Silent Homilies

Our Lady of Margam

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The Parish That Kept the Name

Catholic Wales beside a ruined abbey:
the parish of Our Lady of Margam

A history of Our Lady of Margam,
Port Talbot

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Dedication

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For the people who hired the lorry, converted the stables, served Mass, paid the weekly contribution, and kept the name of Our Lady on this road.

Before You Begin

†

Do you know how this parish actually began? Not with a finished church and a tidy opening day. It began with Mass in borrowed rooms, a house sold after a promise, marriages in what is now the priest's living room, a stable turned into a chapel, and a group of men who spent a Thursday taking an old rugby clubhouse to pieces.

Our Lady of Margam was established in 1951. Before that, Catholics here belonged to St Joseph's in Aberavon. The new parish took a name that already belonged to this place. Margam had been Cistercian ground for centuries. The monks' church was dedicated to Mary. The later Catholic parish kept that name, even though the abbey itself had long been a ruin and an estate church.

I am the present parish priest. The story is not mine. It belongs to the people who found the land, said the first Mass here, paid for the buildings and then looked after them. This book uses the parish history already gathered by earlier hands, the surviving parish papers, photographs that people did not throw away, and some things older parishioners have told me themselves. Where I am not sure, I will say so.

For the first time, readers can now meet some of the original correspondence behind that familiar story: letters, plans and small details that have not previously been brought together and set before the parish in this way. The papers do not tell everything. They do let the people who wrote them speak in their own words.

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CHAPTER 1

Catholics already here

The story of Our Lady of Margam did not begin in 1951. For more than a hundred years before that, Catholics in this part of Glamorgan went to Mass at St Joseph's in Aberavon. That older parish was the mother parish. Three later churches came out of it: St Therese of Lisieux at Sandfields, St Philip Evans at Cwmavon, and Our Lady of Margam.

The Aberavon mission was already old when Margam needed a priest of its own. In those days a "mission" was a Catholic community served by a priest before it had been given the full standing of a parish. Worship there can be followed back to the middle of the nineteenth century. The first generations met wherever they could. For a time they even used a Baptist chapel. In the 1860s a church was built that also housed a school. The present St Joseph's, the church still standing on Water Street, was built in 1930 and 1931. It was built for a largely Irish congregation. The architect was F. R. Bates, from the same firm that later designed the church on Margam Road.

William Joseph Waters, known as Joe, later put the next step simply. The first necessity, he said, was to buy land and buildings. That work was done, in his words, with foresight by Monsignor Peter Gavin, by Canon Quilligan, and by others whose names are less well known. In the spring

of 1951 Gavin was Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Cardiff. The Chancellor was the archbishop's senior official for diocesan business. He signed the letter that first speaks of "Margam parish" as a place with its own boundary. Canon Quilligan was then at Aberavon. Their names belong at the beginning of this story because the new parish was not invented on Margam Road. It was formed from an older one.

The numbers help to explain why a second parish was needed. Older parish histories say that the Catholic population of Aberavon was about two hundred in 1850. By 1925 it was given as three thousand three hundred. A Roman Catholic infants' school had been built in Aberavon in 1896. St Joseph's Comprehensive opened in 1965. Figures of this kind usually come from commemorative books. They should be treated as estimates. Even so, the direction is clear. The Catholic community had grown with the town.

Before Maesgwyn was bought, Mass for people living towards Margam was said in three different places at different times: the Henry Davies Memorial Hall, Taibach Library, and an upper room of the Port Talbot Hotel on Water Street. The hotel was demolished in 1984. The library is still there. Anyone who has ever set out chairs in a borrowed hall already understands that stage of parish life. The room is only yours for an hour. When Mass is over, you leave it as you found it.

That is how Catholic life on this side of the town began. There was not yet a church of Our Lady of Margam. There were already people who knew where to go to Mass, and who would come if someone was dying.



St Joseph's R.C. Church, Aberavon, 1930. The mother parish of Our Lady of Margam. Postcard; Port Talbot Historical Society.



The interior of St Joseph's, Aberavon, 1930. Postcard.



Taibach Library. One of the places where Mass was offered before the parish had a church of its own.



The Port Talbot Hotel, Water Street. Mass was also offered in an upper room here. The building was demolished in 1984. Postcard; Port Talbot Historical Society.

A Reflection

A parish often begins before anyone gives it a name. People already know where they go to Mass. They already know whom to send for. The later building makes that life easier to see. It does not create it.
St Joseph's was not a rival. It was the church that made Margam possible. It is easy, once a parish has its own porch and its own Sunday times, to forget the place that looked after people first. The Mass was the same Mass in a hired room as it later was in a church built for the purpose. What changed was the address. What did not change was the Church.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for St Joseph's, and for every room that held this community before Our Lady of Margam had a church of its own. Amen.

CHAPTER 2

Why the name matters

The parish is called Our Lady of Margam. That title sits beside a much older fact. For centuries before there was a Catholic parish on Margam Road, the great church of this place was already dedicated to St Mary.

In 1147 a Cistercian abbey was founded here. The monks' church was dedicated to St Mary. For about four hundred years the community farmed the land, prayed the Divine Office and buried its dead. At the dissolution of the monasteries the house passed to new owners, first the Mansel family and later the Talbots. They made an estate of what had been a monastery.

The east end of the abbey church became a ruin. That ruin still stands in Margam Park. The west end of the same building continued as a parish church. Today it belongs to the Church in Wales and is still used for worship. Visitors sometimes think they have found Our Lady of Margam when they are standing in the park. They have not. The Catholic church is on Margam Road. The ruin and the old nave are what remain of the medieval abbey.

The Catholic parish formed in 1951 is not the abbey brought back to life. There is no line of ownership from the Cistercians to 63 Margam Road. What the two stories share is a place, and Mary's name.

The first papers from the new parish do not yet use the title most people know today. In December 1951 Fr William O'Connor certified three rooms on the ground floor of Maesgwyn as a Catholic place of worship. The form simply called the building "Maesgwyn" Catholic Church. Eight months later another official form gave it a different name. On 7 August 1952 the registered place of worship at Maesgwyn was entered as Saint Mary's "Star of the Sea." Star of the Sea — in Latin, Stella Maris — is an old title of Our Lady. Marriages were recorded under that name in 1953. In the same year a Latin paper spoke of Ecclesia Sanctae Mariae apud Margam: the Church of St Mary at Margam. Later papers use St Mary at Margam. The familiar wording Our Lady of Margam appears in a visitation paper of 1962.

The papers do not tell us who chose any of these titles, or whether the medieval abbey was in their mind. They only show that, from the start, the Catholic community at Maesgwyn placed Mary's name over the rooms where Mass was said.

A Reflection

We do not know why this parish came to be called Our Lady of Margam. We do know that Mary's name was already on the first official papers, even when the wording was not yet the wording we use on Sunday.
Star of the Sea. St Mary at Margam. Our Lady of Margam. The words are not identical. The direction is the same. Catholics here asked to live under Mary's care before they had a church that looked like a church. The later title did not invent that. It only made it easier to say.

A Short Prayer

Our Lady of Margam, Star of the Sea, keep this parish close to your Son. Teach us to remember those who prayed here long before we arrived. Amen.

CHAPTER 3

A town that was changing

The new parish was born into a town that was still being rebuilt after the war. Industry was growing. Houses were spreading along the roads under the hill. In July 1951 the new Abbey Works at Margam were opened. Families moved for jobs. Some of those families were Catholic.

The parish has long remembered the practical side of that change. People needed somewhere nearer than Aberavon when the buses were full and the children were small.

Old postcards of Margam Road show a wide road, fairly new houses, telegraph poles and the mountain behind them. A photograph of Station Road in the 1950s shows the gates where people waited for trains to pass. The place was industrial and local at the same time.

Further back, other families had already made money and a name in grocery and tinplate. Colonel David Roderick David was born in 1842 at Tyisha, Brombil. By 1901 his home was Maes y Gwyn at Groeswen, Margam. That house is not the later Maesgwyn on Margam Road. The two should not be treated as the same story. The older house simply shows that the David and Llewellyn names were already part of this district long before a Catholic parish needed land.

