

Our Parish Story - Parish of St Peter and St Paul

For us here in Johnsonville, our parish is coming to an end - we are set to merge with the parishes of Newlands and Onslow next year. While the church will remain as the Church of St Peter and St Paul, our parish will be new - with a new name

This event tonight - is part of our farewell to our parish centred on Johnsonville and welcoming the new entity in its birth

We can speak of 'generations' of faith traditions and journeys within the Church

Our tipuna - our whakapapa starts with Jesus who passed on the message to St Peter and St Paul and the other disciplines and who began the early Church. We are all descendants of this core beginning: we can trace the line of St Peter thru the Popes over the centuries to the existing Pope Francis - despite having a few 'dodgy popes' along the way.

From Palestine, the Church spread and eventually (after a long time) arrived to Aotearoa-NZ: Most of us are likely to be familiar that from the Church in Europe came missionaries, such as Bishop Pompallier who celebrated the first Mass at Hokianga in 1838.

But the Church did not arrive to an 'empty land' - Johnsonville stream was known as Waitohi or scared water. Waitohi was also the name of the elder sister of Te Rauparaha and the Mother of Te Rangihaeata of Ngati Toa Rangatira. And before Ngati Toa arrival in the 1820s, Ngai Tara and Ngati Ira lived in this area. Ngati Toa and the associated iwi and hapu had their own beliefs and traditions. I remember reading a reflection when my brother was in PNG in the 1980s that the first thing we need to do when approaching another culture, is to 'take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is Holy - else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams - more serious, still we may forget that God was here before our arrival' (Catholic Overseas Volunteer Service, 1982).

From the baptisms of the 1st Catholics in the area from the 1850s onwards, we have the beginnings of the Catholic Church. Rather than Johnsonville, however, this story began in the Ohariu Valley. The Ohariu Valley was surveyed by the NZ Company in the 1840s and was set aside as a small farms settlement. Many of the Ohariu Valley settlers arrived on the Oliver Lang in 1856, including Thomas and Harriet Bassett (who had 10 children). It was the Bassett family who donated the land to build the 1st Catholic Church in the area - St Joseph's Chapel of 1874/75. St Joseph's in the Ohariu Valley and the surrounding area (including St Josephs of Pauatahanui) was at the time serviced by the Hutt Valley parish of Ss Peter and Pauls. While the Chapel is 'long gone', the historic Catholic cemetery in the Ohariu Valley remains an important historic site of our parish and faith history story

With the construction of the Wellington-Manawatu railway in the 1880s, the center of settlement shifted from Ohariu Valley to Johnsonville. To cater for the growing population, the Church of St Peter and St Paul Church was built in Johnsonville in 1895. As for the Ohariu Valley community, Johnsonville was serviced from the Hutt Valley, in particular by Fr Donnelly and Fr Lane. Like the Ohariu Valley story, it was a partnership enterprise between clery and laity. In particular, Felix and Gertrude O'Neill provided lodgings for the visiting priests and took leadership in the faith community. It was Felix O'Neill who gave the address of welcome to Archbishop Redwood at the opening of the church in 1895.

In 1922, Johnsonville, Ngaio, Khandallah, Porirua, Pauatahanui and Plimmerton was divided from the rest of the Hutt Valley Parish and was called Johnsonville parish - as the parish of St Peter and St Paul with the 1st parish priest, being Fr Michael Griffin. While Fr Michael Griffin 'got things going', it was a joint effort of priest and laity to construct some basic foundation stones of the parish. Johnsonville, as the growing center of the church for the area, was strengthened with the opening of St Brigid's School in 1929 serviced by the Brigidine Sisters with the Brigidine Convent built in 1937. Additional growth required expansion to the original church with the church extension (now the hall) built in 1931.

Fr Griffin was eventually replaced with the legendary Fr Clement Evans in 1936 and it was during the illness of Fr Evans in 1970 that Fr Peter Fitzgibbon served as an Administrator – by all accounts the young Fr Peter was a popular and well-liked priest

Meanwhile the parish of Johnsonville became smaller in geographic size - Plimmerton parish was established in 1940 (which included Tawa and Porirua at the time), the parish of Onslow was established in 1948 and the parish of St Andrew in Newlands was established in 1968. However, before this time in 1963, my Dad helped to build a church on Blackrock Road (while I had my first years living in Newlands, I was baptised in 1966 in the Church of St Peter and St Paul). Along with the new church at Newlands, the old 1895 part of the Johnsonville church was deteriorating and on Christmas morning in 1969, the north wall of the Sanctuary started to cave in as a result of high winds. The architectural solution of the time was to demolish the 1895 Church and build a new church building attached to the 1931 addition. The new church opened in August 1975.

This little history now arrives at the present time -we have retained, refurbished and strengthened the 1975 Church and associated 1931 Hall. We have also renovated the presbytery of 1925. This work means that the Church of St Peter and Paul will remain the center of Catholic faith life in the Johnsonville area for many years into the future.

But churches are more than 'bricks n mortar' – we have many legacies - of Fr Francis Douglas or the pioneering work of the Brigidine Sisters, with special mention of Sr Cyprian. In addition to priests and nuns, we have many lay people who have committed their lives to the gospel. For example, Kitty McKinley, founder of Challenge 2000. Further, a particular characteristic of our parish are the large number of groups and organisations who do so much on their own initiative – 6 music groups, Welcoming Ministry, Passionist Family Groups, prayer groups...etc, etc.

For our future, the past can be our model – as when the Bassetts took the initiative to establish a church in Ohariu Valley in 1874 – today it will be laity working with clergy to also establish new communities within the new parish in the growing urban area – it will be a large and diverse community, but united together

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