



SANDPIPER

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Benalla Knocks and the Door is Opened

On 12 June 2024, Bishop Shane knocked thrice on the main door of St Joseph's Benalla, officially re-opening the Church after months of restoration works to repair damage caused by a formidable 5.8 magnitude earthquake in October 2021.

Parish Priest, Fr Vijay Bandanadam, was thrilled to see the delight of his parishioners as they entered the Church, especially one of his senior parishioners who thought he would not survive the earthquake to witness such a day.

"I had just finished making the Sign of the Cross at the start of Mass when I heard a strange noise," said Fr Vijay recounting the moment the earthquake struck. "I asked the congregation if they heard anything and then I saw the walls cracking and it started raining dust. Realising it was an earthquake, I asked everyone to move out of the Church, but one person chose to stay. He stood near a pillar and said, "It doesn't worry me Father – I'm an old man and I'm in a good place to die." Fr Vijay said it was a surreal experience and he was torn, but he needed to look after the rest of his congregation, and they exited through the side door to safety.

After a couple of minutes, when the rumbling had subsided, Fr Vijay went back into the Church to check on his faith-filled parishioner. He was shocked by the dusty thickness of the air and extent of the cracks in the walls, but relieved and grateful to see the older gentleman still standing – as upright as the pillar!

It was wonderful to see the smiles on people now that we can worship again in our Church said Fr Vijay. "There were quite a few people who didn't really like going to Mass in the school hall," said Fr Vijay who appreciates the resilience and patience of his community. "We now have a beautiful light-filled place to worship," he said.

Benalla Parishioner, Gabbie Downie was Parish Pastoral Council President at the time of the 2021 earthquake. She said it was a challenge to figure out how best to restore the building "A lot of clarification was needed because of the building's uniqueness; its heritage value and compliance had to match up, it was a bit tricky."

Most of the damage had occurred to the grand arch at the front entry of the Church. This arch, which supports the ceiling and front towers, had cracked all the way through. Various

engineering reports were undertaken, and the damaged part of the church was braced and barricaded for some time while a restoration plan was established.

The congregation entered the side door and used only the section near the altar for Mass. "For a while we had Mass at one end of the Church and a barricaded construction site at the other," said Gabbie. Then, in August 2023 when restoration works became well underway, Mass was held in the school hall.

This is not the first time the Church has been closed for restorative works. In 1989 an internal fire caused a lot of damage and the steel roof needed to be replaced. The Church, like its community, has survived other earthquakes and several floods since it was built in 1908.

Gabbie spoke of the resilience of the community. "This experience has shown that community is more than a building," said Gabbie, "but how fortunate are we to have such a glorious space to gather and express our faith as community. It really is a wonderful place to worship."

Bishop Shane, who presided over the re-opening Mass, thanked the congregation for their unwavering faith over the course of the restoration process. "A Church is a symbol of the enduring strength and unity of the Benalla community," he said.

Established in 1876, Benalla is a foundational church of the Diocese of Sandhurst, which was established as a Diocese in 1874. It must have been a significant moment for parishioners to see Bishop Shane knock thrice on the newly restored front door of their church with the diocesan 150th Anniversary Processional Cross, thereby granting a Plenary Indulgence to those who walk through the door during the Diocese's Jubilee Year, and reminding us of the metaphorical doors to which Christ leads us.

St Joseph's Church, as it stands today in Benalla, replaced the original Church. Bishop Carr, Archbishop of Melbourne laid its foundation stone in July 1907, in the presence of Bishop Reville of Sandhurst and Archdeacon Davy VC, pastor at Benalla.

In June 1908 St Joseph's Church was officially opened and dedicated in the presence of a thousand people. Bishop Reville was too sick to preside over the Mass and remained in the presbytery, so three or four priests concelebrated the Mass.

Four years later however, in December 1912, Bishop Reville returned to Benalla to consecrate the Church. At the time, it was the only consecrated church in the Diocese of Sandhurst. (Apparently, only churches which are free from debt can be consecrated. Again, a testimony to the zeal and benevolence of the people of Benalla.