



• Fr. Rukie encourages a man to leave his wheelchair and walk at the Mass healing service in St. Agnes Parish Centre. Pictures by BRENDAN MURPHY.

Crowds flock to the healing priest

By SEAMUS KELTERS

MORE than a thousand people flocked to St Agnes' Parish Centre at the weekend to hear an American priest described as the "modern Padre Pio."

The young, the old, women, men, children packed into the centre for a Mass and a special healing service celebrated by Fr Peter Rukie OSM. **ROCKEY**

As well as the healthy, people came to the centre in wheelchairs, on sticks and crutches. Some were blind, others deaf and others with a serious illness.

After Mass Fr Rukie, who is no stranger to Ireland — in 1948 he helped Fr James Keane found the Benburb Priory in County Tyrone and was a director there for three years, performed the healing service.

Among the crowd was one North Belfast woman, at the centre for a very special reunion with the fresh faced 73 year old Servite priest.

Miss Pat Magee from the Cliftonville Road believes she was cured of blindness through Fr Rukie just over 30 years ago.

"I was brought to Benburb when I was eight months old. I was completely and totally blind, blind for life," she said.

"The doctors had told my parents there was no way to operate and there was nothing could be done."

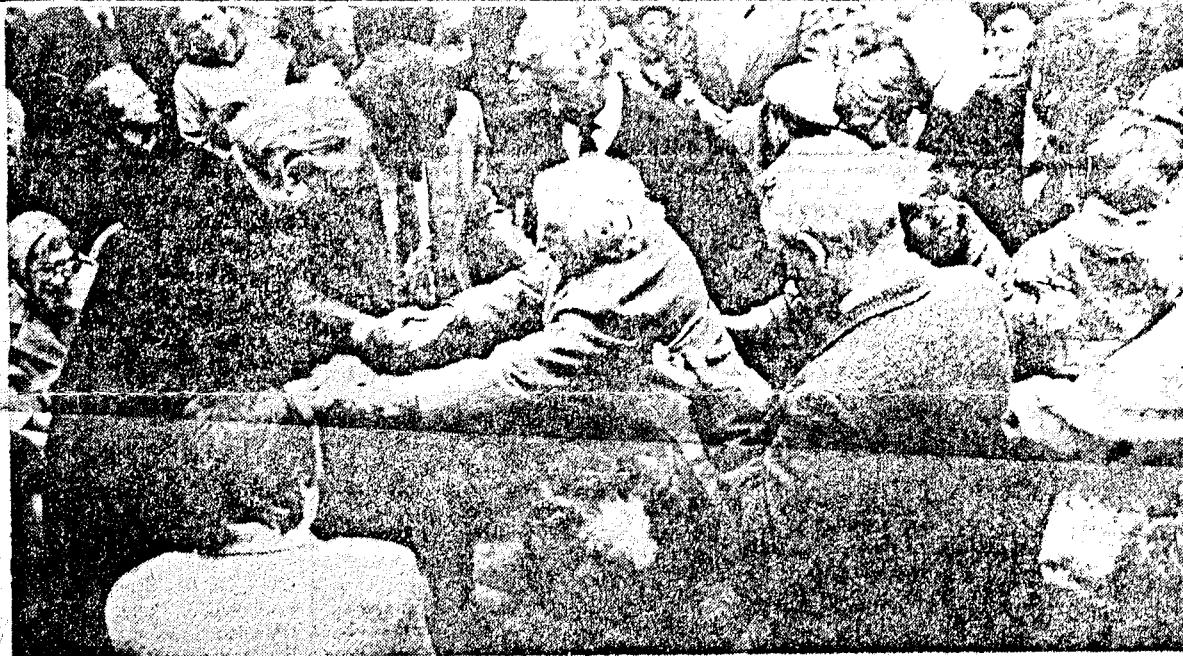
Fr Rukie prayed over Pat and "on the way back from Benburb, in one of those old fashioned cars I started playing with the blind on the back seat and I could see."

"He told my parents never to let anyone operate on my eyes and I never have."

"I have never seen Fr Rukie, until today, this is the first time," Pat said on an obviously emotional occasion.

"Was it a miracle? "All I know is that I was blind and now I can see," she said.

Throughout the service people, many coming from far



• Fr Rukie helps an elderly woman from her wheelchair during the healing service at the weekend. **ROCKEY**



• Fr Rukie gives out Holy Communion to the 1,000 strong congregation at St Agnes' Parish Centre. **ROCKEY**

away, crushed forward for the blessing of the Chicago-based priest — due soon to return to the States — who was invited to Belfast by Mr Reginald Donnelly from St Joseph's Parish at Hannahstown.

One elderly man stepped up from his wheelchair and walked down the hall to the amazement of the crowd. "One mile today and two tomorrow," Fr Rukie told him.

Every person was blessed, some sharing a few private

words with Fr Rukie about their illness.

He does not speak of miracles. He says that after such a service "I usually feel refreshed — it does not bother me at all."

For Fr Rukie the power to heal started during his time in the Tyrone priory. "I was in Benburb when the people came to be blessed and I just blessed them as I do today.

"They came to be blessed and they reported they were cured and the first thing I knew

people were coming in busloads."

Now he tells of "media healing" over the telephones on a radio chat show in America — "it sounds awful" he says. If the RTE strike ends he will appear on a radio show at 3 pm today.

For Fr Rukie, with his evident faith and warmth, somehow you get the impression that the healing power he has lived with for the past 40 years is normal.

It was certainly not normal

for one young Belfast woman who approached him towards the end of the service. About an hour or so earlier he had blessed her. She had been to hospital receiving treatment for her deafness.

Still clearly shocked she said: "I just want to tell you Father, I can hear."

She slipped away through the crowd. Fr Rukie simply smiled. A miracle in Andersonstown on Saturday? There were no doubt Thomas's to disagree.