An old photograph of Cwm Brombil shows only a handful of houses under the hill. In the aerial view, rows of terraces run towards the works, with a football ground and a gas holder marked G.K.B. That was the town in which the new parish had to find a site.



Margam Road, Margam. Postcard, Frith Ltd. Port Talbot Historical Society collection.



Station Road, Port Talbot, in the 1950s. The parish history remembers people waiting at the gates for the trains to pass.



Cwm Brombil, Port Talbot. Postcard; Port Talbot Historical Society. Colonel David Roderick David was born at Tyisha, Brombil, in 1842.



New works and housing at Margam in the early 1950s.



Port Talbot from above, with the football ground and works beyond.



Margam Road, Port Talbot. Postcard; Port Talbot Historical Society.

A Reflection

Parishes do not grow in empty places. They grow where people find work, marry, raise children and look for a church they can reach.
The steelworks and the new houses do not, by themselves, explain every decision that followed. They do explain the kind of town this was. Faith has an address because people have addresses. When a town grows, the Church has to decide how people who live on this side of it are to get to Mass.

A Short Prayer

Lord, you meet people where they actually live and work. Bless this town, and the families who still travel these roads to Mass. Amen.

CHAPTER 4

A site at Glan-y-mor

Before Maesgwyn was bought, the Catholic search for land in Margam had already begun somewhere else.

In March 1945 Canon Vearncombe, the priest at St Joseph's, Aberavon, was paying ground rent to the Margam Estate for a plot in Glan-y-mor Avenue. The old letter writes the road as Glanymor. His own letter of 14 March does not survive among the papers we have. The reply does. It shows that he had already asked whether the freehold could be bought.

From the correspondence

G. S. Roedemer Chartered Land Agent, Margam Estate Office to Very Rev. Canon Vearncombe St Joseph's, Aberavon 16 March 1945

Subject: "Site for R.C. Chapel, Glanymor Avenue."

I thank you for your letter of the 14th instant enclosing the amount of the Ground Rent £2. 17. 0d. [...] With reference to your enquiry as to purchasing the Freehold of the Site, this Site is not included in the list of Freeholds now being offered for Sale by the Margam Trustees.

Two pounds seventeen shillings. There were twenty shillings to the pound.

Later papers look back at what happened next. In 1975 a solicitor writing to the Archbishop recorded that the ground had been purchased in September 1946 for £156, and added one unexpected detail:

> *There are foundations for four houses already laid there before you purchased it.*

The letter describes those foundations as foundations for houses, not as chapel foundations.

That is as far as these papers take us. They establish a site for a Catholic chapel. They do not establish that a chapel was built there, or that Mass was said there. We do not know, from this file, why the parish story then moves to Maesgwyn. What they do show is simpler. Years before the house chapel was registered on Margam Road, the priest at St Joseph's was already trying to secure a piece of ground in Margam.

A Reflection

A parish inherits more than the buildings that still stand. It also inherits preparations that left almost no mark on the street: a rent paid, a question about freehold, a heading on a letter.

Some of that work produced a church we can still walk into. Some of it survives only on paper. Both belong to the same story. The people who handled this site were preparing a place for Mass in Margam before most of us were born. We do not know everything they hoped for. We know that they began.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for those who prepared the way, even when their work is now known only from a letter. Teach us to value what they handed on.
Amen.

CHAPTER 5

Maesgwyn

By 1951 the surviving papers take us to another address: Maesgwyn, 63 Margam Road.

Maesgwyn is an ordinary Welsh place-name. Maes means a field; gwyn means white. The present parish writes it as one word, Maesgwyn. Older papers sometimes vary the spelling, but the house on Margam Road is the same place.

The existing parish history says that Maesgwyn belonged to Major Llewellyn David and that the house and grounds were sold to the Catholic community. The papers in this archive do not contain the purchase deed. The sale itself remains unconfirmed from these documents. What is certain is simpler. By the end of 1951 this house on Margam Road was the Catholic centre of the new parish.

Fr William O'Connor was living there by 28 December 1951. On that day he signed a civil form as Catholic priest, minister and occupier. The existing parish history calls him the first resident parish priest here since before the Reformation. That is how the parish has remembered his arrival. The papers themselves show something more limited, and enough: a priest now lived in the house and signed for it.

On the same form he certified the place of worship.

From the parish archive

Form for Certifying a Place of Meeting for Religious Worship 28 December 1951 Signed: William O'Connor, Catholic priest, minister and occupier

Building: "Maesgwyn" Catholic Church Situation: 63 Margam Road, Port Talbot Accommodation: "THREE ROOMS ON GROUND FLOOR"

The form also says that those rooms were to be used "as heretofore." Heretofore means before now. The certificate was not describing three rooms that were about to become a chapel for the first time. It tells us they were already being used for worship.

The form does not name the three rooms. No plan from 1951 survives in this set to label them. We know the number. We do not know, from these papers, which rooms they were.

The following August O'Connor certified the same place of worship again, now under the title already met in Chapter 2: Saint Mary's "Star of the Sea," at Maesgwyn, Margam Road. He signed as minister, occupier and trustee. Once more the printed words are "as heretofore." The rooms were still in use.

In February 1953 a Latin certificate records another step. By a faculty given to him, John Forbes erected the Way of the Cross at Ecclesia Sanctae Mariae apud Margam — the Church of St Mary at Margam. The certificate says that he erected the Stations with the attached indulgences, according to the rules laid down in 1742. In the practice of the time, Stations were not only pictures on a wall. Once they were erected in this formal way, the Church attached particular indulgences to praying them.

In April 1953 the same place of worship was certified for marriages, still under the name Star of the Sea, Maesgwyn. That is the civil permission. The marriages themselves are remembered by people who were there.

Years later, during a Bingo and Buffet evening in the Community Hall, I was talking with some of the older parishioners about the early days of Margam. More than one of them looked at me with a smile and said, "Father, I was married in your living room." They meant it. They were pointing to the living room of the present presbytery, the house where the parish priest still lives.

At first that sounded surprising. Once the papers are read beside that memory, it makes sense. The documents tell us that three ground-floor rooms were used for worship, and that marriages were authorised in that house chapel. Parish memory adds the room. People were married in Maesgwyn.

A Reflection

We usually keep church and home in different buildings. At Maesgwyn they shared a roof.
Mass was said there. The Stations were erected there. Couples were married there. The priest lived there. None of that waited for a church that looked like a church. The later building on Margam Road matters. The parish worked hard to have it. But Catholic life here did not begin when the new doors opened. It had already begun in ordinary rooms.
There is something fitting about a marriage beginning in a house. Marriage is lived, for the most part, in ordinary rooms. At Maesgwyn the sacrament and the house were not yet kept apart.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the first rooms in which this parish prayed and married. Keep our homes, as well as our church, places where faith is lived. Amen.

CHAPTER 6

Making do

Even before the three rooms at Maesgwyn were formally recorded as a place of worship, Fr William O'Connor was already looking for more space.

On 8 November 1951 he put plans to Port Talbot Council for a church hall at Maesgwyn. The plan number was 2440. On 30 November the Council, acting under the Town and Country Planning Act, permitted the development. Building-bylaw approval followed in December. The forms say "Church Hall" and "Erection of Church Hall." They give permission. They do not prove that this hall had already been built. By March 1962 a survey still listed a temporary hall on the site. Whether that hall is exactly plan 2440, the papers do not prove.

In April 1952 O'Connor wrote to the Archbishop about the house chapel and about the next piece of work.

From the correspondence

Fr William O'Connor Maesgwyn, Margam to Most Rev. Michael McGrath Archbishop of Cardiff 2 April 1952

I received Your Grace's letter this afternoon, & I hasten to inform you that the chapel in "Maesgwyn" House was officially registered as a Place of Religious Worship on the 7th of February last.

