

Synodality

A call for us to live as Community



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The world into which we speak this vision of Synodality.

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” – Proverbs

In the early 2000's I was involved with the late Bishop Willie in putting a Pastoral Plan in place for our diocese. I'm now retired, aged 88, and I'm writing about change and reform in society and Church with the encouragement of Bishop Fintan. Reading the signs of the times has always been an interest of mine. In my lifetime there has been extraordinary changes. In Ireland they began in the early 1960's. In the economic world of industrialisation and urbanisation they became a reality, bringing with them major societal and technological changes.

The Vatican Council brought forward changes to cope with a modern Ireland and embrace a modern world. It was in response to these changes that we were putting the Pastoral Plan for our diocese in place. We set out the vision presented by the Pope at the beginning of the new millennium and attempted to outline this to the gospel vision. Through a constructive process we tried to inform ourselves as to what was the vision of the people for our church in the Diocese of Killaloe. In the years following, we tried to implement that plan, with varying degrees of success.

When our world changes new approaches are called for in church life. Pope Francis responded with what he called the Synodal Way. It is taking us time to understand it. For now, because we know that we need to renew the faith in the life of people, we need to be committed where we support one another. Spirituality is at the heart of all this meaning connecting with inner self, with one another, with creation and nature and with Creator. The Synodal Way is journeying together in community - a community of the Church and its people. I wonder therefore is the Synodal Way just another name for the Community Way?

If it is its worth reminding ourselves that we have a long and proud tradition of community in Ireland. We take great pride in our origins and sense of loyalty, to the people and place from whence we came. It is not at all surprising that this should express itself in concern for the common good in the form of voluntary and community service. This commitment is even more relevant today. I believe that up to the present, despite individualism and secularism, community spirit remains strong in our culture. Examples of this community spirit are described in the following pages and are indicators for giving direction to the Synodal Way.

We must also remind ourselves that human rights only mean something if they extend from the halls of power to the homes of people. They are relevant in small places close to home. In the world of the individual, in his or her neighbourhood, where they live, in the school or college they attend, the factory, farm or office where they work, people are stronger together. The principle of putting people first is critical now in an era where the world is fracturing, the planet is rapidly warming, artificial intelligence is changing everything, and democracy is hanging by a thread. These challenges also need to be examined and discussed.

If we look back to the beginning of Christianity, we see that Jesus was a man of his time, a man of the people, a man who shared deeply in the lives of the people and responded to their needs both spiritually and practically. The church that Jesus founded was a community church. Vatican II supported this idea with its central thesis that the Church is the People of God. The 20th century saw colonisation and clericalism. Surely the way forward in the 21st century is through community? Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann sibh.

Synodality: The means by which the Christian Community engages the realities of our world.

The Church is now focused on reforming itself to respond to the challenge of bringing and fostering the faith to people in an Ireland where peoples' values are shaped by the economy, such as the cost of living and by the social media. We are aware we live at a time where an unquestioning faith is no longer tenable.

However, after the experience of the past number of years, people are beginning to realise that when freedom comes to mean license to do what we like, the fallout can have serious consequences for people, in the form of isolation, individualism, loneliness, crime. Some of this could be reaching a critical stage so much so that growing numbers are searching for meaning now.

We are now a culture in confusion because we are the first generation to have reached the limits of what economic and material growth can provide to a developed country. Put simply – we got too well off too fast. Our political leaders tend to measure their success by the health of the economy. But important as it is, *“it does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor compassion – it measures everything except what makes life worthwhile.”* These are words spoken by the late Robert F. Kennedy and in some way could apply to us. It is an established fact now that in measurable ways societies do not work as well where people are not connected to one another.

And this brings me to the connections between our Christian faith and the health of our society and to the concept of Christian community. The concept of a Synodal Church now needs to be taken seriously. It has all the ingredients for connecting people to one another and to God.

We are aware now that the Church and the Priesthood have been through a very difficult and challenging time. It is at this time we remind ourselves of Jesus and his suffering, passion and death on the Cross. But we remind ourselves too of his resurrection. He healed the sick. He listened to the marginalised, whether it was Mary Magdalene or the woman at the well and He fed the hungry. He connected with the hearts of people and touched their souls. Following His example must be important for the pastoral mission of the Church at this time. And it helps us understand the Synodal Way when it refers to the priority of the poor and marginalised.

And of course, faith is nourished in the simple day to day contact with people in coping with life. Faith can be restored through experiences of the lives of people being touched in a meaningful way. A need to show respect to one another is also very important and I've been thinking of late that there is a need to promote good manners. A simple display of good manners, something which we were all instilled with growing up, is one way of showing respect, but in modern times is lacking among all age groups in society.

In 2012, the theme at the 50th International Eucharistic Congress which was held in Dublin was *"The Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with One Another"*. Faith is also fostered in developing ministries which give people an identity. The concept of a parish as a community of communities makes sense. There is an old saying *"the person enriches the parish, and the parish enriches the person."* An individual's personal network of family, friends, and neighbours forms the core building block of their connection to the wider community.

If we accept that the Synodal Way is also the Community Way, then we can learn much from the community structures that we are most familiar with in Ireland and with other initiatives which have delivered positive results.

Synodality: Creating a space whereby everybody belongs.

There seems to be a certain amount of resistance to moving on the Synodal Way. People continue to wonder what does it mean? I believe it has to do with togetherness and effectively it means community. In rural communities, such as in Feakle where I grew up, people were expected to help one another. To be prepared to help others was a mission that people were aware of because some day it might be us who would need their help. We shared our goods and our labour. A second and more important part of community was knowing that we belonged. We had a sense of place. We were neighbours and we grew up believing that neighbours were needed like friends. In the modern world many of us do not fully know our neighbours. Our Christianity taught us to love one another. "See how these people love and care for one another". It's the hallmark of a Christian community. In our world it might seem utopian, yet as Christians we are called on to promote this way of life.

