

Christmas Mass 2006

Over 3000 people attended the mass at the site of the Irish Famine Monument which is situated within the historic precinct of the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney. Organisers were forced to close the gates well before the event with large numbers constrained to listening from the outside.

The event was televised live back to Ireland on Christmas Eve where it was watched by an estimated 250,000.

The Auxiliary Bishop of Down & Connor, Donal McKeown, was the chief celebrant of the mass. In his sermon he spoke with compassion about the teenage famine orphan girls who became the mothers of many in the new colony of Australia: 'It is hard to imagine the experience of these girls as they tried to reassemble the scattered fragments of their lives'. Bishop McKeown drew a line between the experiences of those brave young women and today's lack of compassion for refugees.

'The names on the monument remind us that we need to respond to people and not just statistics'. He focused on the current challenges facing Ireland as the nation comes to terms with its new reality as a place of immigrants not emigrants. He said that Ireland, as it struggles to keep pace with its demographic changes, could learn from Australia's experience as a successful, multicultural country.

Mr Patrick Scullion, Consul-General of Ireland, said that he was genuinely surprised by the huge turnout and the feedback from home was brilliant.

'As well as celebrating this great feast, this event was a means of showing the strength of the Australian and Irish relationship and that was done beyond our greatest expectations'.

One text received from a mother in Ireland read: 'In the name of all those who have family in Australia, thank you for bringing our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, closer to us this Christmas. This programme made our day special'.

Of course none of the above would have taken place without the input of Radio Telefis Eireann who organised and produced the programme under the direction of Rev. Fr. Dermot McCarthy, head of religious affairs at RTE.

We thank him and his team.

Tom Power