

The History of The Catholic Church of Our Lady of Fatima Bala

The thriving market town of Bala, Gwynedd in Snowdonia National Park, is a pretty tourist resort, surrounded by the Berwyn, Aran and Arenig Mountain ranges, set on the shores of Llyn Tegid, the largest natural lake in Wales, 530 feet above sea level. In one year people from over thirty-six countries signed the visitors' book in our Church! Bala has many Hotels, Guest Houses, B&B, Caravan & camping Parks, and is an ideal base, for exploring the coast and walking in the Mountains of the National Park. The coastal resorts of Llandudno, Colwyn Bay & Rhyl are within 50 miles of Bala, & Barmouth just 28. The Town is also famous as an International Centre for Water Sports. Sailing, wind-surfing and canoeing are enjoyed on the lake. The Canolfan Tryweryn - the National White Water Centre, is situated nearby.

Bala is good for cycling, pony-trekking & swimming at the Penllyn Leisure Centre, Ten Pin Bowling at Urdd Multi-activity Centre at Glan-llyn and has a Golf Course.

Frequent Visitors to Bala will see how much the Town has developed since Fr. James Koenen, a Dutch Dominican Priest,

arrived there in 1946 when the few Catholics in Bala went to the Convent of the Sisters of Nazareth, situated in the hilly countryside, at Llanycil, about one mile from the Town Centre, for Mass on Sundays. The elderly had an arduous walk each way and staff employed in the Hotels during the holiday season hadn't enough time to get to Mass. Fr. James felt that something must be done, but the Parish was poor and there were few Parishioners. Fr. James was resolute and determined, with God's help, to get a Church in the Town. One Sunday, he explained the situation to his little flock - "We must get a Church in the Town. We haven't money, but we will pray and Our Lady will help us". From then on, we are told, at every Mass, the people prayed a Hail Mary with him, and asked Our Lady of Fatima to provide a Church. They prayed fervently and some were doubtful, given the circumstances, and who could blame them? But Fr. James - a man of Faith - kept on encouraging them to pray. Not surprisingly, their prayers were answered, and Mary saw to it that they should have their Church.

In November 1946, Fr. James learned that there was a property for sale, in the High Street, dating from 1609 - a large house, cafe, fish & chip shop and stables. Prior to this, it was the "Onen Inn" where travellers stayed and rested their horses. Fr. James tried to buy the premises through a friend, but negotiations failed so he decided to approach the vendor himself. Much to everyone's surprise he succeeded. It is recalled that even though others offered more for the property, the smaller sum of £1,800 he offered was accepted. This was

surely an answer to prayer and an example of Mary's power with God. Fr. James borrowed the money and trusted in God to help him to repay it. Within four months of the purchase, enough money poured in to repay the loan and the Church was opened free of debt. Much hard work preceded the great day of the opening of the Church such as the difficulty of obtaining building permits but after months of waiting, permission was granted, through the help of a non-Catholic gentleman of great influence.

The conversion of the stables into a Church began in October 1947. Eight months of toil followed and Fr. James laboured alone, pulling down inner walls in the kitchen, coalhouse, workshop & stables also removing oak floors in the loft and upstairs bedrooms. We are told, a good Irishman came and sawed the 340 year old oak beams out of the walls! At last, the fine shape of a Church became visible! People from Liverpool, Lancashire, & Ireland, made a magnificent response to the Bala Appeal. The Tabernacle was a gift from the west of Ireland. The specially designed Stations of the Cross were donated by a man from Cork, as were the ciborium and altar linen.

A Newry family contributed largely to the Monstrance which cost £200. A Lancashire lady donated the Baptismal Font. The Sanctuary carpet was given by a lady from Liverpool and the Sisters in the Convent of Perpetual Adoration in Kensington, gave generously to items for the Altar.

Now Fr. James had to seek permission from Bishop Petit, of the then Menevia Diocese, to dedicate his Church to Our Lady of Fatima. Again Fr. James was faced with a difficulty. The Bishop said the Church should be dedicated to a Welsh Saint, David, Beuno, Winifred etc. certainly not Our Lady of Fatima.

