

**Killaloe Diocese
Going Forward
In
Faith, Hope and Love**

**A letter from Bishop Fintan Monahan
Killaloe Diocese – Autumn 2023**

‘The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.’
Pope Francis – Evangelii Gaudium #3.

During the past seven years I have witnessed this lifegiving encounter in action in the parishes and pastoral areas of the diocese of Killaloe. I experience it at celebrations of the Eucharist, at other sacramental celebrations, in schools, churches, homes, at countless pilgrimage occasions and prayer apostolates. It is my earnest hope that exploring new ways of being Church will enable continued encounter with Jesus Christ, the source of our hope and joy.

Our pastoral plan *Builders of Hope, Diocese of Killaloe, 2013-2020* was coming to its natural end and additional guidance was given in 2018 so as to support the vision of living the Gospel. The main feature of this plan was a change from the old cluster system to that of pastoral areas and the introduction of co-parish priests with shared responsibility for groups of parishes. These developments met with mixed success, not least due to the global pandemic.

Rapid Change in Recent Years

In the intervening five years the rate of decline in church life accelerated much more dramatically than had been anticipated. This was evident in:

- Declining attendance at Mass;
- Reduction in financial resources;
- Continuing drop in the number of priests in ministry;
- Increase in the age of clergy;
- Challenges in encouraging people to commit to voluntary roles.

Ministries of Pastoral Care and Catechesis

On the positive side, there is still a very large number of people who are deeply committed to their faith and who generously give of their time, talents, energy and resources in support of their faith communities. In particular, our recently commissioned volunteer ministers of pastoral care and catechesis have given our diocese a fresh injection of energy. Where they have been effectively encouraged and supported we have witnessed many new signs of hope and new life in the Diocese.

Conversations about the Future

In an attempt to look at where we are going the synodal pathway methodology was employed:

Encounter

With Christ and the body of Christ (People, Church and the world).

Deep listening

To God, Holy Spirit and each other.

Discernment

What we are called to do?

Having done the first and the second phases, we are now at the discernment and implementation stage.

In spring of this year, 2023 with view to addressing this situation, two large plenary gatherings were convened in the diocese. These assemblies consisted of conversation evenings to address the issues arising, to present ideas, to stimulate debate and to discuss and tease out many of the items that were arising. Following on from that fourteen local meetings were held in the pastoral areas. Feedback was duly collated and assembled. A steering group comprising representatives from clergy, volunteer ministers, pastoral development and the diocesan pastoral council was convened to oversee the process and collate, interpret and present the concerns, ideas, themes and possibilities that were arising.

Emergent Themes

Some of the themes that emerged included:

- Significant change is essential if our faith communities are to thrive;
- Youth involvement and youth ministry;
- The role of women in the church;
- Peace, justice, equality, inclusion, care for the poor, the marginalised;
- The positive impact of the recently commissioned ministers of pastoral care and catechesis;
- Training and formation in ministry for lay people;
- A strong desire to develop a culture of teamwork allowing clergy and laity to minister hand in hand;
- Easing the burden administration and compliance by means of enhanced co-operation in pastoral areas;
- Importance of local identity and the fear of losing this;
- Importance of effective communication at all levels.

Many of these themes had previously arisen during the synodal pathway gatherings during the spring of 2023 and will continue to be on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

Evangelisation and Mission

The steering group also noted the basic and fundamental necessity for effective *Evangelisation* and developing a sense of *Mission* as this is, as Pope Francis often reminds us at the heart of why the Church exists. He reminds us “We do well to keep in mind the early Christians and our many brothers and sisters throughout history who were filled with joy, unflagging courage and zeal in proclaiming the Gospel.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* # 263).

Our pastoral area meetings, while acutely aware of the significant challenges, were hope-filled gatherings. Committed people with a sense of ownership and love of Church shared a burning desire for their Church to be as vibrant and life-giving as possible for generations to come. There was also a strong sense of realism that things have to change, if we are to meet the faith and pastoral needs of the believing community in the diocese.

Important calls

Some important calls were made at our meetings, a desire for:

- a strong steer,
- clear leadership,
- a prophetic, visionary voice

to have the courage to identify a structure that would bring us forward and sustain the Church for the next number of years.

There was a call for *a way of being* Church that would bring us beyond management mode into the realm of mission, to be outward looking, not just looking after and maintaining what we had from the past. There was acknowledgement that some elements of the Church of the past were dying, in order to give way to a new Church fit for purpose for the world we live in at present. Significant fears were also expressed in relation to a new expression of Church.