He had gone to the Rates Superintendent "with a view to having our Rates reduced because part of the building was being used for Mass." He was told to get the place formally registered first. "The Registrar was equally kindly."

The same letter continues onto a second page. A Catholic architect on the staff at the Council offices had submitted a plan

> *for the extension of the fine slated, stone building which used to be the coach-house.*

Approval had come that day by telephone. Work could start at once.

> *Your Grace will be pleased to hear that the people here, Protestants as well as Catholics, are most helpful. My American relatives have sent me Vestments & money for this new Mass-Centre.*

O'Connor was glad that help was coming from outside the Catholic community as well. The vestments and the money were his own relatives' gift, sent for the Mass-centre.

That is his account in April 1952. The chapel was still inside the house. The next work was an extension of a former coach-house, a stone building with a slated roof. The papers do not name the architect. They do not name the men who did the work.

Parish memory places the conversion a little earlier. The existing parish history says that the old stables and coach-house near the main house were converted into a temporary church by the men of the parish, and that when the building was finished, in 1951, it could hold about a hundred and twenty people. The archive does not use the word stables. It does use coach-house. It gives a firm date in April 1952 for permission to extend that building. The names of those men have not been recovered.

A survey made in 1962 described three things on the site: a stone presbytery, a temporary hall, and a brick church seating about 120. That later description is useful. It is not a picture of 1952. The coach-house of

1952 was stone. The church of 1962 was brick. They may be stages of the same building. They may not. No later paper in this set says that the brick church had been the coach-house.

What the 1951–52 papers do show is that several things were happening at once. Rooms in the house were being registered. A hall was being applied for. An old coach-house was about to be extended. Neighbours were helping. Vestments were arriving from America. The parish was making do with the buildings it had, and turning them into what O'Connor himself called a Mass-Centre.

A Reflection

A great deal of parish history never appears on a foundation stone. Somebody takes a plan to the Council. Somebody asks about the rates. Somebody extends a coach-house. Somebody sends vestments from another country. Somebody whose name we do not have does the work.

The Church needs priests. It also needs people who can get a telephone call from the Council and start work the same day. That labour is easy to forget, because it looks like ordinary competence. At Maesgwyn it was how the Mass-centre grew.

We may never recover all their names. The work they did still became part of the parish they handed on.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for all who gave work, money and practical help to this parish, including those whose names we no longer know. Amen.

CHAPTER 7

The clubhouse from Porthcawl

The parish has long remembered that its first social centre came from Porthcawl: the old clubhouse of Porthcawl Rugby Football Club.

That account is not among the 97 papers. It is the story the parish has handed on, and Joe Waters later remembered what the rooms were used for once the building was here.

Early one Thursday morning, the parish history says, a group of men from the parish hired a local coal merchant's lorry and drove to Porthcawl. They took the whole clubhouse apart in about twelve hours, loaded it, and brought it back to Margam. They put it up again on the site of the present church.

The papers do not name the men or the coal merchant. They do not say why it was a Thursday. The memory is of a day's work, and of a building that then belonged to Margam.

Joe Waters is the named voice for what happened inside. He later remembered those rooms as a place of Sunday nights. Sunday night was music night. Buses came from Maesteg, from Our Lady of Lourdes, and from other parishes. People from Margam hired a bus the other way as well. Young people met. Bands of varying quality played. The dance floor at Margam, he said, was particularly good.

The existing parish history also remembers the social centre as important to the financial life of the young parish. It does not say how the money came in, or what it paid for.

A Reflection

At Mass people receive the same Christ. That is where the parish is made. Communion does not stop at the church door. The person two pews away has a name, a family, and a week that may have been hard.

A hall cannot take the place of the church. It can help people who have prayed together begin to know one another. That knowledge can become friendship. Friendship can become ordinary care: a lift, a visit, a notice that someone is missing.

The clubhouse from Porthcawl was a room for music and dancing. It did not make anyone a Catholic. It gave the new parish a place in which Catholics could become neighbours.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for those who made room for friendship in this parish. Teach us to know one another's names, and to notice who is missing. Amen.

CHAPTER 8

Growing pains

By August 1953 two priests were living at Maesgwyn. Fr William O'Connor signed a wayleave as owner of the house. The witness was James Morrissey, Catholic priest, of the same address. The form does not call Morrissey curate or parish priest. It only shows that he was there.

The existing parish history says that O'Connor left in 1954 for Hereford. The last paper in this archive that names him at Margam is that August 1953 form. We do not have the letter that moved him.

In 1954, the parish history says, Fr Butler arrived. The older notes remember him as large and affable. Under him the church building, as the parish remembered it, was extended. Among the improvements was a new confessional. The story handed down is that Fr Butler had to be measured at eighteen stone so that the box would fit him.

Between 1954 and 1968 other priests served as well. The older list names Fr J. Walsh and Fr James Kelly among them. In May 1956 Archbishop Michael of Cardiff gave Rev. Bernard J. Egan faculty to bless and erect the Stations of the Cross in the Church of St Mary at Margam. Egan completed that work on 6 May. The paper does not say that he was parish priest, or that he lived in the house.

We know less about those years than we would like. There is no need to invent a personality for every name.

A photograph of the altar servers survives from about 1959. The boys stand in cassock and cotta. Names were written later on the print. They include Phillip Hanford, and others whose surnames still belong to local families. The existing book caption does not list them all. The photograph itself does not print a date. What it does show is that children were already being given work in the sanctuary.

From the parish archive

Letter of Aggregation Society of Saint-Vincent de Paul Paris, 28 February 1958

the Conference of St Mary at Margam was aggregated to the Society.

This meant that the Margam Conference had been formally received into the Society of St Vincent de Paul. The Council General in Paris had taken that decision on 24 February. The letter speaks of a communion of prayers and works, and of a day to be fixed for the reception of members.

The Society is a Catholic organisation known for personal service to people in need. The surviving Margam paper does not tell us whom the first members helped, or what their weekly work looked like. It does not name the local officers on the page we have. It does use a title already met in this book: St Mary at Margam.

By 1962 the papers allow us to see the whole site much more clearly. That can wait. What the middle 1950s already show is a parish with more than one priest in the house, children at the altar, and a Conference recognised in Paris under Mary's name.

A Reflection

Parish memory is uneven. Some priests leave a story that people still tell. Others leave a signature on a form. That does not mean their work was smaller.

Fr Butler is remembered because a confessional had to be made to fit him. Fr Morrissey is remembered, in these papers, because he witnessed a wayleave. The first members of St Mary at Margam are remembered as a Conference, not as named visitors. A historian sees the certificate. The visits, if they happened, were seen by the people who received them, and by God.

The Church does not measure a life by whether a later book can reconstruct it. Some service is public. Some is not. Both belong to the same parish.

A Short Prayer

Lord, remember those whom our history has forgotten, and keep us faithful in work that may never be written down. Amen.

CHAPTER 9

The site in 1962

On Wednesday 14 March 1962 the Archbishop of Cardiff arranged a visitation of Our Lady of Margam. That is the first paper in this archive to use the familiar title in full. Dean M. Quilligan inspected the priest's house against the inventory and enclosed a surveyor's report on the buildings.

The report was written eight days earlier, on 6 March 1962, by F. R. Bates & Son of Newport, for Rev. Father Kelly. It is the first time the papers let us see the whole site at once.

From the parish archive

F. R. Bates & Son Report on Presbytery, Church and Church Hall at Margam 6 March 1962

> *The building comprises an Entrance Porch, Guild Room, Priests and Boys Sacristy, Nave and Sanctuary. Seating accommodation is for approximately 120.*

The church was brick, finished outside in rough-cast, plastered inside, with a slated roof and a concrete floor covered in linoleum. It was structurally sound. Heating came from a solid-fuel boiler in a separate house. The church had lately been redecorated. The guild room was

being redecorated when the surveyor called. The papers do not say which guild used that room.