This way of life gives meaning to life. Helping one another is not just the right thing to do, it makes us feel better about ourselves. But above all it helps us to realise that the Christian way is a radical way. It's the way Pope Francis called on us to be part of when he introduced us to the Synodal Way. He told us, "We need to go back to getting our hands dirty and regaining our own centrality, putting humanity and not human commodities at the centre, because the alternative – the option we have before us is of a world in which humans are at risk of being reduced to consumer goods is an attack on personal dignity, on the integrity of nature, on beauty, on the happiness of life and is also a slow erosion of rights". He said, "What we need today for young people or adults are dreams that wake

them up, that challenge them, that inspire projects that encourage them to make decisions and to become active participants”.

And we must be careful not to fail to recognise opportunities for communications within the family where togetherness is most essential. Francis tells us, “It is a common experience in all families, at mealtime for each person around the table to bring with them their phones, instead of talking, adults often as much as children, as those who accuse young people of ‘always being on the phone’ are often the first to become hooked on it. To be or become a better example could be a challenge for most of us.”

There are very good reasons to believe that the wisdom of Pope Francis in promoting the Synodal Way is inspired at this time. Increasingly we are hearing the call ‘to slow down’ and to move away from a pace of life that is leading to breakdown in relationships – with our inner selves, others, creation and Creator. These can be the key to finding meaning to life. It’s in the ordinary and the obvious we could find the way to the Synodal Way. And don’t forget, “Christian hope is that humble and strong virtue that sustains us and doesn’t let us drown in the many difficulties of life”.

Recently we enjoyed a wonderful night of celebration to mark fifteen years of community ownership of Sixmilebridge Mart. This project is a wonderful example of ‘togetherness’ where a community came together to save what they considered was a vital facility in their area. Not only did they succeed in saving it but have made a tremendous success of it ever since. The night of celebration was itself a wonderful community gathering and some of the feedback received gives an indication of what it meant to the people involved.

One person said, “The atmosphere was one of harmony, togetherness and quiet strength – a belief if you like in what a community can do. A celebration of that belief, a celebration of that community.”

Another added, “What resonated with me was the message that, rather than always looking upwards and searching outside ourselves for answers, we should look around us and within ourselves ... the spirit of togetherness was beautifully reflected throughout the evening, especially in the moments when everyone joined in song”.

Yet another decided to put their thoughts in verse, and these are some excerpts

“Fifteen years to the very day
Since the mart was saved
A place of trade, community a must
Our neighbours bound by faith and trust.
A balm for the soul, a time to care,
More healing than could be found elsewhere.
No therapy could quite compare
To the comfort we shared together there.

An evening full of heart and soul
Of people helping make us whole.
A night of grace and remembrance too,
Of old connections born anew.”

This is just one example of togetherness, which is replicated throughout all our communities on a daily basis, and a good example of people loving and caring for one another.

Synodality: Reaching out to our neighbour.

From a very early stage in my life, and indeed through my ministry, I was aware of the centrality of the family to life and to living, to relationships, to being the real school of learning and the real foundation for values. The family unit and the local community were the two key systems which formed and bound people together for generations. They had remained unchanged and static for decades, the main challenge coming from emigration.

The pace of change from the 1960's onwards had a significant impact on both. Industrialisation and urbanisation brought new levels of prosperity, but also new levels of pressure. There was the beginning of a revolution in information technology, especially with the advent of the television and telephone. The pattern of a three-generational household went into decline which radically changed the role and position of old people. The number of nuclear and single parent families grew.

As the position of a father declined that of the woman of the house underwent a long overdue change. She questioned her traditional role in the family. She challenged the arranging of marriages and the legal inequality which had made her subservient for life. With their newfound freedom, women changed the traditional family as it evolved during the second half of the 20th century. Additionally, the emergence of secularism and individualism had further implications for the family.

It gradually moved from being a place which had a range of adults associated with it - grandparents, unmarried uncles and aunts, neighbours and close friends, and from a place of prayer. In the traditional family everyone was conscious of their dependence on God. Prayer was important, necessary and habitual. Praying together was vital. The togetherness was as important as the ritual of prayer. Statues and pictures of the Sacred Heart were very much part of the home. Likewise, the weekly mass was as important as a community gathering as it was a people at prayer. The home was a place of learning – the sons from the father, the daughters from the mother. So much of this changed and the challenge was, has been, and indeed still is, to identify the current situation of the family, what its needs are and how it connects with the local community.

When I went to Sixmilebridge, I felt that while the Church is a sacred space which promotes community and togetherness, the Vatican Council re-envisioned parish life as centred on the people of God, Pobal Dé, on the neighbourhood, on connecting with neighbours in a more localised setting.

So, every summer, beginning on May Eve, we had Gatherings on the very theme of *The Church is a Eucharistic Community*. These Gatherings were held in different locations throughout the parish – a hillside farm, a lakeside shore, the green on the housing estate, a slatted house, the mart, crossroads, the cemetery, the railway station - bringing Christ's message of *Loving One Another* to people where they lived and worked in their own communities. It has been an extraordinary successful concept which engages the particular community in its preparation.

Local volunteers and members of the Pastoral Council visited every house in the area inviting people to the gathering. Everyone was welcome. Early in the year, the Pastoral Council initiated discussions on the venues for the gatherings – sites are identified and local volunteers mobilised to support and drive the idea from there. Preparation was all important. If the venue was a farm, we did not go near it until the silage was cut. Someone or a few were invited to write the story of that locality – there might be familiar landmarks such as a famine village, a holy well, an old schoolhouse or a Mass rock. They traced the people who lived in the area and what these landmarks meant then and that they remind us of now. It is all about feeling rooted and connected. An altar is erected on the site, and a special Mass is celebrated in that the Liturgy focuses on the significance of the area chosen. The local people do the readings, and the offertory gifts are connected to the place. During the Eucharist, we remember those from whom we inherited our Christian traditions. After Mass as dusk falls, a bonfire is lit. The tea and sandwiches arrive followed by chat, music and song from local musicians. Stories are told.

When I think back over these Gatherings (approx. 50 in all), I feel there were messages in them for our time as we reflect on a new way – Synodal Way – of being Church. Maybe we might need to look deep into ourselves and indeed deep into our Celtic past. The concept of community was important until very recent times. We called it by other names, names such as Meitheal – neighbours helping one another; Cuardaíocht – visiting one another. In our own time, there are indications we still search for identity and connection. Witness the growing interest in local history and heritage. When we held Gatherings, the first step in some of them was to write up the history of each local area. People can be proud to acknowledge the achievements of the generations that preceded them.

