

Pastoral Letter

Diocese of Killaloe - A welcoming People of God

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Romans 15:7

Since my ordination as Bishop of Killaloe on September 25th last, I have experienced a great and much appreciated warm welcome by so many people in this expansive diocese. For this I am deeply grateful. I look forward to many happy and fruitful years of ministry in Killaloe.

Moladh go deo le Dia!

I have experienced this great welcome in both the small rural and the bigger urban parishes as I have seen for myself the great pride that people have in their own communities. It can be seen in practical ways; the care and attention to church buildings, the warm welcoming atmosphere and in the inevitable invitation to the cup of tea! But I also get the feeling that this welcome has deeper roots and that it arises from the welcoming message of the Gospel and an understanding of the warmth of the person of Jesus. As one who called himself “the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11) Jesus saw that the essence of God was the gathering of his people.

Pope Francis in *The Joy of the Gospel*, calls us to be this kind of Church. He says “Being Church means being God’s people, in accordance with the great plan of his fatherly love. It means proclaiming and bringing God’s salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way. The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.” (paragraph 114)

Críost Liam, Críost romham

The motto that I chose to inspire my ministry as Bishop is from St Patrick's Breastplate, *Críost liom, Críost romham*, Christ be with me, Christ before me. I am conscious of the venerable religious tradition of this ancient diocese and of the outstanding efforts of clergy, religious and laity to thread the pilgrim path leading to Jesus Christ, in the tradition which St Patrick brought to Ireland in the fifth century.

Builders of Hope

Outstanding work is underway in Killaloe, following extensive consultation and planning has culminated in the development of our diocesan plan *Builders of Hope*. Last year a professional analysis and progress report was done on the diocesan plan. Following that review Fr Ger Nash was appointed fulltime to help implement and animate the many aspects of the plan. I fully support and endorse the great work that continues in this area, the collaborative efforts of clergy, religious and laity.

Solid Structures - Parish & Diocese

Our sincere gratitude is due to the countless, committed people who live out their faith through leadership roles in parish and diocesan pastoral and finance councils, liturgy, catechesis, music ministry, religious education, safeguarding children, protection of adults at risk along with countless administrative roles.

World Meeting of Families 22-26 August, 2018

One of the exciting new events we are preparing for is the World Meeting of Families. We very much hope and pray that His Holiness, Pope Francis will be in attendance. A diligent, enthusiastic and effective steering group has been formed in the Diocese to guide our preparations. They will help us appreciate and celebrate the Christian understanding of family as we prepare for this great international event. Details and information on <http://www.worldmeeting2018.ie>. It is the hope of the diocesan steering group that this work be a springboard for meaningful dialogue and support for Catholic families well into the future.

Acknowledging many Positive elements of life in the diocese

Already in the short time I have been in the diocese of Killaloe I have seen so many positive elements in the practice and celebration of the faith. These include youth ministry, vocations promotion, care and support of marriage, spirituality, liturgy, catechesis, Eucharistic Adoration, prayer groups, promotion of pilgrimage, support for the Missions, work with the poor & refugees, justice and peace, ecology and the protection of the environment. All this work involves great cooperation between clergy & laity, women and men in so many areas of diocesan life.

Fostering a sense of Personal Vocation

All this collaborative work is indicative of people who are living out their Baptismal calling to be a “priestly people” and who recognise that we all have a primary vocation to spread the Good News. Much of the work of the Diocese in the years ahead will be to foster that sense of personal vocation. If we do this, then I believe that we can create a Church which will attract people by its face which will mirror the welcoming face of Christ. In *The Joy of the Gospel* (par 102) Pope Francis puts it simply “Lay people are the vast majority of the People of God – the minority, ordained ministers are at their service.”

Vocations Promotion

It is my hope that there would be an integrated, twin approach to the promotion of vocations. Promotion of vocations to priesthood and religious life go hand and glove with the promotion of the priesthood of all the faithful. I am so heartened that we have three students for the priesthood at present and others are in a process of discernment. It is also encouraging to witness the on-going work of the revamped vocations committee and so many other groups who are praying for and promoting vocations so diligently. May the Lord continue to bless them and all of us in this great work. It is up to us all to work together to encourage and foster a positive culture of vocations that we as a nation were so renowned for in times past.

