

Two Special Priests: Fr John Peifer and Fr Pat Harper

Over 150 years, 23 Jesuits have served as Parish Priests at Hawthorn, two of them twice. Nearly one hundred have served as assistant priest, some briefly, some for decades, nine served as migrant chaplains and about forty lived in the community and largely did other works.

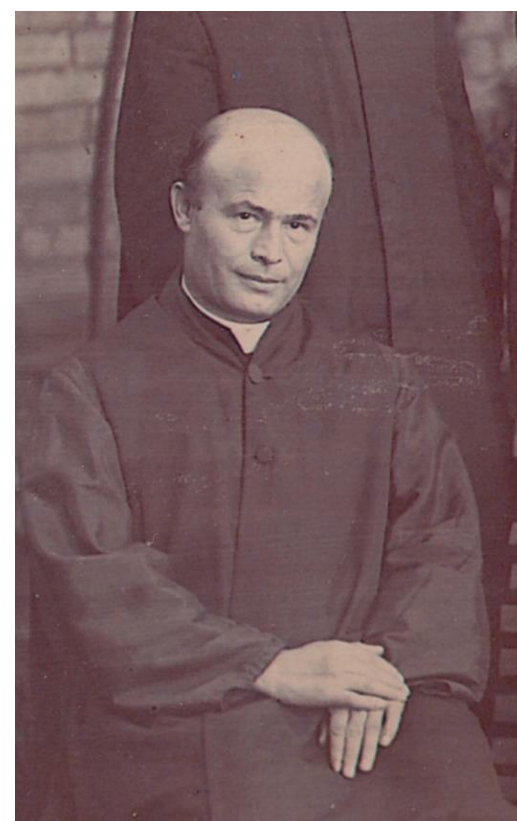
Space precludes featuring all those whom we have had the privilege of serving us. Two have been chosen both for their longevity in the parish and more importantly the affection which they generated amongst parishioners. That said we are greatly indebted to all the Jesuits over 150 years who have made this such a special parish.

Fr Johannes (John) Peifer, a very special priest

Fr Peifer was born in Germany in 1860 and entered the Austrian Province of the Jesuits in 1880. Ordained in 1894, he came to Australia shortly afterwards. After various ministries around the country, he spent 20 years at St Aloysius College in Sydney, then the last 24 years of his life in Hawthorn, where he actively engaged in sodality work and in sick calls. In the confessional his advice was sought by many in difficulties, and he was a well-known figure throughout Hawthorn. By young and old he was held in affectionate regard, and his death in November 1948, aged 88, deprived the Order of one of its oldest and most beloved priests.

Preaching the panegyric at his funeral, Archbishop Mannix said that his life would scarcely ever be written.

‘He was reticent and self-effacing to an extraordinary degree. Nobody ever thought of celebrating his birthday, because nobody knew it, and he did not tell. Jubilees were celebrated by members of his own Order and by others, but there was no jubilee for Fr. Peifer, who told nobody the date of his ordination. He lived a comparatively unknown and unostentatious, but very full life, content to do God's work as it fell to his lot. Amongst his colleagues he was always genial and alert, and bubbled over with humour. In Hawthorn, continued the Archbishop, many homes will be desolate and many hearts will grieve because Fr. Peifer will be no longer amongst them to advise and console and sympathize. He spent most of his time in Sydney and Hawthorn. But I think it was in Hawthorn he found his real home and his most congenial work. He came to be regarded as almost a legend in Hawthorn. Everybody knew, respected and loved him, and it was a great sorrow to all when recently he had to retire from active work, when he could do no more than continue to pray for the work that he himself had done so much to promote.



Fr Johannes (John) Peifer



1937 community L. to.R. : Fr Ed Carlisle, Fr Joe Brennan, Fr John Peifer, Fr J. Kirwan, Fr E. Corish, Fr John Bourke (seated)

Fr. Peifer was a great believer in the power of the written word. In going about his Hawthorn district he was in the habit of distributing Catholic Truth pamphlets in an unostentatious way. I am sure that many people owed their conversion to this gentle, hidden apostolate of Fr. Peifer. In his last days at Caritas Christi Hospice he was able to get up occasionally and go round amongst the patients in that great institution. With each one who was capable of reading he left a Catholic pamphlet.’