Synodality: An expression of solidarity.

There are everyday indications that people want to come together as a community. Often, sadly, it is highlighted when tragedy strikes. The following poem indicates what happens at a funeral in a rural community.

Love in the Midst of Sadness

Someone had to direct the traffic
with quiet efficiency
Someone had to mow the field
to help us park with ease.
Someone had to clear the yard
and erect a large marquee
Someone had to greet the crowds
for this broken family.
Someone had to make the sandwiches
brew the coffee and the tea
Someone had to bake the buns and cakes
and serve them constantly.
And someone will no doubt say
“Aren’t ye great to help them through”
And someone else will answer
“It was the least we could do.”
In all the dark and all the pain
how beautiful to see
Such witness of real love
of true community.

The community simply took over in coping with the loss of a loved one. So maybe the past has a future.

Synodality: The way is made by walking it.

This took place in August this year. It was another experience of a local community going outside the Church building to walk on pilgrimage to a mass rock 5 kilometres away. The pilgrims paused a number of times to reflect on different aspects of their faith until they arrived at the mass rock, where a concelebrated mass by Bishop Fintan Monahan and the local priest, Fr. Pat Larkin, took place. This was the halfway point of the camino. Over 300 pilgrims gathered for the mass.

The bishop's words at the mass are worth recalling. He said: *"There is something deeply moving about arriving at a place like this after a journey on foot. A pilgrimage is different from a walk. A walk changes our surroundings, but a pilgrimage changes ourselves."* He added *"Today we have not simply travelled through the beautiful hills of East Clare, we have travelled through prayer, conversation, silence and reflection. We have walked together and now we gather around this sacred altar of God in this special place where generations before us have gathered often in fear but always in faith."*

"This mass rock at Cappabane speaks without saying a word. Its stones remember, they remember cold mornings and hidden paths. They remember families quietly making their way through the fields before dawn." "They remember lookouts posted on nearby hills while masses were celebrated in whispered voices. They remind us of when attending mass involved courage and risk. Those women and men didn't know whether easier times would come, yet they believed Christ was worth everything."

Bishop Fintan's address was printed in full in his regular feature in The Clare Champion newspaper. The following are some additional excerpts from this article, *"They were in their own way pilgrims of hope like we are today. We stand in freedom because they stood firm in faith. Faith is not the absence of question. Faith is continuing the journey even when every question hasn't been answered. Many of those who worshipped here during Penal days must have wondered whether God had forgotten them, yet they kept coming. Perhaps some of us carry doubts today about the Church, ourselves, prayer and family members who have drifted from the faith. The Lord doesn't reject honest questions, he says, "come and follow me." He said some crossroads in life are joyful and others are painful but at every crossroads God offers us his presence. Our world needs bridge builders. Families, neighbours, Churches and communities all need bridges,"* he said at the mass rock. *"Our final reflection was on steep hills. Every pilgrim knows a climb is always harder than it looks. The Christian life has its steep climbs – caring for an aging parent, living with illness, continuing to hope after disappointment."*

He continued "Sometimes we only understand God's purpose after we have reached the summit. As we leave Cappabane today, our pilgrimage does not end, it simply changes direction and we are transformed. Tomorrow's Camino begins at our own front door. It continues in our homes and parishes, in the kindness we show and prayers we offer. May the courage of those who worshipped in secret strengthen our faith"

This experience was uplifting. It was one of a number of such experiences throughout our Diocese during the summer.

Synodality: Finding expression in our national sports.

The Gaelic Athletic Association is an extraordinary organisation. Founded in 1884, it has straddled three centuries. When it was founded the people of post-famine Ireland were poverty-stricken, spiritless and seemingly without a future.

Yet, in that remarkable period, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with Catholic revivalism (thus the close association with the GAA), the Gaelic League, the Land League, and the co-operative movement, people found a new spirit and a reason to live and hope. There's a lot we can learn from the contribution these movements made to the country's revival. Balancing the local with the global is one of the great challenges today.

All through its existence the GAA has been bound with a sense of place and belonging. It has bonded people together and given them stability. Today we live under a cloud of instability and confusion. We have witnessed a loss of trust in institutions and the continuing collapse of a culture shaped by consumerism, borrowing and the erosion of values, which connect to our inner selves, to one another, to creation and to Creator. If we are to bring stability to society and security to our own lives, we will need to rediscover a sense of place and take pride in who we are and the culture that shapes us. A sense of place implies a belief in an inclusive society where the weak are cherished as much as the strong.

One of the hallmarks of the GAA has been its ability to counter discrimination at any level. At a time when the gap between rich and poor continues to widen in our society it is worth remembering that this amateur sporting organisation has always brought people together from town and country, from rich background and poor. It has served as a unifying force, classless and all-embracing, and in so doing has played an important role in community building. It has been aptly described as The Parliament of the People. Civil war and party politics took a back seat. It involves all sections of the community to a similar extent. It encourages an independence of spirit among the population, a pride in their distinct culture, and in the economic and political potential of Ireland itself. It has through events, like Scór, fostered talents in music, song, dance, drama, folklore and traditions and has given people of all ages the opportunity to participate on a very wide scale in these aspects of our culture.

Probably the greatest strength of the GAA is its voluntarism. It has been its cornerstone and to abandon it now would be an incalculable loss. The club remains its central and most important unit. The GAA is not just about Croke Park, Thurles or Clones, venues for the big occasions. It is fundamentally about every small community that proudly organises and runs a club successfully.

The family and the school are vital to the life of the GAA. Clubs introduce parents to the ethos and spirit of the association, not just in offering coaching to children, but in promoting neighbourliness, togetherness and a real sense of community. The GAA has a lot to teach us about connectedness to one another, to traditions, values and especially the value of sense of place.

Synodality: A tool for reflecting on society through a Christian lens.

