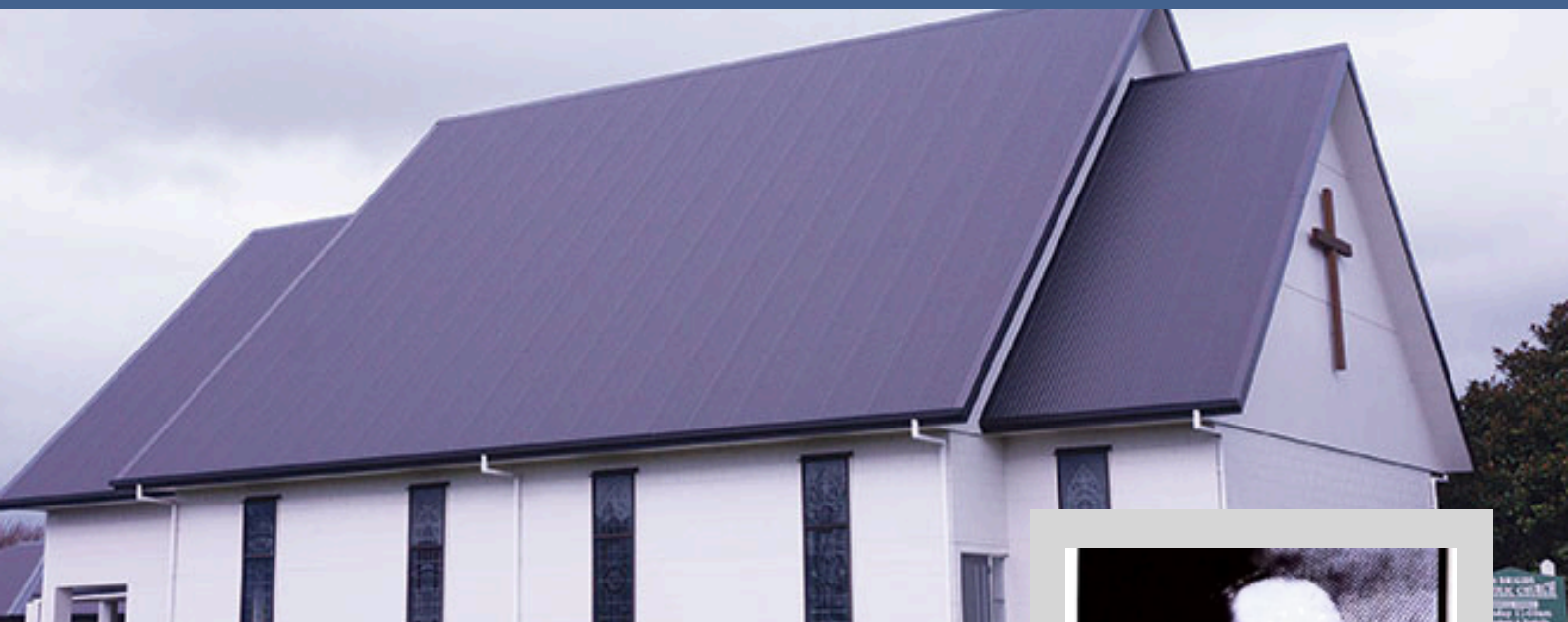


# GENTLENESS AND STRENGTH

## A CENTURY OF FAITH IN THE FORTY MILE BUSH



Through the mist of history and the green rolling hills of the Tararua district, the story of St Brigid's Parish and St Anthony's School in Pahiatua unfolds as a testament to faith, endurance, and the indomitable spirit of a community carved from the "Forty Mile Bush". It is a narrative that begins with the arrival of Irish immigrants in the late nineteenth century, seeking a new life at the end of the railway line, and bringing with them a devotion as deep as the roots of the ancient trees they came to clear.



