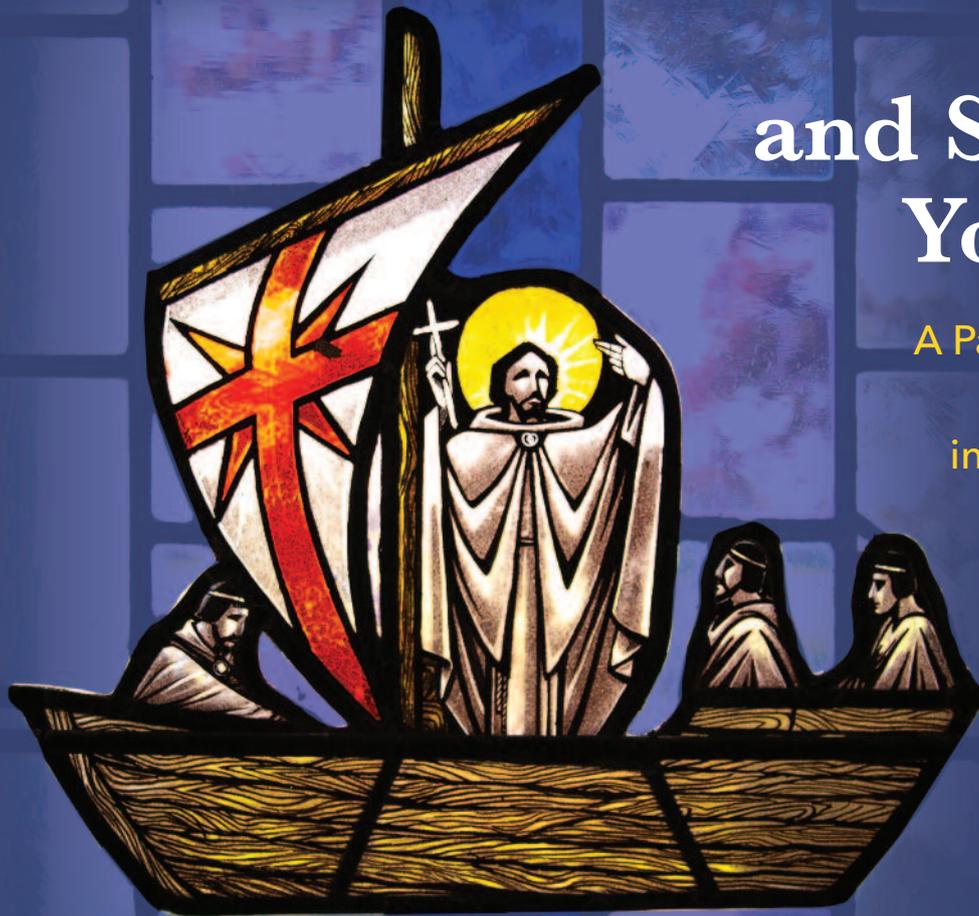


Renew and Strengthen Your People

A Pastoral Reflection on the
Future of the Church
in the Diocese of Clonfert



Bishop Michael Duignan



At times, I fear that we might mistakenly think that once the current Covid restrictions are lifted and once we return to public worship everything will be all right. To return to the way things were, without any attempt to learn from the experience or to embark on serious effort to consider where, as a faith community, we go from here would be truly short-sighted indeed.

(Bishop Michael Duignan)

Well Worth a Read!

In these days between Easter and Pentecost, there has been the tradition of reading the *Acts of the Apostles*. For a long time now, it has been one of my favourite books from the Bible. It reads like a good novel or Netflix series. It has powerful characters, daunting challenges, an ever twisting and evolving plot and the odd tragedy here and there. While the Gospels focus on the story of Jesus from Nazareth, the *Acts of the Apostles* tells the story of his followers in those first few decades after his death and resurrection. If you have not read it, I would encourage you to do so.