From the 1970's I was involved in RHO a major rural housing organisation which resulted in thousands of houses being built in small towns and villages in the West of Ireland and which helped to revive many local communities. Later this evolved to the Rural Resource Organisation (RRO) which had a wider community brief. Having observed the changes which were taking place, in all aspects of Irish society, those of us involved in the RRO believed that there was a need to highlight these changes in a practical manner, to discuss the direction in which we were heading and to propose how best to manage these changes into the future. This led to the set-up of Céifin.

By the late 1980's the Irish economy and Irish society were undergoing a dramatic transformation. The so-called Celtic Tiger brought unprecedented economic growth with a marked increase in prosperity and material well-being. We came to be the best housed, the best schooled, clothed and fed people who had ever lived in Ireland, with employment rates at an all-time high. We were an affluent society, part of a global economic system. Big corporations were the engines which drove most aspects of political, social and economic life. However, it was becoming increasingly obvious to some that our society was beginning to pay a high and unacceptable price for our material prosperity. In the headlong rush to identify ourselves with what we owned, rather than who we were, we were losing sight of the very core of society – people, place, roots, soul.

There was a need for debate to identify the values which could restore the balance in our lives. As we approached a new millennium it was time to ask major questions. What kind of society did we really want? Where do our values come from? Who or what gives meaning to life? And so, in 1998 Rural Resource Organisation convened a conference in Ennis under the challenging title – *Are We Forgetting Something?* In other words, let us take time out to look at where we are and what direction society was taking. Are we happy with how things are, or are we forgetting important things? We selected the name Céifin and the event became known as The Céifin Conference.

For three days a succession of speakers carried this debate to a very high level. An attendance of 500 people from a broad cross-section of society – business, education, caring professions, local authorities, the Church, students and others – indicated that we had tapped into something important. Prof. John Drew from Durham University set the tone: *“The coming millennium is a time of great opportunity for our planet. A new year gives cause for reflection, a hundred years even more so. A millennium is something altogether different, especially as it falls by chance in the middle of three or four decades of the most profound changes our planet has ever witnessed.”*

Ireland, Church and State, was only a few years into a period of extraordinary change for people, families, and communities. We were racing ahead economically at a very fast pace and borrowing heavily at all levels. It was all **boom** and nobody from the government

down was daring to think or mention **bust**. Except, maybe, economist David McWilliams who addressed the conference on the topic of *Boom to Bust in Economic History*.

He warned that just when Ireland is having a great time and the party is in full swing, the global recession which had been building would hit us.

That Ennis conference which ran annually for twelve years, had in its very first gathering become a vehicle for looking at the signs of the times and identifying the issues which we as a society were forgetting. And it wasn't just the harsh outer economic world that concerned us. It was pointed out to us that the spiritual dimension of life had been seriously eroded in Celtic Tiger Ireland. A growing number of people were looking for meaning, but the Church didn't seem able to respond effectively to them. We had speakers from contemplative religious orders address the conference and they had much to say that had meaning for the new Ireland.

We had many other eminent speakers at that first conference including Mary McAleese, Prof. John Lee, David Begg and Mary Redmond (R.I.P.) who contributed to three days of highly charged debate and discussion. There was a palpable buzz among the 500 delegates and a general realisation that we were indeed 'forgetting something'. I asked one of the ladies attending what she had got out of that conference and she replied that she was left with a question "*Who is raising the next generation?*". I have used that many times since and indeed it became the theme of a following conference.

The delegates carried the main issues back to their communities. These issues were, understanding the nature of change, reawakening the inner dimension of life, understanding the influence of the global economy and the media and a rediscovery of the local – people, place, belonging, and community. The eleven other conferences which followed, from 1999 to 2009, attracted speakers of the highest calibre, from Ireland and abroad. Their papers were published annually, in book form, and collectively they represent a considerable bank of insight and analysis of our society in the new millennium.

One fact that was highlighted right through the Céifin Conferences was that the 20th century was very much about material considerations. The 21st would have to be about spiritual, about looking deeper into what dehumanises people. The renewal ongoing in the Catholic Church at this time is to be welcomed.

Synodality: Giving voice to who we truly are as Church.

The Social Encyclicals are among the most radical documents the Church has ever produced but the message contained in them suffered seriously from failures in communication. The language, especially in the earlier documents, was almost impenetrable and therefore seemed to have no relevance to life as lived by ordinary people. There was no attempt at any level in the Irish Church to decode it. Catholic Social Teaching did not have a significant place in the curriculum of seminaries, where dogma,

moral theology, canon law and scripture, in that order were prioritised. Therefore, studies were largely confined to the fields of divinity and canon law.

The fact that I had to go to the University of Wales in Cardiff, to study sociology was in itself an indication of how poorly resourced the study of social issues was in both our Church and State in third level institutions.

My interest in 'development' issues began with the experience of witnessing many of my classmates in primary school having to emigrate. So, at a very early age I got to realise that forced emigration was a scourge. These were the years before the advent of free education in 1967. When I did go to Cardiff, I chose to write my thesis on 'The Growth of Cities in Britain'. I saw at first hand children being raised in massive housing estates and high-rise flats and the implications on family life. My interest in the social teaching of the Church and its relevance to an Ireland that was becoming industrialised and urbanised convinced me that it was right to become involved.

The first great Social Encyclical was *Rerum Novarum* (Rights and Duties of Capital & Labour) issued by Pope Leo XIII on May 15th, 1891. It focused on the modernity that had come with the post-industrial revolution. For the Church the longest period of stability had been from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution. It had been a pastoral period, largely unchanging, and a time of great influence for the Church, as it remained in Ireland until the 1960's. However, as Britain experienced major change with industrialisation and urbanisation, Irish emigrants went to these cities for work. *Rerum Novarum* focused on the plight of the new poor in such cities and in other parts of the Western World and sought to create a moral and just society. It was critical of both capitalism and socialism and sought to find a third way to address the ills of this period by adopting a Christian approach to economic development.

Forty years later, in 1931, Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (Forty years have passed). This introduced the principle of subsidiarity – that no greater body, e.g. the State, should perform functions that could more easily be performed by a lesser body. This principle would later be adopted by the United Nations, and for many it had major implications in the direction life and work took subsequently. At the same time the Catholic Social Movement embraced vocationalism all over Europe. In Ireland the Vocational School system was established to prepare young people for work in the trades and agriculture.

