

**[Extract from Strabane Chronicle
–Thursday 29th June 2000]**

Vera finishes her performance with a perfect cadence

Played as a school girl
by Catriona Gallen

A Strabane woman closed a 57-year chapter in her life when she filled the Sacred Heart Church with her music for the last time this month.

Vera McGillion, from Barrack Street, has been the organist with the Church since the age of 14.

Leckpatrick parish celebrated the dedication of both Vera and Parish Priest Fr. John Doherty on Monday 19th June at a special celebratory mass in the Church of the Sacred Heart.

Vera's last occasion as organist of the Sacred Heart Church, ending a record 57 years, was also a celebration of Fr. Doherty's 40th Anniversary to the priesthood.

Vera McGillion remembers her first time to play at the Sacred Heart Church on the Derry Road: "I remember it like it was yesterday. It was the 29th October 1943 at the Benediction when I first played the organ at Church."

It was through Vera's love of music that she was initiated into the parish of the Sacred Heart playing as a young school girl and continuing to play at Sunday mass throughout her adult life.

Over the last 57 years, Vera has been the organist during the terms of four parish priests beginning in the days of Fr. Charles Kerlin, Fr. Bernard Smith, Fr. John Harkin and ending on the 40th Anniversary of Fr. John Doherty.

Although Vera said she was sad to be leaving the Church was delighted to be able to play at Fr. John Doherty's special 40th anniversary mass which was a happy occasion in the Church, but tinged with a little sadness as it also marked the end of an era for herself.

"The late Sr. Mary Agatha taught me how to play the piano at Strabane Convent when I was a pupil there. I took lessons to Advanced Senior level.



My one regret is that I didn't continue with my music to the level of teaching but I think young people now have more opportunities than I had as a young girl.

"I lived on the Derry Road when I began playing and continued to play there after I moved to Barrack Street with my husband Willie. When he died 12 years ago Fr. Harkin encouraged me to continue on with the choir which has been a great benefit to me and a great healing experience.

"I will certainly miss the companionship of the people and especially the choir but I feel that it is now time to leave and hand over to someone else," Vera explained.

Taking Vera's place as organist and choir master is Peter Doherty from Hillcrest. An accomplished musician and teacher Peter recently won the School Choir of the Year competition on UTV with the choir of St. Cecilia's College in Derry where he teaches. Fr. John Doherty paid tribute to Vera's talents and commitment: "Since I came here in 1989, I have always found Vera to be most generous in her commitment to the Leckpatrick Parish. I don't remember her being absent even through sickness.

"Vera has a very refreshing and youthful attitude to life and quite a sharp sense of humour and myself and the parishioners are grateful to the dedication and faithfulness she has shown to the Parish down through the years.

"A few days ago Vera showed me a little card she received from the late Sr. Bernard the first time she played at the Sacred Heart. It was dated 29th October 1943 – the Feast of Christ the King. It also marked the fourth anniversary of the opening and dedication of the Church – this year we will be celebrating the church's 64th anniversary!" said Fr. Doherty.

Vera's dedication to the church and choir of the Sacred Heart was celebrated at a special presentation held in St. Patrick's Hall last Thursday where Parish Priest Fr. Doherty and the choir members paid tribute to Vera's long standing dedication and commitment to the people of the parish.

Vera and her family also had a special audience with Bishop Seamus Hegarty in the offices of St. Eugene's Cathedral where she was presented with a Diocesan Merit award marking Vera's commitment to the choir and to the Parish of Leckpatrick.



Retired organist Vera McGillon, from Strabane, with Fr John Doherty and Bishop Seamus Hegarty reading the inscription on the Diocesan Merit Award. Vera, from Barrack Street, was presented with the award by Bishop Hegarty on her retirement after 57 years with the Church. ■ See Page 9

Sacred Heart Church retirement



Most Rev. Dr. Seamus Hegarty, Bishop of Derry, presenting a commissioned scroll, designed by St. Aloysius McVeigh, to Vera McGillon, at a reception to mark her retirement as organist from the Sacred Heart Church, Strabane. Included are Fr. Patric McLaughlin, C.C., and Fr. John Doherty, P.P., Laxapatrik. (D2/6 CD13)