

The Ups & Downs of Terrey Hills Parish

Our parish (as it was until recently) is often regarded as being ‘strange’, or ‘irreverent’, or just ‘different’ to other suburban Catholic parishes – especially by our near neighbours – and that’s not unreasonable, because in many ways it is all of those things, and more. I think ‘less-formal’ and ‘people-oriented’ are perhaps other characteristics that we deserve and cherish; perhaps ‘unfamiliar’ might sum up an outsider’s impressions.

When my late mother, a very traditional, unquestioning Catholic, first came to Mass here in the ‘70s, she said afterwards that it was all very nice, but could we now find a real church and go to Mass.

The origins of St Anthony’s church are vastly different to the typical suburban norm of yesteryear, where the local bishop responded to an increasing Catholic population by erecting a traditional brick edifice on a hill, manned it with a priest or two, and added a primary school staffed by a brace of nuns. All very traditional.

Terrey Hills had almost nothing in common with that model. It isn’t even a consecrated church – it’s ‘Mass centre’, something more likely to be found in a small, isolated, rural community where the single building had to be a church on those Sundays when a priest came from elsewhere, a primary school on weekdays, and a parish hall for social events. And, apart from housing a school, that’s what St Anthony’s was, and is still, with the consequent feel of community bonding – although since about 1973 this has been a bonding of the Parish community rather than of just the Terrey Hills suburban community. Since that time, only about ten percent of the congregation has been local, the majority coming from elsewhere. You might wonder why.

In 1930, only about 40 families lived in Terrey Hills. The population grew slowly, and by 1950 was sufficient to attract a limited bus service to Mona Vale, St Ives and Chatswood. Restricted Sunday timetables made attending Mass from here an all-day outing. By the mid-50s there were estimated to be 50 to 100 Catholics here. It was a typical bush village, with all the charms and drawbacks of isolated rural living.

In 1958, three men approached Cardinal Gilroy to ask for some facility for hearing Mass locally. Fr Sobb, who already looked after coastal parishes from Collaroy to Palm Beach, was instructed to include Terrey Hills in his rounds, and the first Mass was held in the Community Centre in April 1958. This couldn’t last, Fr Sobb was overloaded and the Community Centre was sometimes unsuitable following the socials often held there the night before, so parishioners found land, then more and better land, and began to plan a church.

This took, using only voluntary labour, until 1962 to build and open. The first attempt was based on material recycled from a disused Presbyterian church at Fairfield. It had been hoped that the building could be dismantled there and re-erected here, Lego-like, but this proved overly optimistic. Locals built and furnished the building; old pews were salvaged from a church in Manly. The whole project cost £950. “It was truly a church built on raffles, special projects and old-fashioned hard work.” There were seats for 80 people.

Is it any wonder there was a strong sense of community? The locals had built it and were proud of it.

Not much changed for the next ten years, except that servicing Terrey Hills overloaded Fr Sobb. He asked Jesuits from St Ives and other priests to fill in occasionally, and paid them from his own funds. There were no marriages in those years and few baptisms. When my wife and I came to live in Terrey Hills in June 1973 with our infant son, we two adults were ten percent of the Sunday congregation; eventually, after banging fruitlessly on the St Ives’ monastery door, we had discovered that Mass here was at 8:30am on Sundays.

But the winds of change had begun to blow and were about to reach Force 10.

The Jesuits having largely left St Ives, Fr Sobb was struggling to service Terrey Hills. Parishioners approached the Passionist community at St Ives and Bishop Muldoon, and they agreed that the Passionists would take over the Parish. This was in October 1972. Several different priests began the project, but before long Fr Peter McGrath became the regular celebrant and effectively Parish Priest.

Fr Peter was a considerable shock to the Terrey Hills traditional Catholics. Enthusiastic, dynamic, charismatic, deeply sympathetic, welcoming, informal, accepting of everyone, outspoken, plain spoken, but chronically late and overtly ocker – a rich mix of inspiring talents, even if somewhat over the top at times.

Peter was unlike any priest most had ever encountered. We'd come here from a parish where the 90-year old priest had to be helped onto the altar; this man bounded, mentally and physically.

The congregation grew. First newcomers were a group who had been attending Fr Peter's Adult Education courses at St Ives. These soon outnumbered the few locals and, as they were attending his classes, they were not people just following what they'd been taught at school, they had enquiring minds seeking further spiritual enlightenment. Coming from where they did, they tended to be financially well off and to be people of wider business experience. The Terrey Hills' facilities were – perhaps unintentionally, or perhaps not – taken over, but enriched and expanded also.