Ten years earlier the registered place of worship had been three rooms on the ground floor of Maesgwyn. By 1962 a visitor could walk into a building that was recognisably a church: porch, nave, sanctuary, and rooms for the priests and the boys who served. About a hundred and twenty people could be seated.

Beside it stood the presbytery. Bates described a stone house with a slated roof. Upstairs there were five bedrooms, a bathroom, a W.C. and a linen room. Downstairs there were a sitting room, dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, pantries — and a room labelled Housekeeper's room. A store on the ground floor had recently been made into a lavatory. A garage of corrugated iron and wood stood by the yard entrance. The house had coal fires, gas, and an Ideal boiler for hot water. Several rooms had just been painted.

The hall was a third building. Bates wrote that it was "of a temporary nature": timber frame, asbestos sheet outside, hardboard inside, a corrugated asbestos roof, a concrete floor, a small timber stage, and a small lobby and kitchen. Lighting and heating were electric. It was weatherproof and, he said, in reasonably fair condition for that type of structure.

That hall is not proved to be Plan 2440 of 1951, and it is not proved to be the clubhouse brought from Porthcawl. The 1952 coach-house was stone. This church was brick. The papers still do not settle whether one became the other.

What they do settle is enough. By March 1962 Our Lady of Margam had a priest's house, a church for about 120, and a hall. It was more than three rooms. It was not yet the church that stands on the site today.

A Reflection

Every building on that site had been an answer to a real need. Three rooms answered the need for a place to say Mass. A coach-house was extended. A hall was put up. A church seating about 120 was standing by 1962.
None of those answers was a slight on the one before it. A parish is allowed to be grateful for what is enough now, without pretending that it will always be enough. The Church does not despise yesterday's solution because today's need is different. She uses what she has, and she remains free to build again.
The surveyor counted seats. The parish counted people. Both numbers matter. Only one of them is written on the report.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the rooms that were enough for their time. Teach us to use well what we have, and to know when something more is needed.
Amen.

CHAPTER 10

Children at the altar

Around 1959 someone took a photograph of the altar servers. The boys stand in cassock and cotta — a black cassock, and over it a short white garment. Some of the cottas have lace. Their hands are joined. They were photographed indoors against a plain light wall. The print does not show the altar, the Stations, or the nave that Bates would describe three years later. It shows the children who served in that church.

I do not know all their names. The existing book caption does not list them. Names were written later on the photograph itself, in ballpoint. Among those readings are Jack James, who appears to be the adult in the group, Robert Lutton (or Litton), Peter Williams, David Condon, Mike Doyle, Bernard Walsh, Terry Rees, Billy Clear, John Darch, John Mescall, Paul David, Phillip Hanford and Peter Andrews. One of those readings carries a question mark on the print. Who wrote the names, and when, is not recorded.

The date is the caption in the existing book: about 1959. Nothing on the face of the photograph dates it. We do not know, from this print, who the parish priest was that year. Fr James Kelly is securely named only in 1962.

What the photograph does tell us is simpler. By the end of the 1950s the parish already had a group of children who knew the sanctuary from the inside. Serving at the altar was a small job. You learned when to stand and when to kneel, how to carry a candle, when to ring the bell, how to be quiet when you would rather not. At that date Mass in a parish church was still normally in Latin. Servers learned the answers. One of the shortest pairs was the priest's *Dominus vobiscum* — The Lord be with you — and the reply *Et cum spiritu tuo* — And with your spirit. We do not have a record of what these particular boys could recite. That is what serving generally asked of them.

You do not put children in the sanctuary if you think the whole arrangement will be over next winter. The little church that seated about 120 already expected to last long enough for a generation to learn the Mass from the inside.

I now serve the same parish. I do not serve in the same building. Some of the surnames on the print may still be recognised here. The photograph does not tell us who later married, who left, who kept coming, who died young. It only tells us that they stood there.

A Reflection

An altar server stands close to holy things and is not there to be noticed. He carries, answers, kneels, waits. Most of the work is small.

Children often learn the Church in that way, before they can explain it. They learn when to stand. They learn how to hold something without dropping it. Understanding can come later. Faith is handed on by practice as well as by talk.

Serving does not make a child important. It gives him something to do beside the altar. That is enough.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless those who serve at the altar, and those who once stood in this photograph. Teach us to be faithful in small things. Amen.

CHAPTER 11

Fr Colin Henneberry

In 1968 Fr Colin Henneberry was at Margam. The existing parish history says he came that year. He was a young Welsh priest from Mountain Ash. The first papers that name him here belong to the early months of 1968. He was still parish priest in 1975. The same history says he stayed ten years.

The parish already had the house, the brick church seating about 120, and the hall Bates had called temporary. What it did not yet have was the church that stands on the site today.

That spring Henneberry wrote to the Archbishop about the sanctuary of what he himself called "our little church." There was almost no room. The altar was too large and stood on a predella three steps up. Before the sanctuary was redecorated, he asked leave to use a smaller wooden altar that they already had, set on a lower step, so that Mass could be said facing the people. The tabernacle would be bolted to a painted steel slab on the back wall, high enough to be seen from the nave. The work, he said, would cost little.

From the correspondence

Fr C. Henneberry Maesgwyn, Margam to Archbishop John A. Murphy Archbishop of Cardiff 8 May 1968

Your Grace may well recall there is little room in the Sanctuary as it is.

The Archbishop answered two days later.

From the correspondence

Archbishop John A. Murphy Archbishop's House, Whitchurch, Cardiff to Fr Colin 10 May 1968

As you know, whatever you do in the present church will only be of a temporary nature, until you have gathered enough money for the new church.

He agreed to the smaller altar, if the work was inexpensive and if the tabernacle remained fixed and visible above the priest's head.

So by May 1968 two things were clear. The church then in use was already being spoken of as temporary. A new church was intended, but the money was not yet there. The papers from that year do not give a congregation figure, and they do not say that the 120 seats had become too few. What they do say is practical: rearrange what you have; do not spend much; keep the tabernacle where the people can see it; save for the building that is still to come.

In the same months the Archbishop was also writing about industrial chaplaincy at the steelworks. A priest on the plant was not the same thing as a full chaplaincy. That work was already being done by Rev. David Lee. Henneberry had a parish. The Archbishop left the decision to him after a visit to Personnel. If it was not too difficult, he had no objection.

Mass facing the people, a cramped sanctuary, a letter about money not yet gathered — that is where 1968 leaves the story. The plans and the tender come later.

A Reflection

A parish may know that a building will not last, and still treat it with care. Henneberry asked to rearrange a sanctuary he already knew was temporary. The Archbishop told him not to spend much, and still told him to keep the law about the tabernacle.

That is not waste. It is the ordinary Catholic habit of using well what is in front of you while you save for what is not yet possible. The next generation would inherit a different church. This generation still had to say Mass on Sunday.

A Short Prayer

Lord, teach us to care for what we have now, and to work honestly for what those after us will need. Amen.

CHAPTER 12

Planning a new church

In May 1968 the Archbishop had written that anything done in the present church would be temporary until enough money had been gathered for a new one. The papers do not show what was collected in the next two years. They do show what happened when an architect put a scheme on paper.

On 14 October 1970 T. G. Price of F. R. Bates, Son & Price wrote to the Archbishop from Newport. Father Henneberry had already approved a sketch for a new church and hall on the site that fronts the main road into Port Talbot. The first scheme was larger. The version costed that day had been reduced to 582 square metres. Seating in the church was put at 250, with a choir. That is more than twice the "approximately 120" of the brick church surveyed in 1962.

The preliminary cost, including finishings but not the organ, the seating, or work to the existing boundary walls, was given as £55,823. Of that, the church was £36,612 and the hall £18,711. Demolition of the existing buildings was entered at £677. A later note in the same file puts an earlier sketch nearer £70,000.

From the correspondence

T. G. Price, M.C., A.R.I.B.A. F. R. Bates, Son & Price to the Archbishop of Cardiff 14 October 1970

The letter is a scheme, not a contract. It assumes that the buildings then on the site would come down. It does not name the men who would do the work. It does not say how much the parish had already put aside.

