key events in the life of the parish and of some of its parishioners.

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