In those early, rugged days, the sacred was found in the profane; Mass was not celebrated in stone cathedrals, but in the humble homes of settlers, where visiting priests offered the sacraments amidst the domestic rhythms of pioneer life. The spiritual landscape began to solidify in 1894, when Father Thomas McKenna—affectionately known as "Father Tom"—was appointed the first resident parish priest. A man of "robust stature" and a referee on the rugby pitch, Father Tom was as comfortable in the mud of the Huxley Street drain as he was at the altar. He was a shepherd who travelled by gig across rough bush tracks and fast-flowing rivers, his faith a steady light in a wild country.

The physical heart of this faith, the first St Brigid's Church, was consecrated in 1899. Built by the hands of parishioners who cleared stumps and burned logs to make room for the divine, the church was a "tribute to the ability and popularity" of Father Tom.

It was a place where the Latin chants of the "Miserere" and "Gloria" rose into the rafters, providing a brief, ethereal escape from the gruelling labour of the dairy farms. For the farmers, Sunday was a marathon of devotion: they rose early to milk cows while fasting from midnight, only then dressing in their finest clothes to ford the Mangahao River by horse and gig for the hour-long journey to Mass.

Yet, Father Tom knew that for the faith to truly take root, it needed the fertile soil of education. In 1905, he took a "leap of faith," inviting the Brigidine Sisters to Pahiatua despite having neither a convent nor a school to offer them. The Sisters, arriving by train in the heat of January 1906, accepted the challenge with a grace that masked the hardships ahead. They were housed in the presbytery while Father Tom moved into a small cottage, a sacrifice that allowed St Anthony's Convent School to open its doors just a week after their arrival.

The first classroom was a "mean and unworthy" mission room, cramped and drafty, where the Sisters pioneered an open-plan teaching approach long before it was fashionable. Infants sat on the stage while older students gathered near the door, their lessons underscored by the "cloying odour of poverty" that marked the era. For six years, the Sisters walked four blocks of rough road twice a day, in all weathers, until their own wooden convent was finally opened in 1912.

The years that followed were a tapestry of "comradeship, laughter and prayer," even as the world outside was torn by the Great War and later silenced by the Great Depression. The Depression years at St Anthony's were particularly poignant, remembered by past pupils as a time when the "them and us" of social class was written in the footprints of children—some wearing polished shoes, others leaving "outlines in blood" from bare, cracked feet.



Yet, within the school walls, the Brigidine Sisters offered more than just secular knowledge; they provided a sanctuary of art, music, and "lovable qualities" that left an indelible mark on the community.

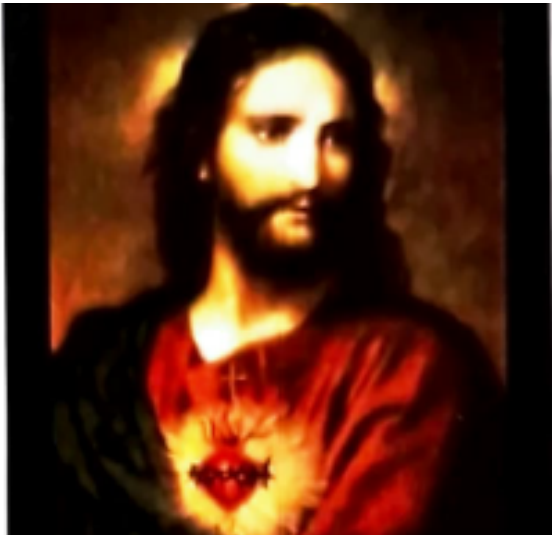
The architecture of the parish continued to evolve, mirroring the growth of its people. The church was literally cut in half and extended in 1934, then moved back 21 meters by sheer manpower and determination. The arrival of New Zealander Father William Walsh in 1963 signalled the end of seventy years of Irish priests, ushering in an era of modernisation, including the building of a new presbytery and the introduction of the new liturgy.

Through fires, earthquakes, and the eventual departure of the Brigidine Sisters in 1985, the legacy of St Brigid's and St Anthony's remained anchored in its mission: "LIFE through Jesus". Today, the school stands as a "strongly embedded" community where Gospel values continue to underpin the "gentleness and strength" of its learners.