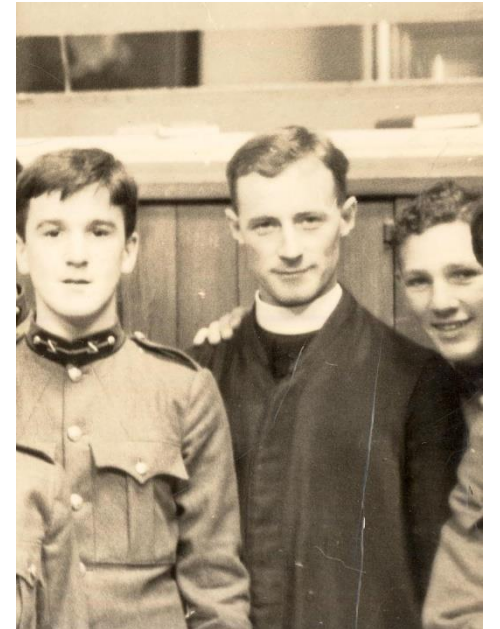
By a remarkable coincidence, while the Jesuits and their friends were celebrating the centenary of the coming of Austrian Jesuits to Australia in 1848, the last link with those heroic Jesuit pioneers should go to his reward in Hawthorn. Although Fr Peifer’s life will never be written, it is timely to remember this humble priest who served our church and the wider Hawthorn community so faithfully, during our 150th year.

Fr Pat Harper: Kind, Generous and Devoted Priest

Fr Harper was born in Dublin in 1907 and entered the Society in 1927. Most of his studies were pursued in Ireland but, in between, he was posted to Xavier College from 1933-1937. Arriving in Australia following ordination in 1942 he had only two postings during his priestly life, the parish of Richmond 1942-45 and for the remainder of his life in Hawthorn.

Apart from being a very practical parish worker, Fr Harper was known for two things in the parish. First was his devotion to his work as director of the Women's Sodality and Children of Mary which he directed carefully at their evening devotions. During the month of May the parish held a crowning of the Blessed Virgin Mary and then for the entire month a "May Book" was left before the statue in the church, in which members of the Sodality would write their names when they made a visit during the week. It was said that some of the women attended these devotions less for the love of God and much more for their respect for Fr Harper.

The second thing Fr Harper was famous for was his parish visitation. Scarcely a family of the fifties in Hawthorn does not have stories about Fr Harper's regular visitation, and even if he turned up at the most inconvenient times, he would be seated down at the kitchen table while the mother of the family rushed about preparing dinner or the young children were doing homework. However



Patrick Harper in the seminary



Fr Harper with first communicants, 1959

unlike some people who are enthusiastic, Fr Harper was very methodical and efficient in his methods. Visitations were to sustain the faith and sense of belonging of families in the parish and then to call back to the Faith those who had drifted away. No one ever turned him away. One family returned after summer vacation to find the house burgled and just underneath the door of the ransacked kitchen a note; 'Fr Harper called.'

A keen sportsman in his youth, Fr Harper also enthusiastically took on the roles as chaplain to the Scouts and to the Manresa Tennis Club.

With the coming of the changes after the Vatican Council Fr Harper felt depressed by the new liturgy, the different styles of personal devotion and the modifications in Jesuit house customs. Following fits of depression and overwork, he collapsed and died in August 1972. Although dying at an early age, he left behind a legacy of faith which still lives on today.

Fr Pat Harper: Recollections of a beloved Uncle

We are fortunate to have Fr Harper's niece, Toni O'Brien, in the parish today. She has kindly provided recollections of her uncle.

"Uncle Paddy" as he was always referred to by his nieces and nephews left Ireland before any of us were born – he had 30 nieces and nephews.

He was the eldest of 8 children and came to Australia in the early 40s.

I came out to Australia in 1969 – and even though I was 21 years of age, he took his 'duty of care' very seriously as I was the first of his relatives to come to Australia.

He was delighted to hear news of everybody at home, but had a very different idea of what life in 'modern' Ireland was like at this time. He still remembered Ireland in the 40s and earlier.

He went home in 1970 for a holiday and while he loved catching up with brothers and sisters – and meeting their spouses - it would be fair to say he was disappointed with the way Ireland had progressed.

When my brother Conor SJ suggested he come home and retire in Ireland – his reply was "Why would I want to come here when everything and everybody I know and love is in Hawthorn – no Hawthorn is my home". - and home he came.

I returned to Melbourne in 1972 with my (Australian) husband and my young son Michael. Uncle Paddy and Michael were great friends. Only a few months later he died, RIP.

Both my children Michael and Conor O'Brien got married in ICC – Michael in 2003 and Conor in 2019. Uncle Paddy would have loved that!

My brother Conor was ordained SJ in 1975 – he would have loved that too – the only one of his nephews who followed in his footsteps.



1947 Community: Frs Harper, Kelly, Bourke, Schneider, Perry