In the 1960's Pope John XXIII issued two encyclicals, *Mater et Magistro* (Mother and Teacher of all Nations) in 1961 and *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) in 1963, the year I was ordained. It was a time of great change for the Church. John XXIII had already convened the second Vatican Council because he felt that the Church needed to look at itself in light of the changing world. It needed to speak words of hope. At the opening of the Council he said, "We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster". In *Mater et Magistro* he expressed concern about the mass population movement to cities and the subsequent loss to rural areas, the concept of community and the need for communities to develop their own resources. Again, he was harking back to *Quadragesimo Anno*, asking people to take responsibility for their own

future. Rather than ‘pontificate’ John XXIII was encouraging the Church to facilitate. He was promoting a new brand of leadership.

In 1967, Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On the progressive development of people) took up the theme of structural injustice. The central issue here was the lack of participation by people in determining their own lives. This indeed was the common thread running through all encyclicals and it influenced me greatly. If the Church was to make a serious contribution to the world it would need to see that world through the lens of the poor. Pope John Paul II in a further series of encyclicals continuously underlined the great scandals of poverty and deprivation in the midst of plenty. Pope Benedict XVI also left vital social messages, the importance of which tended to be ignored because of his style of leadership in comparison to others.

Pope Francis has written two major Social Encyclicals. *Laudato Sí* (Praise be to You) in 2015, subtitled ‘On Care for Our Common Home’. Among other topics he addresses the impact of human activity on both the poor and the planet. The second was *Fratelli Tutti* (All Brothers & Sisters) in 2020. This document explores building a peaceful and just global society. Pope Leo XIV his first and only encyclical to date, *Magnifico Humanitat* (Magnificent Humanity) earlier this year. In it he focuses on human dignity and the age of Artificial Intelligence.

Synodality: Reflecting on our lived reality.

I had many fine experiences of being a priest with the people. I was fortunate to have been ordained at a time when the Church was being reformed. One of the more important Documents from the Vatican Council of that time was *The Church in the Modern World*, 1965. Its key message was the importance for the Church of reading the signs of the times in a fast-changing world and interpreting these in the light of the Gospel. How does Christianity impact on citizenship and community, the interaction of Church and State, Christianity and the development of culture and the fostering of parish life. Even today, this Document makes powerful reading.

The Church wishes to enter into dialogue with the human family about the key issues that are happening in the world, about humanity’s place and role in the universe and about the meaning of human life – individually and collectively. The Council affirms its solidarity, respect and love for the whole human family of which it forms a part. The Church seeks to be aware of and to understand the aspirations and the yearnings of people today.

I am very aware that the Church of our diocese of Killaloe was conscious of these. The late Sean Sexton and I were sent to study the changes – and their implications for youth in Sean’s case and social and economic planning and community development in mine. Sean and I often complimented the then Bishop Michael Harty for having the foresight, not only to read the signs of the times but to prepare the Church for the major changes taking place in Ireland then.

The message from the Vatican Council was: *“We know that whatever contributes to the development of humankind on the level of family, culture, economics and social life according to the plan of God, also contributes to the life of the Church itself.”* Development also contributes *“to the peace of the world and the prosperity of humankind”* and helps permeate the world with the spirit of the beatitudes. These to me were compelling, uplifting words. The Church was making it clear that the human person is the source of all economic and social life. This was far removed from the profit-driven market values of the global economic system.

The major debate in Ireland in the 1960s centred around social and economic planning and the shape development would take. For the first time, planning was accepted as a major element in any organised approach to development in Ireland. This was a crucial outcome that has had consequences which are still felt today.

Witness the ongoing debate on housing and the implications for young couples. Housing became a major item for trading which led to many professional people – doctors, nurses, teachers among others who, because of affordability problems having to leave Ireland. Young couples are forced to live long distances from Dublin – where a lot of the public service jobs are – often with a young baby in the car to be placed somewhere in the Dublin area – and face the long journey home. Imagine the pressure and other challenges for families and community life.

A famous document written in the late 1950s by T.K. Whitaker who was then the Secretary General to the Department of Finance claimed that in the Irish situations and in the circumstances (underemployment, Mass emigration) prevailing at that time, the overriding aim of planning is to put more people to work, producing competitively of course so that total employment and total outputs will rise. This is the way to achievement of all our aims.

There is no doubt that this document gave direction to the new Irish approach to economic development. It was the foundation of broad policies at a centralised level and communicated downwards through organisations such as the Industrial Development Authority and others which were centrally controlled. The major benefits were in job creation, irrespective of where the jobs were to be created. In fact, they were to be located in what was described as growth centres. The idea of growth centres was first introduced into Ireland in 1968 by planners, Buchanan & Planners on behalf of the Government. Perhaps no planning document ever published aroused so much controversy, most of which centred on concentration versus dispersal and the effects the strategy would have, if implemented, on rural areas. Dr. Liam Ryan, one of Ireland’s leading sociologists and social commentators, later to become Professor of Sociology in Maynooth, was one of the people who also commented significantly on the Buchanan Plan.

“The Buchanan Report is a National Plan where a Regional Plan is needed. As a National Plan it would seem to be necessary. Already the fruits of the new economic philosophy would seem to be achieving in the area of job creation but meanwhile, the population continued to fall in the west and northwest.”

A little bit of dole here and a little bit of Bord Failte there will not be enough to change this trend. The people grumble but do nothing. But their grumbings have at least produced the beginnings of a sceptical story for any more of these half measures – each hailed successively as a messiah, each failing in turn – which littered the path of decline for the last 100 years.”

Liam spoke these words in 1970. They are significant because they are suggesting that no number of National Programmes will ever solve local problems. This debate on planning in which I cut my teeth over 60 years ago is still as relevant today. The same questions keep coming up, issues I have struggled with and tried to move forward all my life. In some ways, that debate forced me to articulate the vision I had for the future, the kind of society I felt we, as a Church should be working towards and the values which underpin it. In the years since my thinking, this developed and deepened as has my conviction that social planning is as important as economic planning as well as my belief that the potential of the local community whether it is urban or rural is still undervalued.