The story of these two institutions is not merely a record of buildings and dates, but a literary chronicle of a community that, led by "gentleness and strength," found hope in the shadows of the bush and built a home for the soul.

# STONES OF MEMORY, SEEDS OF FAITH

THE SACRED STORIES OF THE SACRED HEART CHURCH  
IN EKETAHUNA AND THE JOURNEY OF POLISH  
CHILDREN IN PAIHATUA



## THE SACRED HEART CHURCH: A CENTURY OF FAITH IN EKETAHUNA

The story of the Sacred Heart Church began in the late 19th century, as Eketahuna thrived with the expansion of railways and sawmills. In these early years, spiritual life was nomadic; visiting priests such as Father Petitjean and Father Seon celebrated Mass in schoolhouses or the local Club Hotel, hosted by hospitable residents like Mr Kelliher. Devout parishioners showed immense dedication, often travelling long distances on horseback or walking along the railway lines to attend these services.

In March 1898, Monsignor John McKenna secured a site for the first permanent church. A modest, unlined structure was completed for £200 and opened by Archbishop Francis Redwood



on November 27, 1898. For over a century, this small community grew and adapted. The church was eventually moved to Anderson Street in 1926, where a sanctuary, sacristy, and baptistry were added. Fundraising was a community effort, often featuring lively "tug of war" competitions to pay for the upkeep of local churches and presbyteries.

The parish's most enduring figure was Father Cecil Barr-Brown, who served for thirty years starting in 1947. Despite his deafness, he was revered for his ability to connect with children and his "one-to-one" attentive counselling.

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His retirement in 1977 marked the end of an era, but his influence remained as the community moved toward a modern identity.

In 1983, a new multi-purpose Sacred Heart Church was constructed, designed as a "trailblazer" for modern parishes. Its architecture was deeply symbolic: twelve rafters representing the twelve apostles and four pillars for the four evangelists. Even as the parish was eventually incorporated into the Pahiatua church, the community celebrated 125 years of faith in 2023, continuing to offer Liturgies of the Word and to maintain its devotional life.



## SANCTUARY IN PAHIATUA: THE POLISH CHILDREN'S JOURNEY



While Eketahuna built its roots in local soil, the neighbouring town of Pahiatua became a beacon of hope for 733 Polish orphans and 105 caregivers in 1944. These refugees had endured unimaginable trauma, having been deported by Soviet forces from their homes to forced labour camps in Siberia, where temperatures plummeted to minus 46 degrees, and food was often restricted to bread and water.

After a period of amnesty and temporary shelter in Iran and India, Prime Minister Peter Fraser offered them sanctuary in New Zealand. Arriving in Wellington on October 31, 1944, they were transported to a camp on the site of the old Pahiatua racetrack. This camp, once an internment site for enemy aliens, was transformed into a "Little Poland".

The camp was a comprehensive village, featuring dormitories, schools, a hospital, and a chapel. Under the guidance of Father Michal Wilniewiczyc—himself a former Gulag prisoner—the children found spiritual solace. Mass was celebrated in Polish and Latin, and the children built a Lourdes memorial grotto using stones from the Mangatainoka River as a place of prayer and remembrance.

As the war ended, the political landscape in Europe made it unsafe for the children to return to a Soviet-dominated Poland. A secret code was even established: if letters from those who went back to investigate were written in ink, it was safe; if in pencil, it was not. The letters arrived in pencil, and most children stayed to become New Zealand citizens.

Local organisations, including the Catholic Women's League, provided essential support, offering clothing, holiday homes, and help as the young refugees transitioned into the workforce. Though the camp officially closed in 1952, its legacy is preserved through reunions and memorials. In 2024, the 80th anniversary of their arrival was marked by a re-enactment of their train journey and a traditional Mass, honouring the resilience of those who found a home in the heart of the Wairarapa.

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