Closure of Churches

At some gatherings the closure of churches emerged as a topic for discussion. It is widely acknowledged that we have too many churches for our present needs. Many were built at a time when transport was minimal and there was need to get there on foot. Having almost 140 places of worship for 58 parishes, with the resources now available is no longer sustainable. Some smaller rural churches did not open after the pandemic but continue to be available for special celebrations. Difficult decisions as to viability of individual churches should ideally be made at local level, taking into

account the needs and resources of the local community. The diocese will be happy to facilitate further conversation and reflection on this in due course.

On this issue one could also take another approach! Rather than closing down churches we will in the near future be *opening up* our churches and enabling communities with fewer or no priests to take responsibility for the daily upkeep of their local church. More importantly, the local church building will be a genuine community centre at the heart of a parish's spiritual and social life. For this vision of hope to succeed it is vital that priests and people work together in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

Options – possible ways forward

At the meetings three possible ways forward were discussed:

- The first option was revisiting and renewing what we planned in 2018 with the development of pastoral areas in the diocese;
- The second option was a far-reaching proposal, similar to what has been done in many countries in recent years of amalgamating the parishes in pastoral areas. Each pastoral area would become a single parish, thereby simplifying our structures as we move from 58 to 15 units within the diocese;
- The third was a *via media* between options one and two. This would involve taking on the provisions of 2018 but also progressing beyond that to incorporate some strategies of centralisation to address the further decline of the past five years.

In the discussion and debate while the logic, wisdom and regretful inevitability of what was contained in the second option it was felt that we are not quite ready to embrace that fully **yet** and that option three was for the moment the best way forward.

While no other proposed options emerged during the discussion evenings, one other possible way forward was later submitted. This proposal resembled the pastoral area model, reverting to the old deanery areas with the large urban areas being administrative hubs and the pastoral activity clustering around them.

Preservation of Local Identity

Foremost, at all our gatherings was the fear of loss of the local. Local parish identity is ingrained in the religious, cultural and sporting identity of diocese and country. It was felt important to continue to maintain this for as long as possible, while at the same time being practical and realising this may not be possible to maintain with less and less resources available. The faith community will only lose its identity where there are no people present to worship and witness. What we are endeavouring to do is to ensure that there will be others to run the good race that St. Paul speaks of. (2 Timothy 4:7)

Epoch of Change

To paraphrase the words of Pope Francis from 2015 today we are not living an epoch of change so much as a change of epoch. That is certainly the case as we move forward in trying to find a way to not only survive but to thrive into this third millennium of Christianity.

Immediate Plan

Considering all the above I am proposing the following:

Practical Guidelines in the provision of Pastoral Care – Diocese of Killaloe

Pastoral: Developing and progressing the Pastoral Area as a central unit of Pastoral Care to maximise resources.

We shall take the 2018 provisions as our starting point. For pastoral areas that hadn't fully embraced that vision of things they are to be brought up to speed as soon as possible. However, it can't stop there. Within each pastoral area serious progress needs to be made in the area of centralisation of administration which will for now ensure that the pastoral service can be kept as local as possible.

Our focus needs to further move from parish to pastoral area, while at the same time enabling and resourcing local faith communities. Since the concept of parish is so deeply engrained in our culture this will take time and further renewed effort. The following may help in this process:

- a. The frequent use of the name of the pastoral area;
- b. The creation of a pastoral area council composed of people nominated by the parish pastoral council and the priests, under retirement age, ministering in the pastoral area. The pastoral area council should meet at least quarterly to deal with matters which affect all the parishes in the area. Such matters would include liturgy, sacramental preparation and the ongoing formation of parish ministers (word, eucharist, music);
- c. The pooling of resources through the creation of a single pastoral area office, the publication of a shared parish newsletter, shared social media presence, organising shared sacramental preparation and shared pilgrimages and other celebrations.
- d. Encouraging people to participate in liturgies in churches other than their own.

Liturgical

So that people may leave our Sunday liturgies with a desire to return next week, we need to:

- a. Invest time, energy, creativity and money in the celebration of liturgy;
- b. Avoid poorly prepared and attended liturgies which are not prayerful or inspiring;
- c. Work to ensure that ministers of word, eucharist and music are involved in all Sunday (including vigil) Masses;

- d. Accept that it is no longer possible to have a Sunday (or vigil) Mass in every church every week;
- e. Exploring the possibility of celebrating Sunday Mass during the week;
- f. The priests assigned to each pastoral area (in consultation with pastoral area and parish pastoral councils) need to construct a Mass rota which respects the following principles:
 - i. Priests under retirement age should be scheduled to celebrate no more than three Sunday (or vigil) Masses;
 - ii. Priests over retirement age should only be scheduled to celebrate one Sunday (or vigil) Mass;
 - iii. Each priest should celebrate the Sunday (including vigil) Masses in a parish in the pastoral area other than the one where he is resident, at least once a month;
 - iv. Masses celebrated by the same priest should have an interval of 90 minutes between their starting times;
 - v. The celebration of marriages and funerals outside of Mass may, in some circumstances, be appropriate.