However Bishop Petit, later observing Fr. James leaving looking so dejected at the refusal, called him back, and granted his petition - the first Church outside of Portugal, to be dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima & the first Catholic Church to be opened in Bala since the Reformation. On 15 June 1948, the Church was opened. Priests from all over the diocese, Spanish, Portuguese & South American Consuls, visitors from Ireland, Liverpool, Manchester and overseas came. Local people thronged the little Church and out into the streets. Bells rang out in the town and Mass was relayed over speakers; "the chant of the Capuchin Friars from Pantasaph rose and fell in waves of homage over the town". An Italian children's choir, competing in the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, sang Motets - from the kitchen - no room for them elsewhere!

Later that year, a Portuguese donor provided 'Our Statue', carved in oak, by the same sculptor who carved the Statue in the Fatima Basilica, in Portugal. It was blessed by the Bishop of Leira in Fatima, for all who come to pray in Bala. On 12 December, the Statue arrived by ship in Liverpool and was placed in an open car decorated with flowers, emblems, and flags of Wales & Portugal. It was followed by a cortege of white coaches, carrying

pilgrims and others walked! The Procession made its way to Chester, Wrexham, Llangollen and Bala. On the edge of the town they walked in procession along the High Street, praying the Rosary, to the Church where Benediction was celebrated. Our Lady had arrived to take up residence in Bala.

Many Pilgrimages took place in 1949 and on 21 May 1950, 8,000 pilgrims from all over Britain came to witness the Crowning of the Statue. On reaching the edge of the town, the thousands of pilgrims, praying the Rosary, processed on foot along the High Street to the spacious grounds of the then Fatima Guest House, a fine two-storey house for Pilgrims, overlooking the Lake. The Statue, carried by the Knights of St. Columba, was placed on a temporary altar. The Bishop of Shrewsbury - Rt. Rev. John A Murphy, presided at the Crowning Ceremony, blessed two crowns, one for the statue used in the Procession and one for our Statue - the gift of the people of Portugal. The children of the Portuguese Consul Crowned the Statue and after Benediction, the Procession moved back to the Church. Pilgrims continue to come from all over the world to Bala and to pray in the peaceful haven of her second stable-home!

Many changes have taken place since that wonderful day! Fr. James died on 6 August 1976 and is buried in Pantasaph Monastery Cemetery. The work he began continues to this day. He was succeeded by Fr. James Rudd and other visiting Priests. Fr. Richard Edwards was the last Resident Parish Priest and he retired in 1997. Since then, the Parish has been

served by Priests in Charge of Dolgellau and Bala - [See website for details](#). The Millennium was marked by the building of a Shrine to Our Lady of Fatima in an extension to the side of the Church, made from Welsh slate it has a beautiful stained-glass window, representing the miracle of the 'spinning sun' in Fatima, the work of Loreto Sister, Jen Bromham, from Swansea. Mike Watts from Blaenau Ffestiniog, designed the slate work and inscriptions in Welsh & English of Our Lady's words "Behold the Handmaid to the Lord." All materials used were Welsh, as was the Builder, .Ellis Gwyn Jones. 8 Dec. 2000 was a memorable Day, when, Priests from the Dioceses of Wrexham, Liverpool, Salford & Shrewsbury, plus hundreds of Pilgrims, assembled for the Blessing of the Shrine and to Concelebrate Mass. The Crown was restored to its former beauty and the youngest member of our Parish, Emma Roberts, Crowned Our Lady. The gift of a beautiful Rosary from the Pope, to mark this special occasion was added.

[Devotion to Our Lady of Fatima in Bala?](#)

History reminds us that Wales has always had a special devotion to Mary - Mair in Welsh. Many places are called after her. The story of Fatima reveals Mary's love and concern for all God's children and her 'Message', given to the three children in Fatima, is more relevant today than ever. Mary made an urgent appeal for Prayer, Reconciliation & Penance. So, continuing Fr. James Koenen's mission, we encourage everyone who comes here, to listen to what Mary has requested us to do.