A Community of Faith on Fire with Enthusiasm

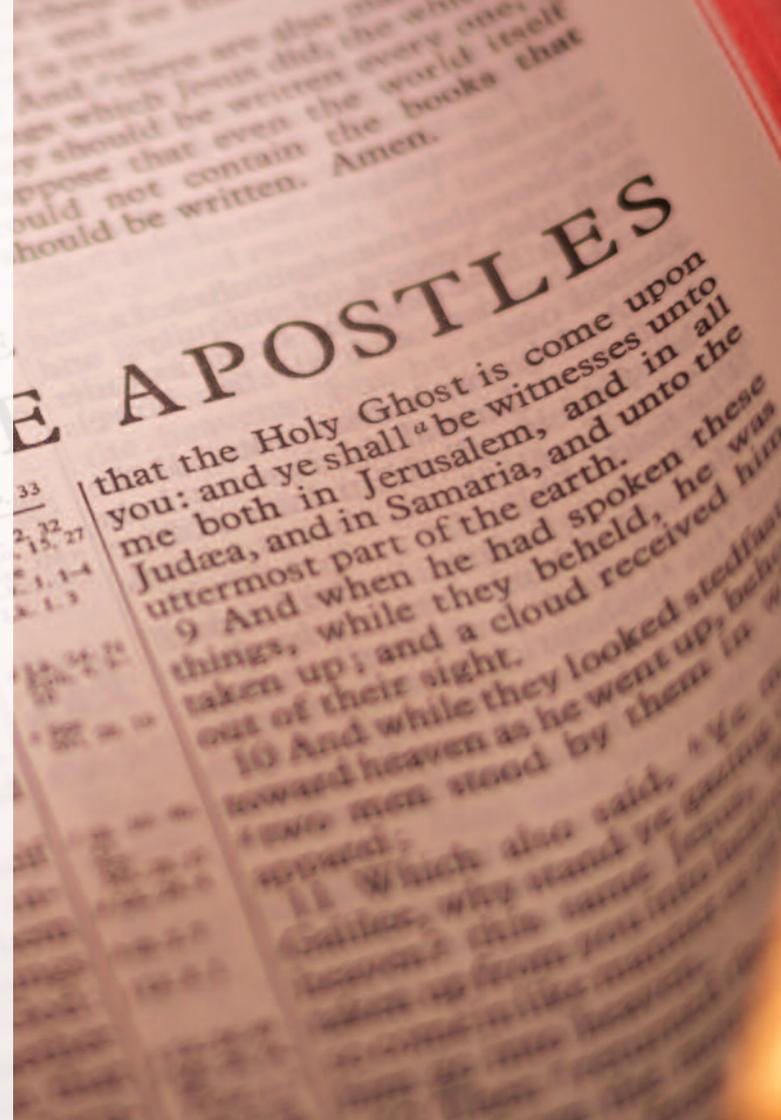
It is the story of ordinary people with ordinary livelihoods whose lives were totally transformed because of their encounter with Jesus Christ. For them, Jesus and his message was something that truly enhanced their lives. It was good news and they were on fire with enthusiasm about it (Acts 2:14f).

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they had an almost foolhardy zeal to share their story with others (Acts 2:32f), even if at times that got them into trouble and put their reputations and even their lives at risk (Acts 8:55f). They gather as a community to read the Jewish Scriptures, to reminisce about what Jesus had said and done and to break bread as he had asked them to do (Acts 2:42f). They reach out to help the poor and needy and become beacons of transformation and hope for those on the margins of their society (Acts 4:35f). So impressive was the witness of their lives that their numbers grew quickly. Within a few decades, small communities of the followers of Jesus were to be found all around the Mediterranean region and even as far as Rome itself (Acts 28:11f). Some years later, at the town of Antioch in modern day Syria, they “were first called ‘Christians’” (Acts 11:26).



Thriving Christian Communities

Those first Christians had no written accounts of Jesus' life, no Gospels, no New Testament. They had no church buildings. For the most part, they met to pray in each other's homes (Acts 2:46f). They had some good leaders in each community with everybody called to play their own part. They seemed to thrive in urban areas where they could meet with others and share with them their experience of what living as a follower of Jesus was all about (Acts 11:19f). Often it was through their giving to the poor and the marginalised that people came to know about them. They had their challenges. Some faced family or community resentment for seemingly leaving their old Jewish ways (Acts 11:1f). Others were misunderstood in the non-Jewish world in which they lived (Acts 17:23f). Paying the high price of persecution and even death because of their faith was never far away (Acts 19:23f). Yet, their commitment to Jesus and the authenticity of their lives drew new followers to their flourishing communities. Their message brought profound positive meaning to many people. Their work was a force for real good in the world in which they lived.