The existing parish history remembers another way money was gathered. In 1970 David Thomas founded the 200 Club. Two hundred names were collected for the first draw in January 1971. That story is not among the 97 papers. It belongs to the parish memory of how ordinary subscriptions ran alongside architects' figures.

On 23 November 1970 Price sent drawing 60L/9. Henneberry was satisfied. There was to be a glazed screen between the chapel and a Blessed Sacrament chapel. Confessionals were planned so that the penitent came from the chapel and the priest from the sacristy. The hall was drawn so that a later soundproof partition and stage seating could be added. Working drawings and tenders would follow if the Archbishop approved.

By June 1971 five tenders were in. The lowest was Joseph Evans & Helyar Ltd, £48,985.89, for fifteen months. Price recommended them, even though the quantity surveyors thought the figure about ten per cent light. An extra thousand pounds or so was mentioned for a car-park extension that Henneberry wanted. On 27 June 1971 the Archbishop accepted Evans & Helyar at £48,985, plus about £1,000 for the car park.

The existing book later records the cost of the church and hall as £63,000. That figure is not the same as the accepted tender. What the extra covered, the 1970–71 letters do not explain.

So by the summer of 1971 there was a named architect, a named contractor, a sum in pounds and pence, and a drawing. The old buildings were still standing. The inventory of the house and the little church belongs to that later moment, when the work was about to begin.

A Reflection

A parish does not own a church in the way a family owns a house. The people who approve a drawing will not be the only people who pray in the finished room. Some of them will have moved. Some will have died. Some of the children who will be baptised there have not been born.

That is why a figure such as £48,985.89 is not only an architect's number. It is a decision made for people who are not yet in the pews. Stewardship, in a parish, often looks like this: a letter, a drawing, a tender, and a willingness to pay for a building you will one day hand on.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless those who planned and those who gave, including the people who will use this church after us. Amen.

CHAPTER 13

On site

On 27 June 1971 the Archbishop accepted the tender of Joseph Evans & Helyar. Three months later a surveyor was still walking through the old presbytery and the old church. He noted damp, a crack in the sanctuary wall, and this:

the new Church contract which is at present proceeding.

That is the earliest dated sentence in these papers that puts the new building under way. It does not give the day the first sod was turned. It does not say that the old church had come down. In September 1971 both things were true at once: a contract was proceeding, and the little church was still there to be inspected.

Where Mass was said while the work went on is not recorded in this file.

From the parish archive

Surveyor's report 27 September 1971
new Church contract which is at present proceeding.

On 17 November 1971 the Dean came for a visitation. The house inventory was checked against the rooms. The list that survives from that month is not a building contract. It is a list of furniture.

Inside Maesgwyn, November 1971

1ST BEDROOM (HOUSEKEEPER). Bed. Stool. Wardrobe. Chair. Chest of drawers. Gas fire. Dressing table. Ornaments (personal.) Curtains. Carpet.

HOUSEKEEPER'S SITTING ROOM. 3 Piece Suite. Table. Tea Trolley. 2 Chairs. Pouffe. Telephone. Clock (Electric). Curtains. Coffee Table. Carpet & Fireside Rug. T.V. and Table (T.V.Hired). Ornaments (Personal). Gas Fire. Mirror (Personal).

The papers still do not give the housekeeper's name. They do mark some things as personal: her ornaments, a mirror. The television in her sitting room was hired. The parish priest's bedroom is listed next door, with statues and pictures marked personal, and an armchair of his own.

The kitchen had a refrigerator, a gas stove, a washing machine, an electric kettle and a toaster. Ordinary life in the stone house was still going on while a contract worth £48,985.89 was proceeding outside.

On 19 January 1972 Father Henneberry wrote that work was proceeding satisfactorily on the new church. He also mentioned the hall as a parish club, and an extra room that would cost two or three thousand pounds more. The old church is not described as demolished on that letter. The opening is not yet arranged.

The existing book later gives the whole project as £63,000. These construction letters still do not explain the difference.

A Reflection

A parish history is often written around the day a church is opened. Most of parish life happens before that day.
While a contract was proceeding, someone still answered the telephone in the housekeeper's sitting room. Someone still slept in a room whose ornaments were marked personal. Mass still had to be said, whether or not these papers tell us in which building.
The Church is not only built when walls go up. It is also kept, day by day, in rooms that will never appear on an opening programme.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless the unnoticed work that keeps a parish alive while something larger is being built. Amen.

CHAPTER 14

December 1972

On 20 June 1972 Father Henneberry wrote to the Archbishop from Maesgwyn. Work on the new church and hall was going quite well. Mr Price and the contractors thought they would finish around the middle of November.

He then asked for a date.

From the correspondence

Fr C. Henneberry Our Lady of Margam, Maesgwyn, Margam Road to Archbishop John A. Murphy 20 June 1972

> *Since the parish is dedicated to Our Lady, I would dearly love to have the solemn blessing and official opening of the church on Dec. 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception.*

That is the language of a request, not of a completed ceremony. 8 December 1972 was a Friday. The papers in this archive do not contain the Archbishop's reply, a programme, or a newspaper report of that day.

The existing parish history says the new church was opened on 18 December 1972. That day was a Monday. The same history says Archbishop John Murphy celebrated High Mass in the morning, and that evening Bishop Daniel Mullins, then Auxiliary Bishop, celebrated

Mass as well. Those details are not among the 97 papers. We have not found a contemporary cutting that settles either date. Both must stay on the page as they are: one a priest's hope in June, the other the date the parish has long remembered.

What the papers do settle is narrower. By June the work was expected to finish in mid-November. On 1 December 1972 there was a meeting about financing the new church. On 18 January 1973 the marriage register names Our Lady of Margam Catholic Church, Margam Road. By then the new building was the place in which a marriage could be recorded.

Taking Stock later described a combined church and social centre by Thomas Price of F. R. Bates, Son & Price, with the hall abutting the church so that seating could be extended if needed. The large house was kept as the presbytery. That is the church on Margam Road. The later solemn dedication of 1991 is another story.

The exact day the doors were first opened for the blessing Henneberry wanted is still not proved from these files.

A Reflection

A church is opened so that Mass can be said in it. The date on which the door was first unlocked matters. The Masses that follow matter more. We may yet recover the day. Even if we do not, the parish already knows what the building was for: baptism, marriage, funeral, Sunday after Sunday. Those things do not depend on whether the remembered Monday or the requested Friday was the first morning.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the church on Margam Road. Let every Mass said here be faithful, whether or not we can name the first morning. Amen.

CHAPTER 15

Paying for it

The existing parish history records the cost of the new church and hall as £63,000. The accepted tender in June 1971 had been £48,985.89, with about another thousand pounds for the car park. In January 1972 Father Henneberry asked for still more. The Parish Council wanted a planned open terrace taken into the hall as an extra room, for use as a parish club. Mr Price said it could be done. The extra would be two thousand five hundred to three thousand pounds.

The surviving papers do not explain how those figures became sixty-three thousand. The book's total is the one the parish has used. The tender is the one the letters prove.

The same history says the debt was fully paid by 1977.

One of the instruments was the 200 Club. It was founded in 1970 by David Thomas, who gathered two hundred names for the first draw in January 1971. He ran it for twenty years. Terry Thomas then ran it for twenty-five. In more recent years Jonathan O'Leary has continued the work. The existing history says that in January 2021 the club marked fifty years.

A 200 Club, as that history describes it, is a regular draw. Members pay in; numbers are drawn; some money goes back as prizes and the rest

helps the parish. The 97 papers do not record the subscription, the prizes, or the exact use of each pound. What they do not replace is the memory of three men who kept the club going across half a century.

The hall bookings were another thread. So were the people who never joined a committee and still put something in the plate. In January 1972 Henneberry wrote that the work had already stirred the parish, and that the hall was being thought of as a parish club.

