

## **Conversations About Our Future: Presentation by Fr Albert Mc Donnell,**

Just a couple of thoughts. Inevitably there will be some overlap and I will try to keep that to a minimum but just some thoughts about our current situation and our future.

### **Slide 1: Picture of Canon Island**



The first and obvious point is that the life of every organization, and indeed the life of every person involves change. Perhaps not too many people recognise that image. It is taken of an island on the Shannon Estuary. It's an old abbey that is there on Canon Island. Just a thought – we go there on pilgrimage every year – that always occurs to me is the degree of activity that there must have been around there one time, coming and going. Because when that Abbey was alive, that was the centre of pastoral life on the Shannon Estuary, both sides of the river, the County Clare side and the Limerick side. And it was from there that the priests went out to evangelize, to preach the Gospel, to celebrate the Sacraments and so forth. But, there came a day when the candles were blown out for the last time, there came a day when that building ceased to be a vibrant centre of pastoral ministry. But even though Canon Island, even though the Abbey, the Abbey on Canon Island, St Mary's Abbey came to an end, the faith lived on.

### **Slide 2: Newmarket on Fergus Church with Seven Gables**

There have been many moments like that in the history of our diocese and in our Church. The next image is of the Church of St Mary of the Rosary in Newmarket on Fergus. Do you see the seven gables? Each one of those gables represents one of the medieval parishes that now.



form the single parish of Newmarket-on-Fergus. So, what is now one parish, back in the Middle Ages was seven separate parishes. So somewhere along the line, the people of faith, the bishop, all the rest, discerned that what needed to be done was to reorganise and that is what happened. And if you look at the history of our Church you see that same pattern again and again. If you go back to Scriptures to the Acts of the Apostles, which is really the story of the first generation of Christians, you will see how they had to face problems that their memory of Christ, that the Gospels, did not provide answers for. So they prayed, they discerned, they discussed, they opened their hearts to the Spirit and they made decisions and moved on.

Now one thing about the Church in Ireland is that we have come out of an extraordinary period of stability. If you look at Ignatius Murphy's history of our Diocese, you will see that from soon after the Famine right up until the 1960s there was an incredible period of stability in our diocese and indeed across Catholic Ireland. If you take for example, say the parish of Toomevara. That had three priests. There was a Parish Priest and two curates. Each time one of them died or was transferred elsewhere, the bishop sent a new one. And that was the way right across the diocese. You had this incredible period of stability. But not only is that period of stability over, it is now fading from our memory. The older people here, including myself, are among the few who remember that anymore.

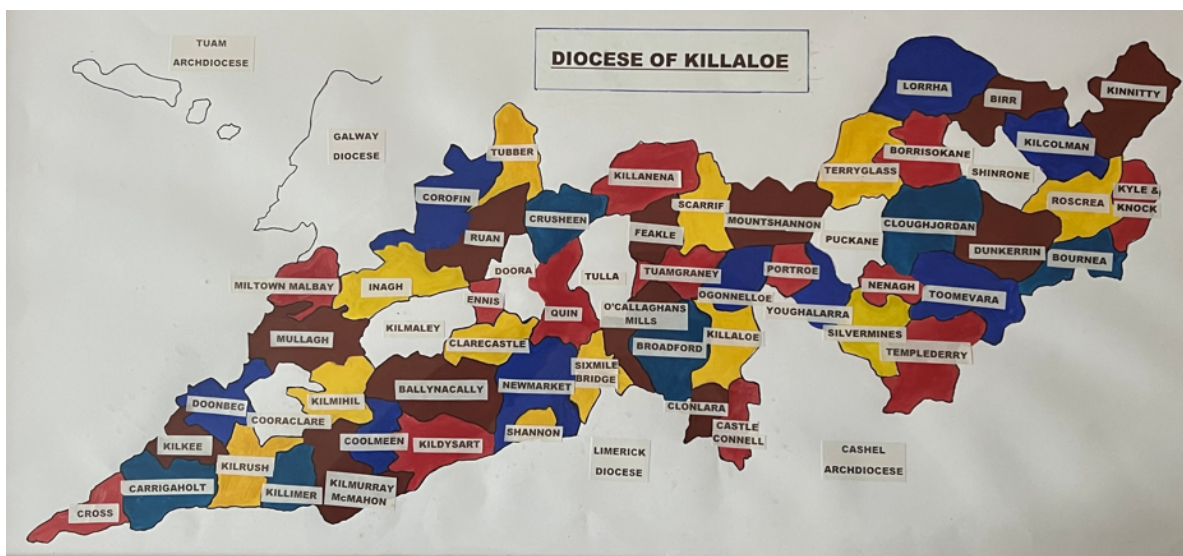
That is something that Pope Francis speaks about quite a bit, about the change that is happening in our world. And they phrase that the Pope likes to use is that we are not living in a change of era or an epoch of change. We are not living in a time when we are seeing a