Personnel

The time and energy of priests, ministers of pastoral care, catechesis and committed lay people should be used to best effect. After extensive consultation, I see team ministry as the only way forward - priests, volunteer ministers, committed lay people working together, sharing resources, planning together. The following principles should help in that regard;

- a. The Vicar Forane in each pastoral area is responsible for the leadership of the pastoral care of the group of parishes in an inclusive and imaginative fashion;
- b. Priests in each pastoral area should meet weekly to review the previous week and to plan the following week and other forthcoming events, to discuss administration and to arrange free time and holidays. Ministers of pastoral care to be attend such meetings at least monthly and are to be included in decision making;
- c. Priests over retirement age are not expected to play a role in administration;
- d. A priest under retirement age should be designated to attend pastoral council, liturgy and finance council meetings in each parish;
- e. The meetings should prioritise Mission over Maintenance;
- f. A priest or minister of catechesis should be appointed as chaplain to each Catholic school;
- g. Each parish is to have only one pastoral and finance council;
- h. The scheduling of baptisms and funerals should be inspired by the pastoral needs of the people and the reasonable availability of priests;
- i. Each priest should have a designated day off each week.

Administration

A key priority is the centralisation administration at pastoral area level. Many rural areas do not have the resources, know-how and skills to be up to date in relation to financial compliance, GDPR, safeguarding, property issues, charity act and other areas. Key to progress in this new way of being Church will be identifying a central location in each pastoral area and ensuring that the work of administration is performed there. This will free up time for pastoral work. This may involve some upskilling of administrative staff in central offices. Naturally, the employment rights of existing parish staff must be respected. Nevertheless, I am asking that progress on this would be made by the end of 2023. I ask pastoral areas to identify the location that would best serve as an administrative hub where practical items can be managed, storing of records and data, booking and planning for occasions, financial transactions and other administrative tasks.

For the moment parish accounts can remain separate within the pastoral area, but looking ahead and planning for the time where they will be united. Priest remuneration accounts in each area are to be amalgamated into one as the priests in the pastoral area are being paid from that account. In many pastoral areas this has happened already. This work is to be complete in each pastoral area by the end of the calendar year, 2023.

Monitoring, Support, Review Compliance and Accountability

In Spring of this year a lot of work was done, looking into the existence and effective working of parish pastoral councils. A survey was done in relation to each parish and pastoral area and as a result of that much work and support needs to be offered in this area. Regular support calls will be done to ensure progress is being made in the pastoral areas. Encouragement and support will be offered on a regular basis. There was a strong call for training for the implementation of structures at pastoral area level. Support and guidance will be available as much as possible and it is something the diocese is currently exploring, how best this can be resourced, supported, evaluated and significant progress made. The new vicar for evangelisation and mission, Fr. Michael Collins will be working in this area in the coming years.

All of the above is to be implemented as soon as possible, hitting the ground running from early Autumn. The Vicars Forane in each pastoral area will be key drivers in the implementation and animation of personnel in this important work. The structure will be reviewed annually, from Autumn of 2024 each year. Some summary pointers will be made available with specific timeframes for implementation of the above.

There will be an expectation of accountability backed up by regular audits of the pastoral areas. This will ensure implementation and compliance with the above vision and that specific areas do not get left behind with the necessary progress. We are already familiar with this level of accountability in the area of safeguarding and finance.

Synodal Church

Over the next number of years we are eager to continue the synodal journey so as to become the vision of Vatican II, Church as people of God. Pope Francis describes clergy and laity working together to embody the Kingdom of God. A synodal church is a community where every voice is respected and has an input into decision making. Pastoral and finance councils are especially essential in this regard. Ultimately, concrete decisions have to be taken in the light of receiving the Spirit refracted through the prism of the multi-faceted wonder of God's people.

Baptism, Witness, the Role of the Priest in a Synodal Church

Our rediscovery of the foundational nature of the sacrament of baptism leads us to treasure all charisms and vocations. Baptism is the common platform on which we all stand as we each live out our own pathway towards holiness. The role played by priests continues to evolve. Administration and so much else that was once the exclusive reserve of the priest is now done in collaboration with other members of the faith community. Our liturgy also requires a great many voices and charisms if it is to be fruitful in our lives. However, the priest will always fulfil a unique role as animator of charisms within the faith community inspired by the awareness that the Lord is present in us all.

A joy ever new, a joy which is shared

I finish where I started with encouragement from Pope Francis in his first Apostolic Exhortation – *Evangelii Gaudium*. “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this moment to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* #3)