The Glan-y-mor land bought in 1946 was still unsold in 1975. Those letters come next. The church on Margam Road had to be paid for after it was opened, as well as before.

A Reflection

Much of Christian generosity is ordinary. A person does not have to pay for a whole church. A small contribution, repeated and joined to the contributions of others, can become something no one person could provide alone.

St Paul wrote of many members and one body. He was not talking about a club book. The same truth appears, more quietly, when people give what they can so that a parish can keep a roof, a hall and a place for Mass. Nobody who paid into the 200 Club owns a particular brick. They took part in a common work, for people they knew and for people who would come later.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless those who count, collect and keep the books. Let even ordinary money serve the life of this church. Amen.

CHAPTER 16

The old site

In May 1975 Father Henneberry wrote to the Archbishop from Maesgwyn about a small piece of land that was no longer needed. He said it had been bought some thirty or forty years earlier. The deeds were with Mr Rufus Thomas. Temporary buildings had probably stood on it when it was purchased. Those buildings were now garages. The matter had been stuck for seven years.

The reader already knows that land. In 1945 ground rent was being paid for a "Site for R.C. Chapel, Glanymor Avenue." In 1946 the Archdiocese bought it for £156. No paper in this archive proves that a chapel was ever opened there. By 1951 the parish story had moved to Maesgwyn. Nearly thirty years later the unused plot was still on the books.

From the correspondence

Fr C. Henneberry Maesgwyn, Margam Road to Archbishop John A. Murphy 20 May 1975

Your Grace may recall that we have a small piece of land here which is, in fact, surplus to our requirements.

He hoped the Archbishop would have more success than he had had. He also hoped they would soon be "visiting the bunkers in Royal Porthcawl." The second sentence is not about the land. It is about two men who still expected to play golf when the Archbishop was well enough.

In June 1975 J. Sheehan wrote from the diocesan side. The land had been acquired by the Archdiocese in 1946. Two garage occupiers might have a statutory title. The occupier of Stallcourt — a neighbouring property — had a joinery shed and was willing to buy, with or without the garages. The Trustees wished to sell, having acquired the land at Margam Road. Sheehan advised a valuation excluding the garages, and a contract through L. G. Williams and Pritchard.

A later note in the same file mentions a figure of £3,500. In these papers that figure is a valuation or suggested price, not a completed sale. Who finally bought the plot, and for how much, is not closed here. Nothing in the 1975 letters says that the money was used to clear the church debt.

So the first Catholic site the papers record at Margam ends, as far as this file goes, as surplus land with garages on it. The chapel hoped for in 1945 had not been built there. The church that was built stood on Margam Road. Stewardship, in 1975, meant deciding what to do with a piece of ground that hope had once attached to, and that the parish no longer needed.

A Reflection

Hope can leave a mark on a piece of ground even when the hoped-for building is never opened. In 1945 someone was already paying rent for a chapel site. In 1946 the Archdiocese bought it. Thirty years later the same ground was surplus land with garages on it.

The first intention had not been wasted. It had been for Mass. Mass found another house, another road, and at last a church. The unused plot did not prove that the hope was foolish. It only proved that not every first site is the site that lasts.

A parish is not bound to keep every piece of land it once needed. It is bound to remember why the land was wanted. When the reason has moved, the ground may be let go. What must not be let go is the reason itself.

A Short Prayer

Lord, teach us to hold what serves the Gospel, and to let go of what no longer does, without forgetting why it was first sought. Amen.

CHAPTER 17

Priests, gaps and returns

The existing parish history gives Fr Colin Henneberry the years 1968 to 1978. The last letter from him in these papers is dated 20 May 1975. Where he went next is not recorded here.

Fr Timothy Corkery became parish priest in 1978. That is the date in the same history. The first paper that finds him at Maesgwyn is a letter of 21 July 1978, addressed to "The Rev. T. Corkery."

The Archbishop wrote because the old heating at the house was costly and unreliable. Another priest, elsewhere, had lately put in a new system without checking the contractor, and it had gone badly. Corkery was to telephone Tom Price and have both the firm and the scheme examined. Price sent two quotations: R. J. Bond Ltd of Port Talbot, £2,530, and Camm and Owen of Swansea, £3,320. Corkery favoured Bond. Whether the work was done is not on these sheets. The letters are about the presbytery, not a story of Corkery's character.

He served until 1983. The parish history says he retired because of declining health. He died in 1984 and is buried beside Fr James Kelly in the churchyard at St Joseph's.

After that, Margam was served again by the clergy of St Joseph's, Aberavon. For five years the parish had Mass, baptisms, marriages and

funerals without a priest of its own living next door. The names of those visiting priests are not listed in the papers we have. The 200 Club, according to the same history, was still running. Who unlocked the church, who prepared the altar, who counted the collection — those names have not come down in this file.

In 1984 Bishop Daniel Mullins came to live in Margam. He was not the parish priest. He had been Auxiliary Bishop of Cardiff since 1970. The parish history calls the years 1984 to 1988 his time as Area Bishop of the Swansea deanery, with Maesgwyn as his house. In February 1987 he was appointed Bishop of Menevia. In 1988 he moved to Swansea.

A bishop in the presbytery is an unusual fact in a small parish. It does not mean that the Sunday congregation suddenly became a cathedral. It means that, for a few years, the house beside the church on Margam Road was also the house of a man who would later dedicate that church.

When the bishop moved, he asked Mgr David Bottrill, already his Vicar General, to become parish priest. Bottrill's years as parish priest run, in the parish list, from 1988. The first paper in this archive that places him at Maesgwyn belongs to 1990, when the house was also being used as a diocesan Finance Office address. The appointment year remains the one the parish history gives.

So the decade after the new church was paid for was not a quiet procession of the same priest. It was Henneberry's last years, Corkery's short ministry, a stretch when priests came from Aberavon, a bishop in the house, and then a resident parish priest again. Through all of that the people still came to Mass in the church they had built.

A Reflection

A parish does not belong to the priest who happens to live in the presbytery. Priests are given to a parish, and they are given for a time. Some stay long enough to build a church. Some stay only a few years. Some are borrowed from the next town. For a while even a bishop may sleep in the same house. What does not change is why the people gather. They come for Mass. They bring children to be baptised. They bury their dead. The priest at the altar may have a different name from the priest of the year before. The sacrament is the same.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless the priests who have served this parish, and the people who kept coming to Mass when the name over the door of the presbytery changed. Amen.

CHAPTER 18

The dedication, 1991

A printed booklet survives from 8 May 1991. On the cover is a line drawing of the church and the roofs beside it, under trees. The title is simple:

DEDICATION of OUR LADY OF MARGAM 8th May, 1991

That Wednesday is the date we can put beyond doubt. What the inner pages said is another matter. They are not among the ninety-seven photographs. The existing parish history cites "the parish record of the solemn dedication, 8 May 1991." That record should still be in the parish.

By then people had already been using the church for nearly nineteen years. In June 1972 Father Henneberry had asked for a solemn blessing and official opening on 8 December. The parish history remembers an opening on 18 December. By 18 January 1973 a marriage was being recorded at Our Lady of Margam Catholic Church, Margam Road. The debt, according to the same history, was cleared by 1977.

A church can be blessed and used long before it is solemnly dedicated. Dedication is the fuller rite by which a bishop sets the building and its altar aside permanently. It does not mean that the Masses said there since 1972 were incomplete. It means that in 1991 the Church made a solemn,

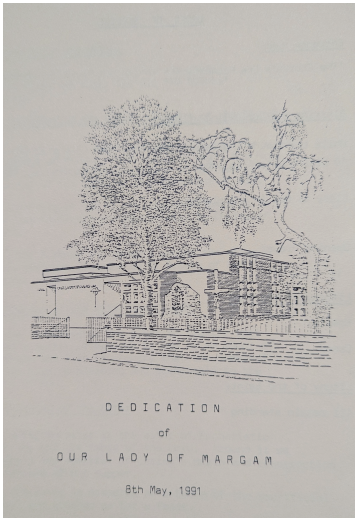
public act of giving this place to God.