whole lot of changes. But we are living through in a changed era, a changed epoch. The change that is happening is fundamental. It's basic and has enormous consequences.

*If we want everything to stay the same*

*then everything has to change*

A phrase that the Pope likes to use is the one I have on the screen there. It's taken from a novel, one of those novels that every child in Italy reads going to school. "If we want everything to stay the same, then everything has to change." That's the core phrase that the Pope quotes a lot. Sounds contradictory of course. "If we want everything to stay the same, then everything has to change." What do we want to stay the same? The core, what matters most: our friendship with the Lord, our faith in the Lord, the way of living that goes with the Gospel, the sense of hope and meaning that it gives to our lives. That's what we want to preserve. But if we want that to happen then all the structure, all the architecture, all the scaffolding that supports it has to change. And the Pope has been using that phrase – he first used it in speaking to his own collaborators in the Roman Curia, a group not known for radical change or kind of mad sort of thinking. But he first used that phrase there and it's something that applies to the Church in Ireland. If we want to keep our friendship with Christ alive, then we have to be open to radical change in how we have organised ourselves.



## **Inherited Structure**

We begin with the structure that we have inherited. And we have inherited an extraordinary structure. That's the map of the diocese. Each of the 58 parishes are illustrated there. Each and every one of those parishes has one church or more. I think it's just three parishes, Portroe, Kildysert and Killmihil who have one church. The other parishes have one, two or three [churches]. In some cases, four [churches]. Catholic schools were provided in all those parishes, community centres were built, cemeteries were developed an extraordinary flourishing of Catholic life and ministry took place. Now, we are also painfully aware that there was a dark side as well. And that is something that, please God, we will continue to address and please God it will recede into the past. But, like I say, it was an extraordinary achievement.

Where I live is in a place called Kildysert. It's on the Shannon Estuary. It's just over the road is a place called Cahercon where the Columban Sisters were founded. There is still a memory of those sisters, young girls from farms and shops and round about, young girls who had opted to join the Columban order and heading out to China. That was an extraordinary thing that those young girls that those young girls were going to the ends of the earth, driven by their desire to share the faith. And that was the whole vitality of that structure that we inherited, that missionary outreach. Another example, is when the present Pope visited Ireland for the World Meeting of Families, the Taoiseach at the time, indeed the current Taoiseach, pointed out that Ireland only established the Department of Health and the Department of Social Welfare in 1947 – the State was founded in the early 20s. But we didn't feel the need to establish those two major departments, health and social welfare for another 25 years because people of faith, Church-groups and religious congregations were looking after those needs. So just to stress the extraordinary and wonderful structure that we inherited.