Challenges

We have huge challenges facing us in common with other dioceses and many other European countries. As a Church, we are responding to declining Mass attendance, drop in vocations, the need for evangelisation, increasing secularisation and financial needs at both parish and diocesan levels. There is also the challenge that many of our relationships are now with or through electronic media and that we have lost the “face to face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pains and their pleas, with their joy which infects us” (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* par 88)

A Time of Transition

As Archbishop Eamon Martin, the Primate of All-Ireland said recently “We are in a transition time between the relative security and certainties of past times and what discovering what the Spirit wants of the Church in Ireland today and tomorrow. It will be impossible for us to hold on to the ways we lived parish in the past. The parishes of tomorrow will be ‘communities of intentional disciples’ sustained by committed and formed lay people”

Changes needed

Because of the decline in vocations, the expansive geography of the diocese, the isolation of some rural and even urban parishes and clusters in our Diocese of Killaloe, it will not be possible to maintain the same level of presence as in the past. A new and imaginative response on the part of all of us is required to ensure that the welcoming community centered on each local church will continue into the future. Major changes will be needed along with an evolution of mindset, expectation of practice and service.

Liturgies in the absence of a priest - Community led liturgies

One of the greatest challenges facing us, as the number of priests declines, is for individual parishes to continue as regular centres of prayer and worship on a daily and weekly basis. Our 137 churches are embedded in the life story of our people. They are places of memories and of living where people gather to pray, to remember, to celebrate, to mourn, to seek guidance, help and consolation. Our parish church is where we celebrate Eucharist, Baptism and Confirmation, First Holy Communion and Marriage. We gather there for our last farewell to parents, family and neighbours as we entrust them to God’s care. The challenge we face is keeping our faith communities alive and vibrant in the new environment in which we now live.

Some relevant Statistics

Some facts and statistics make stark reading and give us a sense of the extent of the changes that are needed:

- Six parishes in the diocese have currently no resident priest;
- An additional 12 parishes would have no priest if it wasn’t for

- the generosity of service of many working beyond the age of 75;
- In our diocese we have 137 Churches in 58 parishes;
 - There are 192 celebrations of Mass in our Diocese every weekend.

Our Churches are testimonials to the faith of the people who built and maintained them. Most were built at a time when means of transport was not as it is today and the legacy of that is a huge number of Churches which are used to a level of service that is no longer sustainable.

Training underway

With that in mind, we are working to train and assist lay people of faith to be leaders of liturgical prayer in their local communities. We are inviting women and men to train, in accordance with national norms, so that they will enliven the liturgical life of their parishes and to lead liturgy in the absence of a priest. This training is for everybody currently involved in our parish liturgies; choir leaders, readers, Eucharistic Ministers, sacristans and priest. The primary aim is to enhance every liturgical experience in the parish and to ensure that it promotes the active participation of the people. Lay people will be carefully prepared to lead the liturgy of the Word along with other important ritual times such as bereavement ministry, sacramental preparation and parish animation ministry. The hope is that such trained personnel will become an integral part of the sacramental system as it is at present, while also being available to come to the fore independently in emergency or special circumstances.

The Diocese is working to ensure that even if the Eucharist is not always celebrated in the parish, that the gathering and welcome it represents will always be available to people who cannot travel further.

Important Reassurances

The Lord's invitation to 'Do this in memory of me' is and will always be the wellspring of our lives as Christians. It is a source of great sadness that it is no longer possible to have the celebration of the Eucharist in each of our 137 Churches every weekend. The Mass is the highest form of prayer and we are invited and obliged to participate. On those occasions when, due to the non-availability of a priest, it is not possible to have the celebration of Mass in a parish, it is good that the community gather to pray. As Bishop, I have a duty

of care to protect our priests from being overstretched and overworked. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Sunday liturgies in the absence of a priest are envisaged as a response to an emergency situation in a parish.

Positive aspects of lay ministry already at work

Central and key to all of this is a sincere effort to develop and expand on the vocation of all the baptised to exercise their priesthood of all the faithful in conjunction and collaboration with the ordained and with religious. The call and vocation to service of all the baptised is an important one and has been strongly emphasised since the Second Vatican Council many years ago. It is a call to all to fulfill an opportunity, privilege, responsibility and duty to exercise the ministry of all baptised and for each and everyone to use her or his talents in service for the great glory of God. 1 Cor 12. Romans 12.

Taking the “first step”

Pope Francis also invites us to this new way of being church in *“The Joy of the Gospel”* He calls it “taking the first step” (par 24) “Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The Lord gets involved and he involves his own, as he kneels to wash their feet. He tells his disciples: “You will be blessed if you do this” (*Jn* 13:17). An evangelising community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.

Trust in the Providence of God

In all of this we trust in the assistance and direction of the Lord to care for us and guide us and we leave it in his hands.

“Glory be to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine”. Ephesians 3:20

Moladh go deo le Dia!