The parish history says the dedicating bishop was Daniel Joseph Mullins, Bishop of Menevia. He held that office on that day. He was not a stranger to the house next door. The same history says he had lived at Maesgwyn from 1984 to 1988.

Mgr David Bottrill was parish priest in 1991. The surviving cover does not say what part he took in the ceremony.

According to the parish record, relics of eight saints were placed in the altar: Eugenia, Teresa, Philip Neri, Paul of the Cross, John Bosco, Dominic Savio, Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows and Maria Goretti. The record as we have it does not say which St Teresa or which St Eugenia. The other six names are clear enough. Those relics join this church to men and women who never saw Port Talbot. Why the dedication came in 1991, and not sooner, is not explained by the papers we have.

The church dedicated that day is the church in which I now celebrate Mass.



Dedication of Our Lady of Margam, 8 May 1991. Parish booklet.

A Reflection

There is a difference between using a place for God and solemnly setting it apart for God. By 1991 this building already held years of Sunday Mass, of baptism, marriage and funeral. Dedication did not make those years holy. They already were.

What the Church did that Wednesday was to give the place itself, permanently, with a bishop's prayer and with the names of saints sealed in the altar. The people who walked in after that day were walking into a church that had already been prayed in. They were also walking into a church that had been publicly handed over.

A Short Prayer

Lord, you received this church on the day it was dedicated. Keep it for your worship, for those who have prayed here and for those who will come after us. Amen.

CHAPTER 19

After the dedication

8 May 1991 was written on a booklet and entered in the parish record. The next morning the church was still on Margam Road. Mass still had to be said. Doors still had to be opened. People still had to be buried, children baptised, and bills paid.

Mgr David Bottrill was parish priest that day. The parish list gives him those years from 1988 to 2000, and records that he continued to live at Maesgwyn until 2013. In 1990 the same house also appears as a diocesan Finance Office address. After 2000 the exact title of his remaining years here is not clear. What is clear is that he stayed.

The lists that follow him are Canon Sylvester O'Donnell, then Fr Paul Watson, who had already been assistant priest from 1996 to 1999, and then Fr Andrzej Kukliński from 2020. The parish lists do not make every handover date equally clear. The church did not wait for the lists to be tidy. It went on being used.

The inside of the church continued to change as well as the names of the priests. In 1970 the architect's amended plans had already allowed for a glazed Blessed Sacrament chapel beside the main chapel. That is how the new church was designed to hold the reserved Sacrament: not only on the high altar, but in a chapel of its own.

A parish notice records what happened later.

From the parish archive

Our Lady of Margam, Port Talbot Re-location of Tabernacle

On the 2nd. of June 2021 The Tabernacle at Our Lady of Margam was moved from the side chapel and re-located to behind the main Altar at the centre of the church.

The side chapel has now been dedicated to Our Lady of Margam and a new statue of Our Lady stands in the position of the old Tabernacle. The statue was blessed on Sunday 6th June:- The feast of Corpus Christi.

The notice does not name who authorised the move. It does tell us what the change meant in the building. The Blessed Sacrament was brought from the side chapel to the centre, behind the main altar. The chapel that had held the tabernacle became a Lady chapel. Where the tabernacle had stood, a statue of Our Lady was placed. For an ordinary worshipper this is not a small rearrangement. It changes where the eye goes when a person comes in to pray, and where the Sacrament is found.

Behind the altar stands a chair with a story attached to it. A parish notice from 2021 records the tradition that Pope John Paul II used it when he celebrated Mass at Pontcanna Fields in Cardiff on 2 June 1982. That Mass is well documented. What has not been recovered is how the chair came from Cardiff to Margam: who brought it, when it arrived, and why this parish became its home.

Sometimes an object remains while the details of how it arrived are lost. The parish has remembered other things in the same way: a clubhouse brought from Porthcawl, a priest too large for his confessional, an opening date that never quite settled on one December day. Documents keep one kind of history. People keep another.

For the years after 1991 the surviving papers are thinner than they were when the church was being planned. That does not mean the parish stopped. Mass continued. Baptisms, marriages and funerals continued.

The hall that had been built with the church continued to have a life of its own. Later, around 2013, the social life attached to the site changed. The exact nature of that change is not yet clear enough to set down as a closed story.

When I came to Margam in 2020 I found a church that had already been dedicated for almost thirty years, a house that had already been a presbytery for much longer, and a chair whose story was already being told. I did not build any of it. I inherited it.

The people who planned the new church in 1970 could not know what it would need fifty years later. The people who, according to the parish history, paid the debt by 1977 could not take that later work away from those who came after them. A church is received. Then it has to be looked after.

A Reflection

Almost everything in a parish church was prepared by someone else. Someone paid for the altar. Someone kept it clean. Someone taught a child how to serve. Someone sat in the pew before we did.

We receive more than we make. What we receive is not only brick and wood. It is a place already used for Mass. The responsibility that comes with it is simple. Take care of what was handed over, so that the next people who walk in find a church still ready for the Eucharist.

A Short Prayer

Lord, we thank you for what others have handed on to us. Teach us to care for it faithfully. Amen.

CHAPTER 20

What we hand on

The church dedicated in 1991 is the church in which I now say Mass. The Community Hall beside it is the same hall that was planned with that church in the early 1970s. Neither building looks after itself. Roofs wear out. Water finds a way in.

By 2025 that was no longer a small leak. Water was coming through the Community Hall roof and into the church. At times buckets were needed. The risk was not only stains on a ceiling. If water kept coming, the buildings themselves would suffer.

The parish obtained public grants for the work: £179,000 from the Welsh Government and £22,000 from Neath Port Talbot Council. Together that was £201,000 of public funding. A small parish could not have paid for work of this size on its own. The Community Hall is used by people from beyond the Sunday congregation as well as by the parish.

The contractor was Vanguard Roofing & Cladding Ltd. Work had begun. Then a payment of £52,913.97 was required before the contractor could continue. That payment had not yet been released through the diocesan process. Work stopped.

The parish buildings belong to the Archdiocese. I was not dealing with the project alone. The Community Hall Committee gave enormous

help. Its members included parishioners with considerable practical knowledge and experience, and much of the work of managing the project was carried with their help. While the work was stopped, the committee and the parish kept trying to move the project forward. Parishioners could see that the work had stopped. We asked people to pray. There was a real fear that the delays could put the grant funding at risk.

The parish also continued to raise what it could itself. With the help of parishioners there were regular bingo evenings, buffet fundraisers and other smaller efforts, including a car wash after which the cars were blessed. These events could not pay for a project of this size, but they allowed parishioners to contribute and to do what they could.

The Archdiocese later allowed funding of up to £100,000 so that work on the roofs of the church and Community Hall could continue. That sum is separate from the £201,000 in public grants. The additional funding came after the period in which the work had stopped, and allowed the roof project to continue.

The work has now been completed. Forty-five solar panels have been fitted on the roof. There is solar battery storage. An electric-vehicle charger has been installed in the car park. The roof that had let water into the hall and church now carries the means by which the parish can use energy differently in the years ahead. This book does not claim what that will save. It records what has been put in place.

Fr O'Connor had filled in Council forms and registered three rooms. Fr Henneberry had been told not to spend much on a temporary church until there was money for a new one. In 1971 a tender of £48,985.89 was accepted. Another generation kept the same buildings standing when the water came in. The people who first planned the church on Margam Road could not have named solar panels. They would have understood the reason for looking after a roof.

A church built by one generation, paid for by another, and dedicated in 1991 is now dry again. What is handed on is not only a repaired building. It is a place still fit for Mass.

A Reflection

Nobody who first paid for this church could keep it for himself. The men who converted a coach-house, the people who paid into the 200 Club, the priest who asked for an opening on Our Lady's feast, the bishop who dedicated the altar in 1991 — all of them handed the building on.