But time moves on. And a structure that was created for a world in which you had almost 100% engagement with the Church, almost 100% of people engaged with their parish on a weekly basis, a Church that was built at a time when you had numerous vocations to the priestly and religious life and where there was a different model. There was a priest at the centre. He made things happen. It was a structure that simply has been superseded. It was an understanding of the faith that no longer prevails. So, a structure that we see in that image [of the 58 parishes] that was once a great help to us but now, I think, the maintenance of that

structure has become a burden. And I believe that we are no longer able to maintain 58 units in our Diocese.

A question that is worth asking and reflecting on: 'what is needed to make a parish sustainable?' We are a sacramental Church. Our lives as Christians, as Catholics, are built around the Sacraments. Baptism is obviously the gateway, the other Sacraments of Initiation, the Eucharist, food for the journey that sustains us on our journey as Christians, the Sacraments of Commitment: Matrimony, Ordination and so forth. For Sacraments you must have clergy. And we are all very much aware as the Bishop pointed out at the beginning of the enormous drop in the number of clergy. But of course, the drop has happened at both sides of the altar. About 80% of our people rarely engage with the life of their parish, certainly with the sacramental life. It's more in some places, less in some others. What will be interesting now, in a few months' time, is the detailed results of the census. How many people will describe themselves as Catholic? It has been dropping in every census. The likelihood is that it will drop further. There is a real likelihood that in the age-group say between 20 and 40 will a minority or majority of them still call themselves Catholic? It could well be a minority. That's where we are at. So therefore, the parish structure that was created on the assumption that you have 100% engagement, is that appropriate where engagement has dropped to 20% or in some places to single figures?

### **The Vatican 2 Model of Church**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council was the single most important religious event in the second millennium. It brought about a new understanding of Church, going back to the origins of our faith. And one of the consequences of that is that a priest 'running the show' so to speak, is no longer in line with how the Church understands itself. So, a great deal of active involvement by people who are not ordained is needed if we are to live on as Church, as the People of God as developed by Vatican 2. You see that obviously in liturgy. A celebration of any liturgy, the Eucharist or any of the others, where just one voice, the voice of the priest is the only voice is that an authentic, fruitful celebration of the liturgy? Will people leave that kind of celebration of the liturgy with a desire to return next Sunday or on the next occasion? To keep a parish alive, you need social media. That's how people communicate nowadays. It used to be local newspapers; they are all in decline. It's all social media nowadays and you need people to look after that. Maintenance of the buildings is important. You need people to serve on school boards. You've a whole area of state compliance as well that's new.

## Compliance

Safeguarding

Charity Act

GDPR

### Slide 6:

Now, it's important but it requires time and energy. You've the Charity Act. Each of our Dioceses and consequently our parishes are charities. So, therefore how we manage our money has to meet the requirements of the Charity Act. Otherwise, there is the risk of prosecution and so forth. There's the whole area of Safeguarding something that many dioceses identify as a main priority. You've the whole area of the protection of data, GDPR. They are important, necessary good things to do but they require time and energy. Also Finance. If four-fifths of the people are not engaging in the life of their parish or their diocese, then finance is going to drop and I am sure many of you here are on your parish finance committee and you are very aware of that. And, of course, as we are all aware costs are increasing. We are very aware at the moment of the likelihood that insurance costs will increase. So, if you take all of that, I am convinced, and I say this with sadness really, I am convinced that the picture in that image [of 58 parishes] is no longer viable. I don't see how we can do it. We don't have the clergy; we don't have the people; we don't have the money; we don't have the resources; we don't have the energy.

## Current Pastoral Approach

Ministry and the sacrament of baptism

Enhanced co-operation between faith communities

### Slide 7:

#### The Current Pastoral Approach



The Current Pastoral approach that is invoked in Ireland I think, in my opinion (you might think differently) is characterised by two elements. The first is a new focus, a renewed focus, on the ministry of all the Baptised, that Ministry is not linked solely with the Sacrament of Orders, (even though the Sacrament of Orders as I said earlier remains important, naturally). But that every person who is baptised, confirmed and has made their 1<sup>st</sup> Holy Communion has a part to play in the ministry and the life of our Church. The second point is, as Ger pointed out so well earlier, enhanced cooperation between our faith communities, that small units on their own cannot survive in today's world. And in all of that it is important to bear in mind that we are not starting from zero, that we are not starting from scratch, a lot has been achieved.