The word spread: this was an unusual community, accepting of situations seen as impediments to worship in some other parishes; dynamic; progressive; not hidebound. It lacked only a toilet at that time – a lack soon filled by volunteers. Soon the 80 seats were full every Sunday; more Masses were offered; people had to stand outside and peer through the windows. On good days the altar would be taken outside and people stood or sat on the grass. Our son played under the altar during Mass. The parish boomed, it was meeting a need.

After considerable deliberation, design effort and costing, the building was extended to a capacity of 350. There had been real concern that if the Passionists left – in particular, if Fr Peter left – then we locals might be stuck with a \$40,000 debt we couldn't service. However, community confidence was high, so the extension went ahead, and was ready for Easter 1975. With a carpeted floor and stackable seats, it embodied the community centre qualities that were to become such an important part of the Parish ethos. In 1989 a large dine-in kitchen and other facilities were added, indicators of further progress.

Church attendance expanded. Weekend Masses, especially Saturday evening, overflowed. Extra windows had to be installed in the back wall to allow the overflow a view. Teenagers congregated outside. Children sat all over the altar steps; the young and fit sat on the floor in the aisles. Christmas Eve Masses often attracted 3000 or more, Easter was much the same. Occasional visits to other parishes were like eating stale biscuits after living in a chocolate factory – food? Yes, but bland, dull, lacking essential appeal.

Social work and social activities flourished. Committees were established within the Parish Council: liturgy, music; support; singles support; communications; youth group; house and grounds maintenance; social, etc. So many put their hands up that elections had to be held for the Parish Council. As with those people from St Ives, the people attracted to the Parish were often the cream of the committed crop from elsewhere. We became a parish top-heavy with commitment and talent. Our charitable work in providing Christmas hampers, for example, peaked at 700 hampers one year – over \$70,000 worth of customized and personally delivered gifts. Our Youth Group held regular social functions; we held Winter Madness concerts, in the church; we had enormously successful fetes; and marriage encounter weekends away. There was too much living Christian Community activity to list in this short account; it was the embodiment of Christian spirit, not just religious observance. The ABC televised Mass, and once used our Hamper Mass as a Christmas backdrop.

It was a heady time to be a Catholic in Terrey Hills.

An important offshoot was the Family Group Movement, now worldwide under Fr Peter's guidance. It provided spiritual and social contact for some 30 or so Parish groups of about a dozen families each through picnics, home Masses, weekends away, mutual support and the like.

Unfortunately, inevitably, it has faded. Fr Peter did leave eventually and although other Passionists followed him to Terrey Hills and were equally respected and wonderful men in their own right, some found difficulties in adapting to the culture that had evolved in which the priest did not, perhaps, always have the last word, and in which liturgical custom had drifted rather far from other's norms – not heretical or insensitive, just simpler. Peter was a hard act to follow; it was all, to a degree, personality-driven. There were some unfortunate events that tested, and even divided, the community, although despite these the basic Parish principles remained solid – and are still, even though numbers have declined and we have adapted to today's reality.

Other events have intruded: priests in other parishes, perhaps once not so welcoming of unorthodox relationships and the like, have passed on; children have grown up and moved away; older people might no longer wish to travel so far; religious observance has lost some relevance for some; modern children don't all follow their parent's paths into regular attendance at Mass. Many things have changed since the heady days.

One major thing was the decision by the Passionists to cut back their services to be more in keeping with their own declining numbers, and to meet more-pressing needs in more-disadvantaged communities. They left Terrey Hills and the Parish was taken under direct control of the Diocese of Broken Bay – a culture shock for both sides, I suspect, but bearable, especially in view of possible closure otherwise.

Before long, many of the traditional Committees had faded to numbers more appropriate to falling Parish attendance. Christmas hamper numbers, for example, fell to 200 a few years back, and fell further since.

The most recent change in circumstances has been the amalgamation of three adjacent parishes into one, with the attendant difficulties in melding three different cultures into a cohesive body under control of one very busy Parish Priest, helped by two imported priests themselves striving to overcome language and cultural differences. It's not easy, not for anyone. It was necessary, but unfortunate.

However much I might regret the passing of earlier times, they left behind a spirit not easily quenched in those who experienced those exciting days; days that can be recalled but not recovered.

It's not unexpected that Terrey Hills Parish has slumped somewhat. After all, where now are those stalwart Catholic organisations of my youth: the Holy Name Society, the Sacred Heart Sodality and the Children of Mary? They served their purpose in their day, as did St Anthony's in the Fields.

Yes, we are 'different', I hope this has told you why.

Tony Griffiths,

with acknowledgement to "Fill My House", written by Sr Leonie Martin in 1989.