We do the same. A repaired roof is not a monument to the present parish. It is a way of making sure that Mass can still be said here when we are not the ones saying it. The Blessed Sacrament needs a dry house. Baptism, marriage and burial need a door that still opens. The people who come after us will not owe us thanks for owning the church. They will need it to be usable.

The building is not God. It is the place where this parish has been taught to meet him. That is why a generation that did not lay the bricks still climbs onto the roof.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless those who built this church, those who repair it now, and those who will pray here when we are gone. Amen.

Epilogue

When I celebrate Mass in this church I am using a building other people planned, paid for, dedicated and kept open. The letters and photographs we have been reading stop at particular years. The parish did not stop with them.

A history like this is bound to look uneven. Official papers keep the people who wrote to bishops, signed contracts and filled in forms. They keep prices, plans and dates. They keep a priest's name more readily than the name of the person who unlocked the church on a weekday morning. That is not because those weekday people mattered less. It is because prayer and ordinary work rarely produce a file.

In 1971 an inventory recorded a Housekeeper's bedroom and a Housekeeper's sitting room in some detail: furniture, ornaments, a mirror, a telephone, a hired television. The papers have not given us her name. The archive can preserve a person's things more easily than the person. Many people who contributed to parish life appear only faintly, or not at all, in the surviving formal records.

Some of the boys in an old photograph of altar servers can still be named because somebody later wrote on the print. Others cannot. A few words in ink can keep a name that never reached a diocesan letter.

Some of what we do know comes from memory rather than from a dated letter. The parish has long remembered a clubhouse brought from Porthcawl. It remembers Fr Butler and a confessional built around a very large priest. It remembers an opening in December 1972, though the surviving letter asked for one date and the later history gives another. A notice from 2021 records the tradition about the chair behind the altar. Those stories belong in the book because they belong to the parish. They are not the same thing as a contemporary certificate. An honest history

can hold both kinds of evidence if it says which is which.

The buildings changed over the years. Each was meant to give the Catholic community a place in which to gather for Mass. Baptisms, marriages and funerals followed the same pattern: people brought their lives here, and the Church met them here.

Many of those people will never appear in a footnote. They came on Sundays. They brought children. They buried their dead. They put money on the plate. They stayed when the priest changed and when the building leaked.

This church exists so that the people of Margam can gather for Mass, receive the Eucharist, celebrate the sacraments and pray.

A Note on Sources and Parish Memory

This book is built from more than one kind of evidence.

The backbone is the parish archive: letters, plans, certificates, surveys, inventories, registers and photographs, together with related diocesan correspondence. Where those papers give a date, a price, a name or a wording, the history follows them. External sources have been used only where they settle something the parish file cannot settle on its own — for example the date of Bishop Mullins's appointment, or the fact that Pope John Paul II celebrated Mass at Pontcanna Fields, Cardiff, on 2 June 1982.

Beside the papers stands the existing parish history, and the memories of people who lived this story. Official files keep the people who wrote letters and signed contracts. They keep boilers more easily than housekeepers. Years of ordinary Sunday life may leave almost nothing in a drawer. That is normal in a local archive. It is not a verdict on whose work mattered.

Not every parish story survives as a certificate. Some things were remembered and passed on. This book has not thrown those stories away because a contemporary document could not be found. It has tried to say what kind of evidence they are.

Three examples may help. The existing parish history and later memory preserve the story of a clubhouse brought from Porthcawl. The surviving building papers do not prove that transfer, so the story remains in the book as parish memory. In June 1972 Fr Henneberry asked for a solemn blessing and official opening on 8 December. The existing history remembers 18 December. Both dates are given; neither is silently

preferred. The papal Mass at Pontcanna Fields is independently documented. A parish notice from 2021 records the tradition that the chair now behind the altar was used at that Mass. What has not been recovered is how the chair came to Margam. The tradition is therefore told as tradition.

Lack of surviving documentary proof does not automatically mean that a parish memory is false. Parish memory and documentary proof are not the same thing. Where sources disagree, the disagreement is sometimes left visible. An unanswered question is better than a neat answer invented to tidy the story.

Some questions remain open: some identities of the first temporary buildings; the December 1972 opening; which St Teresa and St Eugenia are named among the relics; how the chair came here; names on photographs. Those are places where the evidence stops.

Parish Priests and Clergy at Our Lady of Margam

Some earlier years follow the existing parish history, because complete appointment records have not survived among the papers used for this book.

Priest	Years	Note
Fr William O'Connor	1951–1954	First parish priest of the modern parish.
Fr Butler	from 1954	First name not recovered. Dates from the parish list.
Fr J. Walsh		Dates from the parish list.
Fr James Kelly	documented 1962–1965	Named James in the parish history.
Fr Colin Henneberry	1968–1978	Parish list.
Fr Timothy Corkery	1978–1983	Parish list. Retired through ill health; died 1984.
Served from St Joseph's, Aberavon	1983–1988	No resident parish priest named.
Mgr David Bottrill	1988–2000	Continued to live at Maesgwyn until 2013 (parish history).
Canon Sylvester O'Donnell	2000–2012	Parish list.
Fr Paul Watson	asst 1996–99; PP 2011–20	Lists overlap with O'Donnell for 2011–12.
Fr Andrzej Kukliński	2020–	

Other clergy connected with Margam

James Morrissey is recorded at Maesgwyn in 1953; his exact role is not established. Bernard J. Egan is associated with the Stations of the Cross;

he is not proved to have been parish priest. Bishop Daniel Mullins lived at Maesgwyn, 1984–1988. He was not parish priest. He dedicated the church on 8 May 1991.

Important Dates

1945 — Ground rent is being paid for a “Site for R.C. Chapel, Glanymor Avenue.”

1946 — The Archdiocese acquires that land for £156.

1951 — Three rooms at Maesgwyn are certified for Catholic worship.

1952 — The place of worship is recorded as Saint Mary’s “Star of the Sea.” The coach-house is brought into the story of making more room.

1958 — The St Vincent de Paul Conference of St Mary at Margam is aggregated.

1962 — A survey describes a brick church seating about 120.

1968 — The Archbishop describes the existing church as temporary while money is gathered for a new one.

1970–71 — Plans and an accepted tender of £48,985.89 for the new church and hall.

December 1972 — The new church comes into use. Fr Henneberry had asked for an official opening on 8 December; the existing parish history records 18 December.

January 1973 — A marriage is recorded at Our Lady of Margam, Margam Road.

1977 — The existing parish history records that the debt was cleared.

1984–1988 — Bishop Daniel Mullins lives at Maesgwyn.

8 May 1991 — The church is solemnly dedicated.

2 June 2021 — A parish notice records that the tabernacle was moved from the side chapel to behind the main altar.

6 June 2021 — The same notice records that a statue of Our Lady was blessed in the former tabernacle place, and the side chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Margam.

2025–26 — The roofs of the church and Community Hall are repaired. Public grants of £201,000 and separate Archdiocesan funding of up to £100,000. The completed work includes 45 solar panels, battery storage and an EV charger in the car park.

Acknowledgements

The history in this book belongs not only to priests, bishops and buildings, but also to the many parishioners whose names never entered the surviving papers.

I am grateful to those who kept letters, photographs and postcards; to those who shared what they remembered; and to those who helped to put names to faces. I am grateful to earlier hands who gathered the parish history that this book has used.

I thank the Community Hall Committee and the parishioners who have given practical help in caring for the church and hall. I thank those who have prayed here, given week by week, organised fundraising, cleaned, served and stayed.

Above all I thank the parishioners of Our Lady of Margam today. Your prayer, your offerings and your ordinary work keep this church open and looked after. This book is possible because you have kept the parish alive.

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Archival letters, plans and certificates described in this book belong to the parish collection unless otherwise stated. Historical postcards and photographs of Aberavon, Margam Road, Station Road, Cwm Brombil and the Port Talbot works are reproduced from the collection used in the earlier parish history and, where marked, from Port Talbot Historical Society; one Margam Road card also bears the credit Frith Ltd. Copyright in individual photographs remains with the respective copyright holders where applicable.

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