## Killaloe Diocese 2018

### Map of Pastoral Areas

In our own diocese, as the Bishop has pointed out, the creation of the fifteen pastoral areas is a wonderful starting point, a stepping stone to what I think we need to do. It's important to recognise what has already been achieved. We were one of the first diocese in Ireland, perhaps the first, in Bishop Harty's time, to have a Pastoral Councils in every single parish. And that was an extraordinary achievement. Pastoral Councils are something that people are used to and that is a wonderful strength and resource. It's a pity and it's sad really, to see especially since the pandemic in the last couple of years, we have seen the decline of our pastoral councils. There are now parishes in our diocese that don't have working pastoral councils. There's one or two cases that I know of (I wouldn't be informed of every single parish) where there is no pastoral council at all or there are cases where there is but it's just a couple of names on the sheet of paper but that really doesn't function. So that is something

that has to be enhanced. It's something that we've already practice at, that we've experience of and therefore that itself is an advantage. And the number of people involved in the life of our parishes, the number of people who came here tonight shows that it is important for you, that you feel that there is work to be done, work that is worth doing, work that if it's done will bring about benefits to everyone and bring us all a bit closer to the Lord. As the Bishop pointed out, the introduction of our new volunteer ministers is, I think, the single most important step forward that we've taken in this diocese in a very long time. And I know from the Pastoral Area that I work in that it has made a very big difference and will continue to do so.

### **What's Next?**

What do we need to do next? What's the next step?

Well, I think the first thing we need to do is simply to take control of the life of our diocese, pastoral area, faith communities. Doing nothing will not stop change. Change will happen no matter what we do or what we don't do. If we do nothing it will become drift, it will be uncontrolled. And that in itself is a recipe for disaster. The pandemic in our diocese (now I know there is no good time for a pandemic) but in terms of pastoral development the pandemic in our diocese came at the worst possible time. The new system that the Bishop referred to had just been set up so shortly before that, our new pastoral areas were just about to get going and then everything stopped. And of course, as those couple of years went by the situation got worse in terms of the engagement in the life of our Church and so forth.

So, we need to take control and we need to move forward on the basis of reflection, discussion, prayer and decision, rather than letting everything run out of control on its own. We need to decide what is worth preserving and what isn't. Naturally we'd all agree that friendship with the Lord and the hope and the meaning that flows from that are what's worth preserving. Structures, whether they were invented last week, last year, last century or a millennium ago are never an end in themselves. The Lord did not at any point ever say that Killaloe has to have 58 parishes. Structures are a means to an end. They were set up to help us in our lives as faith communities. And the day that a structure becomes a burden is the day that it needs to get revised and replaced.



We can't keep going as we are. That is simply not an option. Staying as we are now that will not work for us. One of the problems we have in our diocese now is that we have too much structure. 58 parishes is too much structure. We need something much, much simpler. It was pointed out, I think that it was Fr Ger who said it with regard to Kerry. They expect that each of their pastoral areas will have only one priest. We are on the cusp of that here in our own diocese. A cursory look at the numbers will tell you that. If we continue with each pastoral area having multiple parishes, multiple pastoral councils, a small group of people doing everything, very committed, good people but few in numbers, the priest probably in his late 60s or early 70s perhaps more, trying to attend to meetings of 4/5 different pastoral councils and the people in each church area simply not having the knowledge or resources or the training they need to look after all those things, particularly compliance or trying to produce liturgies that are meaningful and inviting – all of that – we simply will fail. That won't work. We'll run ourselves into the ground. We'll kill ourselves.

