

**Presentation at the unveiling of the blue plaque
on St Ignatius' Chapel in St Clement's on 31 July 2018**

Joseph Munitiz SJ

My Lord, Bishop Kenney, Professor Evans, ladies and gentlemen:

What better way to celebrate the Feast of St Ignatius of Loyola but by commemorating this chapel built under his patronage and in his honour! For me personally it is a great pleasure and an honour to introduce this simple ceremony of unveiling.

Fortunately you have the handout which gives the basic information about this former Chapel of St Ignatius, so I can be brief. For my part I would like to invite to be present among us in spirit, as they cannot be here in person, THREE important figures connected with this building.

The first must be **Fr Charles Leslie**, whose plan it was to put up the building at a time when Roman Catholics were living clandestine lives. He had suffered greatly on seeing his beloved religious order suppressed in 1773, but continued to work in the Oxford area, living first at Waterperry where a recusant family had kept up Roman rites for some 200 years. He realized that there was more pastoral need in Oxford itself, and he bought a small house here in 1790. He came from an aristocratic Scottish family; his father was the 21st Baron Balquhain [pron. BALKIN]. With his good education and gentlemanly manners he soon established excellent relations with the University, which then, as now, was remarkably tolerant when it recognized educated good-will. Work started, and funds were collected. But the process was not an easy one: in the 1790s there was an influx into England of impoverished French Catholics, and any charitable funds available went in their direction. Fr Leslie found himself in grave financial difficulties and decided to dedicate all of his own inheritance, about £1000, to the building. He was careful to insist that the exterior – though set back to avoid giving offence – was simple but handsome. He also opened a small school, which developed into St Joseph's – but you will hear more about that from Sister Marie Ann.

The second great figure to join us in spirit will be of course **John Henry Newman**. Fr Leslie had died in 1806 when Newman was four years old, so they would not have known one another; however, Newman was part of that influx of converts from the University that Fr Leslie had prayed and hoped for. Since 1842 Newman had been living in Littlemore, and when in 1845 he was received by Dominic Barbieri into the Catholic Church, the only place where he could attend mass was here in the Chapel of

St Ignatius. For several months, October 1845 to February 1836, every Sunday during that winter he would make the three-mile walk (unless he rode over on horse-back) from Littlemore. He may have followed the Iffley Road, about 40 minutes on foot. Inside the chapel, on either side of the High Altar, he would have seen a grand pair of Corinthian columns that were to catch the eye of Nikolaus Pevsner in the twentieth century, before the interior was adapted as office space.

But the third ghostly figure who will I trust be with us is **Fr Gerard Manley Hopkins**. By the time he returned to Oxford in November 1878 the Jesuits had built the much larger church that we all know, St Aloysius, built only three years earlier in 1875. Hopkins served as an assistant priest there. But the Jesuits kept up services here in the Chapel for the benefit of the many local people. We have the sermon notes that Hopkins prepared in 1879 for four sermons: one for the Feast of the Sacred Blood in July and three on Sundays in August and September. I would like to quote from the last as it is one of the rare personal glimpses Hopkins gives of the motivation for his entry into the Roman Church:

All converts agree in feeling [and here is the personal note!] that they are led by God's particular will. They are bound to go, it will be sin to stay, God calls them, bids them etc.: 'I hear a voice you cannot hear' etc. We who are converts [says Hopkins the Oxford convert] have all heard that voice which others cannot, or say they cannot hear, have seen that beckoning finger which others cannot, or say they cannot, see...

As you can see, and Fr Devlin who first edited these notes emphasises this, Hopkins is revealing here not the logical grounds of his conversion, as he does elsewhere, but how his heart was moved. And I also feel that our hearts can be moved as we stand where he stood.

To close, a few special words of thanks:

first to the Secretary, Eda Forbes and to all the Committee responsible; second, to Fr Provincial for covering the costs of the plaque and to others of the Province who helped in various ways; but finally TO YOU ALL FOR COMING ON THIS OCCASION.