

## APPENDIX B: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION GROUP, SUMMARY OF SESSIONS

Members: Kathleen Mc Donnell, Martin Shanahan, Leonard Cleary, Martina Meskell, Mary Bourke, Mary Tierney, Bridget Horan, Veronica Molloy, Brendan O' Brien, Kathleen O' Leary, Helena O' Gorman, Margaret Lee, Fr. Donagh O' Meara, Maureen Kelly, Dr. Eugene Duffy (Facilitator) Marie O'Connell-Quinn (note-taker); Sr. Betty Curtin, Fr. Anthony Mc Mahon & Roisin Kennedy attended one session. Others were unable to take up the invitation to be part of the group;

The Theological Reflection Group was convened in March 2012 to reflect on the feedback emerging from the Diocesan Process of Listening, Reflection and Conversation. This group comprises people from around the diocese who have some experience of reflecting theologically. They met for four sessions, guided by Dr Eugene Duffy, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. What follows is a brief outline of each session.

### SESSION 1

The Group began by reflecting on the collated feedback from the two diocesan gatherings of held in November and December 2011. The absence of mention of God or Christ in the report was particularly noted. It raised the question of how God informs who or what we are at all as Church? How are we shaped by the inspiring vision of Jesus?

It was felt that the feedback reflected much of people's disappointment and pain about the reality of Church as it is experienced on the ground and a desire for structural change. It also reflected a desire that the faith inherited from previous generations be passed on as well as a deep anxiety about how to connect with young people about faith issues. (The group also recognised that the dominant focus on faith and young people may distract from adults reflecting on their own faith and how that is expressed today.)

This led to a discussion on what is meant by 'passing on faith'. It was felt that for most people it is equated with practice – attending Church. Faith is also equated with morality and with continuing to live Christian values. It is also seen as a tradition, something we grew up with and a set of rituals. Further discussion and input from Eugene led to the insight that faith is mostly spoken of at a rational level – at the level of a set of beliefs. But at its essence **faith is a relationship, experienced at an affective level**. For the most part we find it hard to talk about our relationship with God, at an affective, heart level, at the level of spirituality.

### SESSION 2

The discussion on Night 1 led us to consider our own relationship with God. Who is the God with whom I am in relationship? There was a very moving sharing where each of us shared our personal image of God and something of how life had shaped and informed that image. Images of God as compassion, as energy, as life, as movement, as love were shared.

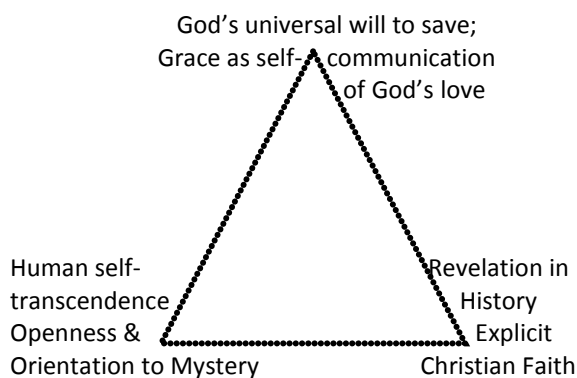
We were helped to re-evaluate and demythologise some of the images we received as children. We saw that many of these images were of an external God, a 'Supreme Being' who is distant and remote from us. We spoke about the difficulty in today's culture of experiencing a God to whom we can relate personally in a culture which does not support this sense of God. We talked about what it means to call God 'person' and the difference in how that word was understood in the early Christian period which was quite different from our notion of 'person'. We recognised the role of Scripture in helping shape our God images.

Eugene offered a reflection on God as 'Ground of our Being', the one who is the source of our lives and holds us in being. From the beginning we are 'in God', 'in whom we live and move and have our being'. God is not distant from or alien to us and we do not have to bridge a gap between God and us. God is the loving relationship who holds us in life. The group reflected on how life-giving this image

was for today. Eugene presented Rublev's Icon of the Trinity as an image of God inviting us/drawing us into the very life of God.

### SESSION 3

We began Session 3 by reflecting on the richness of our sharing on our images of God. We had moved from head talk to talking about relationship, to talking about the God in whom we are grounded. However, we recognised that our conversation was also privileged. Talking about God or faith in present day culture is difficult. Church language is often alienating and does not speak to people. Eugene proposed Michael Paul Gallagher's book Faith Maps, Chapter 3, which focuses on the thought of Karl Rahner, as input. It would help inform our conversation about how can we talk meaningfully about our sense of God and about faith in contemporary culture. Rahner was writing for a context where there was a crisis of religious belief, religious language was dying and people had lost contact with an inner experience of faith. This is also our reality. We focused especially on the graphic below from the article



Rahner believed that God's grace, God's self communication, is available to every person. The downward flow at the right of the triangle represents this good news made known through the Biblical Revelation. Traditionally people have been brought to faith through preaching, catechesis, sacraments and belonging to the Church. The left hand side represents the theatre of the Spirit at work in a real but hidden way in all cultures and peoples, in all of human life and experience. We live at a time when the explicitly Christian revelation is no longer reaching people as it did in the past. Rahner believed that the pathway to

faith today is through human experience. God is found by reflecting on our own experience of the Sacred as it is revealed in hints and guesses, in the ordinary experiences of life where the Spirit is at work but often hidden. The challenge for us is to offer space for people to reflect on their own experience so as to enable people to get in touch with their 'deep but silent' experiences of God. The challenge is to provide opportunities to help people to awaken to the presence of God in our story, in our lives and relationships, in all of creation. Coming to an awareness of God within our own experience is a necessary starting point for speaking about faith today. Only then will Liturgy, Scripture and the traditional ways faith is mediated speak.

### SESSION 4

In Session 3, we recognised the need to provide opportunities for reflection/conversation that engages our experience and helps us to get in touch with the Sacred in our lives. In our final session we took up the question of how to do this. Initially, we spoke of doing this at parish level, perhaps at Pastoral Council level. As we reflected, this seemed too ambitious.

It seemed more possible to the group to expand the existing group, recognising that there were many others around the Diocese who were 'ripe' for this kind of conversation. We will get comfortable in the process and be more ready to move out to facilitate other groups in similar conversations. People will learn how to facilitate only by doing it.

One suggestion was that similar groups be gathered in each Cluster. It was proposed that priests within the Diocese who would be open to this kind of exploration be invited to participate, while recognising that many priests do not feel comfortable in sharing their personal faith journey.

Engaging with young parents was seen as vital to the future. Sacramental preparation programmes could provide a forum for this kind of sharing but the programmes we have presently are tired and not enabling. Could Sacramental Preparation Programmes be developed in a way that allows parents to talk about their own experience as the 'theatre of the Spirit?'