In a globalising world, the local matters more and more. The local is about identity, it is about neighbours, it is about pride of place, it is about community, it is about people. It is about building from the ground up. In a way, it is what the Synodal Way is about. Pope Francis rightly acknowledges that the Synodal Way, if it is to make sense and if it is to be the future for the Church, must have roots. It must be rooted in Jesus Christ. It must be rooted in the people - where they are at. It must be rooted in a place. In short, it must help people to connect – to inner self, to one another, to creation, to creator.

Synodality: A Diocese being synodal in how it plans.

There are obviously major changes taking place in society as there were at the turn of the century. Back then, there were calls for new approaches in Church life, as there are now. At the close of the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II invited the local Churches across the world to take up the challenge of bringing the good news of the gospel to the world of the twenty first century. He asked that each local Church would begin this task “by drawing up an effective Post-Jubilee Pastoral Plan,” reminding us that any such plan must have its centre in Christ Himself.

An Assembly of Priests in January 2002 endorsed the call for a Pastoral Plan for our Diocese of Killaloe. A small committee of Priests, religious and lay people was set up to work on such a Plan. They engaged in an extensive consultation process across the diocese. Over one thousand people in the diocese participated directly in the making of this Plan. These belonged to a range of focus groups who came to a series of meetings at the initial stages of the Plan. In other words, the participation of as many people as possible was vital. In devising the Pastoral Plan, three general areas were identified to focus on: Prayer and Spirituality; Formation and Support; Structures and Communication. An implementation group was established to implement the Plan in the years following. The work of renewal continued.

The Plan was then as a work in progress, with varying degrees of success, mainly in the area of Pastoral Councils – their establishment and involvement in the life of the parish.

A second Pastoral Plan was prepared during the time Bishop Kieran O'Reilly was Bishop. Later, Fr. Michael Collins was appointed Director of Pastoral Planning and under the stewardship of Bishop Fintan, the pastoral certificate in lay ministry and a number of local initiatives emerged.

Pope Francis was promoting a vision of the Church *“as closer to the people and emphasising pastoral conversing, a missionary Church on the move and a Church in conversation with culture and the signs of the times. Effectively, he promoted a decentralisation of clerical powers, and he offered a vision of leadership that is not dictatorial on the part of the clergy but rather a collaborative effort between the people and the pastor.”* During his years of mission in Peru, Robert Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV was following this pastoral style.

Pope Francis through his Synod on Synodality was proposing a spirit of Synodality – a vision of walking together as a way forward for the Church. In a sense, without calling it that, it was beginning to appear in many of our parishes in Ireland. In our Diocese, Bishop Fintan promoted it and continues to do so but it is slow in getting it through. He does this in emphasising the importance of nourishing the inner life through his daily reflection on the word of God, through encouragement of contemplative prayer and pastoral initiatives such as clustering of parishes.

The Church calls today for a Synodal kind of Church, but it is at local, parish and sub-parish levels it can be promoted. In the past, faith was transmitted through the local community. However, the cultural transformation taking place in our western world including Ireland, is leading to a constant erosion of religious practise. New ways must now be found at a time when many people are searching for meaning. Maybe one way might be to go deeper into the local.

Synodality – the challenges.

Understanding the main challenges, both local and global are crucial. The second half of the 20th century and the first 20 years of the 21st century have brought Irish people face to face with extraordinary change. In a short period of time, we became part of a Global Economic System which emphasised the movement of goods, people and ideas. The dominant features of this system are market values which, up to a point, are fine in the commercial world. When they permeate all other sectors and systems such as Health, Education and Law, we get a different situation. Then values are predominantly money values (a Capitalist System), and they shape life and the way we live.

This change in a short period of time coincided with technical and technological advances at a rate that has no precedent. In my lifetime, Ireland saw the birth of television, the computer, internet, laser beam, credit card, satellite communication, organ transplants, microsurgery, the smartphone and now Artificial Intelligence.

We journeyed in a short space of time to areas heretofore unknown. Technology and the pace of change continue to accelerate rapidly. In short, economics and the world of

technology are changing fast but don't allow for the fact that society takes time to change. For example, parents are stretched to keep up with their children, and this has become a major issue. The family and community have become infiltrated with market values and are now struggling with moral values as a result.

Right now, the Government is concerned, primarily with economic and health issues and rightly so. But what is now needed is leadership, Church and State, to inspire and to call on people to take time to reflect on their deepest desires and the values which lie under the surface and meet the current situation with courage and all that is best within them. Is this too aspirational – for Church and State Leaders?

In his first major work as Pontiff, entitled *Magnificent Humanity* (*Magnifica Humanitas*) Pope Leo has called on artificial intelligence to be designed to achieve the common good and welfare of mankind. He calls on it to be disarmed. The word is strong but deliberately chosen. He likens the technology to nuclear technology that can be used either for weapons or for civilian energy. *"In a similar sense, artificial intelligence needs to be disarmed, freed from logics that turn it into an instrument of domination, exclusion and death"* the Pope said: *"Like nuclear energy, it must be at the service of all and of the common good. Decisions about technology must never be separated from conscience and responsibility."* In launching this document, Pope Leo told the gathering that the world may now be facing a transformation of *"similar magnitude to the industrial revolution, with perhaps even greater consequences."*

A key concern is that the technology could end up concentrating in the hands of a few, exacerbating existing inequalities and risking digital exploitation. He begins by stating *"humanity is today facing a pivotal choice either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and Humanity dwell together and argues for an ethical code to govern AI that users be educated about how it works and that it be subject to legal frameworks."* In short, the Pope argues for a Technology and an Economics as if people matter.

Already, there are warnings of a real possibility that AI will displace human labour at a very large scale. If that happens, supporting those displaced will be a moral imperative of historic proportions. These and many other warnings to do with AI are a clear indication of the importance of the Pope's message at this time. Our history reminds us of the price we pay when we neglect the opportunities crisis brings with it. Almost, 70 years ago, a Vatican Council was convened by the then Pope John XXIII. He felt the Church needed to look at itself in the light of a changing world (a time when massive change was taking place in Ireland – Industrialisation, Communications and Education). That Council offered a vision for the Church in the world. How many of its radical insights have been put into practise?

Prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965), the Irish Catholic Church shared many of the features of the 1950s Church which represented the final stages of 19th Century devotional Catholicism. The characteristics of 1960s Catholicism comprised a remarkably high level of religious practise, the legislation by the state of the Catholic

Ethos, the authoritarian approach of the bishops towards their followers, the high number of vocations to religious life and the extent to which the thinking, rituals, language and symbols of Catholicism informed consciousness. The vast number of Irish people were dedicated Catholics who held the “*Church in very high regard.*” Most Churches were full on Sundays and there were queues for Confessions on Saturday nights. Vocations and Ordinations to the diocesan priesthood were very high and thousands of Irish people worked in missionary countries as priests, religious and lay volunteers.

In the 1960s, Ireland experienced major economic growth. Instead of emigrating, young Irish people were returning to work in Ireland. It was also the decade when Ireland engaged with advanced western societies. It was a decade of freedom, a time of openness, a time when the modern world came in among us. There was a dramatic increase in living standards. For the first time in many generations, the 1960s offered employment security and the prospect of reasonable material comfort. However, there was another side to the 1960s that was far from idyllic for people coming from the margins of society. Economic growth served to widen the gulf between rich and poor.

The holding of the Second Vatican Council was fortuitous in that it coincided with cultural experience. There was a desire for change in Ireland and when it came, it spiralled. For most Irish Catholics, the various liturgical changes, such as the use of the vernacular in the mass and the priest/altar facing the people were the most visible and the most dramatic signs of change in Catholic culture. Change came much more slowly in other areas such as lay participation and ecumenism. The Council however ushered in a new mood - a more optimistic Catholic culture. The Council contained enormous developments in the theology of the laity and the mission of the baptised in the Church. Lay people were empowered to fulfil their vocation in the Church. *The Church in the Modern World* was a major document to emanate from the Council.

I was ordained in 1963 in Maynooth. The then Professor of sociology encouraged my Bishop to send me off to the University of Wales in Cardiff to study change and how it was impacting on the Church. I was fortunate when I returned after completing my studies and working pastorally among Irish emigrants in Birmingham, to be based in Shannon. It was then an Airport, an Industrial Estate and a new Town. I got involved there with people and the local Church. I was also truly fortunate to have had Michael Harty (RIP) as my Bishop back then. He gave me the freedom to explore differing directions and possibilities, even if some involved having to adopt positions that went against the current popular or accepted norms. I think I can say my life’s work was parochially in the best sense of the words which are “*Community Building.*” They involved me in a range of practical, social, cultural and spiritual initiatives that I saw as part and parcel of my normal priestly ministry of the sacraments and preaching God’s Word.

It became obvious by the end of the 1960s that the promise and liberal spirit of Vatican II would face opposition. The Irish Church was very conservative, and the primary concerns of most Irish Bishops was to bring about the changes of the council while retaining the traditional strong faith of the people. Some people claimed that the theological and liturgical renewal inaugurated by Vatican II shattered old certainties and

suddenly everything was in principle capable of being changed including the teaching of the Church. By the end of the 1960s, it became clear that the promise and liberal spirit of Vatican II would face opposition from within the Church. The initial hopes and enthusiasm surrounding the Council were certainly diminished with the issuing of an *Encyclical on Human Life* (Humane Vitae) in 1968 together with other strains and tensions springing from contrasting ecclesiologies that arose from the Council. Many would wish to see the beginning of a return to a more orthodox and conservative Church.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the polarisation that surfaced after the Council widened as priests came to differ among themselves as to their role and the role of the Church. Were we to confine ourselves to the borders of our parishes, to see our role primarily as leaders of worship and dispensing of the Sacraments or were we called to be actively engaged in all aspects of human life? On occasion, it would have been put to me that what I was doing was not “*priestly work*” and suggested that there was no spiritual dimension to it. I would argue the opposite - to challenge the world with Christ’s values demands a deeper spiritual dimension. It means being prepared to suffer and moving out of the comfort zone. This is an essential part of the Christian way.

I would suggest that the high point of religious commitment in Ireland had passed by the late 1960s and signs of decline had appeared as illustrated by the diminishing authority of the Churches in social and economic life of the people and especially in changing times. From an early stage, it became clear that the Church would have to become involved in real dialogue within itself and with the world around it. This, of course, would require considerable honesty and courage. If we turned away from that challenge, the vision inspired by Vatican II – one of engagement with the world around us, would be seriously threatened. The conciliar Church called for a different way of being a Church and a different way of being a Christian. Fortunately, a certain amount of change did take place, but a lot of the promise was not realised.

Change in any sphere brings considerable challenges but human nature dictates that we approach new initiatives with a certain optimism and we need to offer that optimism to the proposed Synodal Way. Perhaps a more childlike approach is required. Where or from who will our young people get their ideals? Michelle Obama might have had the answer when she wrote: “*Children wake up each day believing in the goodness of things, in the magic of what might be. They are uncynical believers at their core. We owe it to them to stay strong and keep working to create a fairer and more humane world. For them, we need to remain both tough and hopeful, to acknowledge there is more growing to be done.*” Michelle was a very ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey.

She shared her story in her autobiography - *Becoming* - to encourage others to be committed to a powerful force she calls Optimism. For her that is a form of faith and an antidote to fear. And there’s grace in being willing to know and hear others and especially her God, her faith and her religion.

Looking back, I feel eternally grateful for the parents who reared me and the community that shaped me. It was in that same community I learned that people who care, act and

refuse to give up may not change the world, but they can change many individual worlds. And it was there my faith in God was nourished. It was there I realised there is nothing wrong with being a dreamer.

Synodality: What a synodal Church might look like.

What do we mean when we refer to the Synodal Way? Put simply, it means journeying and listening together. The challenge is how to put this into practice. Where can we find where it works and how? I came from a strong local community where people came first. I was always aware of the importance of neighbours and of community.

