

Church of Ireland cathedral appoints first Catholic priest



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Belfast's Church of Ireland cathedral has appointed a Catholic priest to its Cathedral Chapter for the first time in its history.

Fr Edward O'Donnell, parish priest of St Brigid's RC Church Belfast, has been appointed Ecumenical Canon at St Anne's Cathedral. Ecumenical canons may say or sing Morning or Evening Prayer or the Litany, read Holy Scripture, deliver addresses and assist at occasional services. Fr O'Donnell will join the Cathedral's two existing Ecumenical Canons, a Methodist Minister and a Presbyterian Minister.

There are already Catholic Ecumenical Canons at three other Irish cathedrals, the first of whom was Fr Enda McDonagh, former Professor of Moral Theology and Canon Law at Maynooth, who was installed at St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, in 2007.

Belfast's history of sectarian violence makes this latest appointment particularly important. Fr O'Donnell described it as "a significant step, perhaps even historic" and recognised the "generosity" of the invitation. He said: "While this is a personal privilege for me, the honour is shared with all those who work quietly and persistently to improve and strengthen inter-church relationships."

Among those people are David Stevens, Thérèse Woodfield and Catherine Harper, members of Belfast Cathedral's music team. As part of their 'Cathedral Choir School Project' they deliver weekly classroom music lessons, free of charge, to three primary schools in deprived North Belfast: one school in a Protestant area, one Catholic school, and one of the city's few integrated schools. Particularly promising pupils are invited to sing in the Cathedral's choirs.

As well as providing disadvantaged children with the opportunity to sing in a cathedral choir, the scheme has helped reconcile children from Belfast's Protestant and Catholic communities. "We make it very clear to the choristers that it doesn't matter which side of the fence they're on," says Mr Stevens. "When we first set it up, there were occasionally rumblings among the kids, asking which side of town they came from. They died away pretty quickly."

Katherine Backler-The Tablet