## What would our new enlarged parishes look like?

A question that's worth asking – if we were – I hope we do, and please God we will in my view – if we were to amalgamate our 15 pastoral areas into single parishes, what would they look like? I think the key element would have to be that they should become *Communities of Communities*.

## Community of Communities.

If we were to do that each pastoral area would have multiple churches. Around each of those churches you would have a praying community. It wouldn't be possible, it not possible now to have the celebration the Eucharist in each and every church but you still would have a community that prays in every church. I would think that what would need to happen in a large parish is that each pastoral area as it is now, each parish as it would become would

have to identify one or at most two churches where Mass would be celebrated every Sunday and then after that the other churches would have the celebration of the Sacraments and the Eucharist as possible. After the pandemic, to my knowledge five of our Churches, (maybe it's more but I am aware of five) have not reopened, are not functioning as they did before. So, we've at least five churches now that are rarely if ever used. That number will keep growing. So, we will simply not be able to maintain all of our churches. What I would think in our new enlarged parishes, the priest, together with the pastoral council representing all the church areas should, as I said earlier, identify a Church that's the principal church where the Eucharist is celebrated every Sunday and then an arrangement where the other church is. In some of them it might be possible to have the Eucharist celebrated every Sunday. In some of them, with the permission of the Bishop, it might be possible to have a Sunday celebration of the Eucharist perhaps on a Wednesday. Lay led liturgy is an area we have explored in this diocese. That would be the liturgical side of it.

Secondly then, in the area of compliance, the burden would be removed from individual church areas and would be shouldered by the larger parish. So instead of needing numerous people in each Church area to look after safeguarding and GDPR and the Charities Act, you would be able to identify people who would have an interest and a knowledge of these areas who would do it for the whole parish. It would allow us to employ a parish secretary for the whole of the enlarged parish. We have done that in our Pastoral Area, and it has made an enormous difference. Then of course some many of our existing parishes of maybe 500 people they simply can't afford to employ anybody, and income is dropping everywhere. But our enlarged parishes would have the resources to do that. Administration would be simplified by the fact that you've a single bank account for the whole parish, a single set of accounts and so forth.

There would be a lot of reward in doing it. I think we still have the energy to do it. If we wait much longer, we won't have the energy to do that. We become more and more aware of that as time goes by. Also, if we reduce the amount of structure we have, we liberate ourselves from a good deal of administration. That in turn frees up energy for evangelisation, for sharing the Gospel, for reaching out to young people, for helping people preparing for the Sacraments. The whole issue of Catholic education is in a state of flux. I think everyone expects we'll have fewer Catholic Schools in the future than we have now. You'll have Catholic children attending non-Catholic schools who will wish to receive the sacraments and

our enlarged parishes would be in a stronger position to help prepare those children than our existing 58 parishes. So, you free energy from administration that could be used for preaching the Gospel.

Just one or two points to come to an end. Numerous parishes across mainland Europe and I notice in recent times in England and also in North America have done this. They've done it with an air of regret as I said earlier but they have done it because they want to keep the Gospel alive. They want to keep faith communities alive. I think if we were to do something radical, (because going from 58 parishes to 15 is pretty radical), but I think it would be a powerful statement of our belief in the Gospel and our desire to keep the Gospel alive. The fact that we are gathering here tonight is a strong statement of our desire to do that. But translating our discussions into concrete action I think would be an even stronger one. It would itself be a prophetic act, an act of witness to the Gospel.

Just to give an example, the Netherlands had 1500 parishes in 2003. Now they have 660. There are numerous other examples, German Diocese and the United States that I could give.

The situation is quite serious. We are at a minute to mid-night. If we don't do something radical quite soon, we won't have the energy to do it.

The final point I would like to make is the one on the screen.

The cost of  
doing nothing  
is far greater  
than the price  
of change



(Fr Albert Mc Donnell, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2023, Abbey Court Hotel, Nenagh)