



# FAITH IN DIFFICULT TIMES

The last months have seen our whole civilisation thrust into the unknown, sojourners in a strange land. It might be said that any crisis contains opportunity for growth. For the discovery or rediscovery of purpose. And a great crisis may prove a veritable school of strength and leadership. We pray that this may now be the case for the Church in Ireland.

It has surely been a strange time. Our work, our prayer, our extended family lives, our neighbourliness and friendships, our familiar routines of living. All disrupted. These are the occasions when the liminal, the cliff-edge quality of mortal life becomes startlingly obvious.

Because the recent pandemic has, if nothing else, given us a chance to take stock. To see the value of health, of rest, of quiet, of time spent with others, of mutual consideration and that invaluable blend of kindness and expertise which characterises the 'frontline' professions. We have a chance to feel the good earth under our feet and be grateful for it. Agreed, it would be naïve to expect that this will transform us all for ever after. That said, nobody really seems to expect a simple return to the 'old dispensation'. Too much has happened and the danger, we are told, will not so easily go away. At the very least, whether better or worse, we are now a people wide awake and perhaps more appreciatively living.

For the Church in Ireland this has come at a time of weakness unparalleled in its recent history. And yet the challenge was met. Parishes organised Masses on webcam and radio. Many priests and bishops took to the internet with flair and creativity. A tired Church, wearied by relentless change, found new strength in a context of general human emergency. And now, like so many other organisations, it faces a slow, tentative return to something like normality. A new normality, because things cannot possibly revert to being just as they were before. Are we up for it? Are we still in the greatest game of all? Are we able for yet another cultural and spiritual journey? To find out, we could do worse than remember our beginnings. Our setting out. Our believing genesis.

The central question facing us at this time is the only one worth asking. No matter that our numbers are dwindling and our resources accordingly sparse. No matter even that vocations are down to a trickle. These problems dwarf beside the one we face if we cannot answer this crucial question. And if we can answer it then these lesser problems can all, in God's time, one way or another, be solved. It is the question asked of any catechumen at the brink of baptism: Do you believe?

As the accompanying document makes clear, we are not returning to the former and familiar church culture. The enormous changes we had already experienced in terms of culture and belief will be visible symbolically, you might say, in the awkward arrangements we will have to make within our churches for safety. We have been swimming against the broader cultural current for some time now. In the somewhat tedious restrictions outlined below, we will experience again the frustration of feeling that a huge amount of effort is being expended for an apparently limited result. But that is not the point. The key question remains: do you believe?

Our confidence in the Lord's promises is fundamental. Our faith, as St. Paul asserts, points all the way to Christ. We cannot expect to have the courage and confidence to face our present journey as Church if we do not believe in God's love for us, His enduring mercy, His plans for our future. No matter what the apparent difficulties. A future.

The Church is weak? We may feel as believers vulnerable, small, perhaps old, weak. God does His best work when we are too weak to get in the way. But when we feel small, old, weak and pathetic, we have nothing to boast of but our faith, "...the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Heb 11:1). This is how we found a great and living tradition.

But how to seize the moment? The Second Vatican Council noted the crisis of faith in the modern age (*Gaudium et Spes*, 19-21). The situation has hardly improved fifty years later. If you are to serve humanity in this sceptical age you will have to be able "to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you." (1 Pet 3:15). The potential of the internet for spreading the Gospel recalls the crucial importance of the endless roads and protected shipping lanes of the Roman Empire for the initial spread of Christianity. It has proved a gift during the lockdown and the possibilities for spreading the Gospel through the internet are endless. This lesson cannot be forgotten and it is crucial that parishes and priests continue to experiment with it, investing if necessary in computer and communication training. Believers now are scattered here and there all over the country. We need to be in contact, to take warmth and courage from each other. The internet is no substitute for the nourishment of physical presence and interaction. But it could be a considerable help in sharing the Word and in creating opportunities for meeting God and each other.

The fact is that this is a tremendous opportunity to rediscover ourselves as Church. It is a time of tremulous new beginnings dependent entirely on God and His gift of faith.