The idea came from Pope Francis. In trying to understand what is meant by this, it is important to explore the changes both cultural and theological that the Church was undergoing in Latin America during this time. Why is this so? Because of the influence Francis, as Cardinal, had in that Church and changes there and then because it was the culture and Church the young priest, Robert Prevost, later to become Leo XIV, became part of. Here I bow to two priests, Des Hillery and Tony Casey, from our own diocese, who spent some time as missionaries in Peru in recent years. I got a sense from these priests that they experienced a unique way of pastoring communally, their closeness to the people convinced them that building up a sense of Church community was the way forward. They lived and loved that experience.

I am only reading and writing about a culture and a Church which was experiencing change. Prior to this the Church of Latin America had been trying to implement the changes and reforms from Vatican II. It is worth noting that a special conference at Medellin in 1968 called the Latin American “Second Vatican Council” focussed on the poor and oppressed, it was agreed that the Church should have a “preferential option for the poor”. This was also the driving force in shifting the Church’s focus to missionary activity, local expressions of faith and popular devotion. Later, a conference reconsidered popular devotion and applied it to the socio-cultural perspective of the place in which the pastoral work was happening and not just from the imported culture of the missionaries. Then, it re-envisioned parish life as not being reduced to just what happens in the Church building but as centred on the people of God, the local area and the community.

Pope Francis has called on us to participate in a Synodal Church at ground level. This concept has been difficult to understand, or perhaps easier to ignore, for many people, and resistance has been obvious.

The resistance to change must now be clearly identified and steps taken to move towards a Synodal Church with more people taking responsibility for their Church. Where should we begin? Some years ago, one of the great theologians of his time, Charles Davis, who left the Church in 1960 recognised the absolute need for Holiness if any Reform was to be successful. He reminded us that *“ordinary Catholics move to talks where they hear about all kinds of things to do with Liturgy, laypeople in the Church, shortage of clergy and a thousand and one other things. They are duly impressed. But who will speak to them*

quiet simply about God?” When asked how he would like to be remembered, Davis answered: *“I wish to be remembered for having had a spiritual influence.”*

In the Church, we are fortunate that Pope Francis saw the need for change and Pope Leo agrees. Both agree it must be radical but measured and it must be from the ground up. For us in Ireland, it is interesting as we now hold the Presidency of the EU. It gives us an opportunity to establish, whether we like it or not, that Europe was founded on the Christian story – its values and ethics. Understanding our faith is crucial to understanding the real world and discernment is the key to understanding.

Most people now agree that the future seems very uncertain. Maybe we have thought too much about converting the world and too little about converting ourselves – not simply an improvement but a radical change from a static *being Christians* to a dynamic *becoming Christians*. In that context, is it time for “*leaders*” who serve the organisation or institution, but eventually lose sight of why it is there, to acknowledge this and especially in changing times. Isn’t, that the Francis way and doesn’t it appear to be the Pope Leo way, whose measured statements and actions so far are welcome? The Synod gives us the opportunity to become part of the change that is needed in our world, our local community, our Church at every level, but especially from the ground up.

A National Synod is due to be held in October which will provide the opportunity to discuss many of these issues. There are seven priority areas which are the subject of this gathering:

The Synod gives us the opportunity to become part of the change that is needed in our world, our local community, our Church, at every level, but especially from the ground up. The opportunity needs to be taken. Are we ready? Are we willing? Are we able? Brave, honest men and women are needed now if radical change is what the Synod is calling for and if it is what our world now needs. The only meaningful change is radical change.

Synodality - some final reflections.

I, with some of my classmates, often felt we were poorly trained for ministry in the new Ireland of the 1960s onwards. A few examples bear this out:

1. We studied scripture as a subject – I don’t think we were trained to find spiritual nourishment there.
2. We didn’t feel that our training equipped us to cope with the western world and culture – shaped as it is by capitalism, greed, mé féinism, and dominated by individualism. We are turning towards drugs – prescribed and other – for physical and mental nourishment for wellbeing. We now take care of our physical and mental health as never before, but we pay less attention, if any to spiritual nourishment, or do we know how.
3. We might even know about Jesus. But do we know him? How are we sustained spiritually and are we only recently beginning to refer to the importance of social capital meaning shared values and community?

Without these, the Synodal way will not be easy. The Christian way is based on what Jesus told us: *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”*.

Is He not the Synodal Way too and Community the Structure? Is He not the **Way**?

“Walking every day in the presence of God” – “the way of Salvation,” the way of Jesus, “the way of Holiness,” the way of the Gospel” but also of “love,” “of conversion,” “of beauty,” “the way of freedom,” “the way of the Cross,” “the way of Justice,” “the way of dialogue in order to make peace.”

Pope Francis – the Christian life is a way *“to go forward.”* The Way of Formation in Christ must be the Way to go and a formation that connects with the real life of people. It will include building bridges, not walls, and it will sometimes demand eating humble pie. We must do it because this is how peace is made. Jesus humiliated Himself to the end.

Knowing about Jesus is important, but the real challenge now is about the way to finding Him within. Do we need to be taught how to meditate? The key message for every soul to understand is by seeking within; one can look outward with eyes and hearts of love and understanding.

Despite the changes and progress in education, knowledge and technology – all experienced in one life – does it not all go back to where it started? LOVING GOD and LOVING NEIGHBOUR?

In the context of all the analyses and contributions from people around the world, in preparation for the Pre-Synodal Gatherings, my thoughts may not have much relevance. However, they are thoughts from one who has lived in the world and ministered in the Church for 60+ years. There are two things I want to add:

I am so happy that the renewal of the Church continues and with Gerry O’Hanlon, I too agree: *“It would be wonderful if after next October’s meeting the Catholic Church in Ireland could announce that its Synodal pathway was alive and well and give examples of concrete commitments to the practise of co-responsibility at parish and diocesan levels as well as national and world-wide levels.”*

I also agree that priests are often the gatekeepers, in terms of involvement of others, and their role is crucial. Pope Leo, on October 28th, 2026, asks priests to reflect upon what Synodality is about. He invites priests, particularly, to open their hearts and take part in the process and he asks them to be patient with one another, noting that we travel at different speeds. Thank you, Pope Leo, for your gentle encouragement.