Wall of a Thousand Crosses and a Million Tears

Our cover of the wall of Balally Church reminds us of departed ones through COVID-19. **Fr Peter Byrne**, parish priest, tells the story of this beautiful gesture of remembrance.

'Wall of crosses and a million tears' is the name given to the space in Balally Church where we placed a cross for each person who had died with COVID-19 on our little island. The community felt that there had to be something we could do to bring these people into our hearts and prayers. We wanted to support families that were grieving the loss of a loved one.

Those who died were other 'selves' and held those titles that we hold so dear: grandparents and parents, spouses and siblings, sons and daughters, friends and neighbours. By such a simple gesture it was as if we were stepping over the threshold of nursing homes and hospitals and joining up with the frontline staff in their battle to save lives and give meaningfulness to these deaths. The crosses became an icon to speak to everyone who went by, a reminder that every life is precious, beautiful, unique, wonderful. Lives were not to become numbers or statistics on the news.

Placing the crosses became a ritual, a liturgy, a powerful reminder every day that we were in an emergency. It also was a plunge into the freezing depths of grief. At night prayer we would light a candle for each one who had been lost and we would pray the beautiful 'We Shall Remember Them' psalm. It was a risk to finish off the day on a sombre note, but it seemed to be the only Christian response to this devastating virus; an unseen enemy with so many visible victims. We had to bring these loved ones to prayer and to God, we had to decorate their lives with words of hope and consolation. No one was going to be forgotten; there was not going to be a hierarchy of victims. And so everyone got a cross on our wall, a candle on our altar and a place in our hearts. We had to add the ingredient of hope to a swell of despair and a sense of family in the middle of so much loneliness.

We counted the number of deaths from the North and the South of Ireland together. A man-made line on a map wasn't going to determine who we would pray for and who not. Borders became so meaningless in this pandemic.

There was one day when we had to light ninety candles and put up ninety crosses. The space around the altar for the candles had to be enlarged. The sense of shock and loss was palpable. That was a day for tears.

The crosses themselves were the

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palm crosses that were meant for use on Palm Sunday. The first hundred crosses came from Sandyford Parish and we thought that that would surely be enough but on the 31 March we had already used up those hundred and we had to ask for more. Cabinteely Parish and Dundrum Parish helped with crosses but soon these too were gone. On the 22 April the number of crosses had reached a staggering 1004. We started to run out again but a generous business from Tipperary sent us a huge box with more crosses. On the 18 May our wall had 2000 crosses and we couldn't count the tears.

As time moves on we will take the crosses down and give them to members of the parish to mind so that all the victims of COVID-19 on our island will always have a home in Balally.