Rekindling the Enthusiasm of those Early Days

I have great hope that we, as Christians in Ireland today, might rekindle the palpable excitement, enthusiasm and adventure of those early days of the Church. Why you might ask? I am convinced that the power of the Holy Spirit is as active today as it was back then. I am convinced that the Christian message is equally as true and beautiful today as it was in Jesus' day. I am convinced that faith has as much power now as it had then to give positive meaning to life. I am equally convinced that as a community of faith, we can be as positive a force for good in the world in which we live as those first Christians were in their own day.



Church in a Time of Pandemic

For months now, health restrictions have meant that we have not been able to gather for public worship or indeed for any other parish activity. We have not been able to gather, as we would like, to mourn and pray for our dead. The celebration of key sacramental events in people's lives, especially our young, have been restricted or postponed. As a people of faith, we have lived and are living through a time we would have not imagined or never even thought of as a possibility just over a year ago.

The Post-Pandemic Church

I suspect that once the mists of the Pandemic dissipate, it will become evident that the Parish and Diocese it leaves in its wake will be a very different Parish and Diocese from what it was before Covid-19. It is too early to say exactly what changes will occur but I think we can say, with some sort of certainty, that things will be different. Some fear a possible disaster. Fewer people practising, financial difficulties, children and families further distanced

from the Sacraments and congregations permanently migrating to the comfort of online attendance. There may even be a growing realisation that, although much of what we normally do as Church was absent these last months, for many people, it was not really missed. Others speak of the Pandemic as simply hastening the decline in Church life that was already quite evident - fast-forwarding it a decade or more.

Many are more positive in their assessment. More time for reflection has brought for some a new spiritual awakening. Our online presence has opened up a new space for spiritual encounter and enrichment, that has unlimited possibilities for outreach. With the absence of public worship, many have rediscovered the richness of personal prayer. The domestic church has come centre stage as families gather to pray together at home. Some have taken up online religious education programmes or joined online bible groups or prayer meetings. On a practical level, parishioners have found a new sense of belonging to their parish by volunteering to assist with the implementation of the Church's safety regulations.



A Graced Opportunity

At times, I fear that we might mistakenly think that once the current Covid restrictions are lifted and once we return to public worship everything will be all right. To return to the way things were, without any attempt to learn from the experience or to embark on serious effort to consider where, as a faith community, we go from here would be truly short-sighted indeed.

I suspect that a post-pandemic Church might offer us a graced opportunity or what the early followers of Jesus might call a “*Kairos*” moment. There is now the very real possibility of one of those moments where the Holy Spirit powerfully enters human time and space to move us forward in a way, which is qualitatively different from what went before.

In the past, we have often spent much time and energy trying to engage with and convert secular society. Perhaps now is the time for us to seriously engage with and convert ourselves and the way we live as a Christian community within that secular society.

Pastoral Conversion

Pope Francis has often spoken of the idea of “pastoral conversion”. He speaks of his dream for a Church that moves from an outlook of mere self-preservation to one more akin to that of those first Christians (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 27). An outlook where, as a people of faith, our genuine friendship with Jesus is evident, our joyful enthusiasm to share our faith contagious and our authentic practical living out of the faith in our lives transformative far beyond the Christian community. Pope Francis holds that our pastoral ministry should seek to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way” and he invites “everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation in their respective communities.” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 33).

The Pope is not talking about reworking the fundamentals of Christian doctrine, but rather about a radical reform and refocusing of the way the Good News is presented, along with the structures needed to support vibrant Christian communities.

I think that the time has come when we have to admit to ourselves and to each other the urgent need for such pastoral conversion. Genuine pastoral conversion involves profound prayerful discernment, and a re-evaluation of how we do things. With the ever watchful guidance of the Holy Spirit, this involves freeing ourselves *from* something in order to free ourselves *for* something better. As human beings, we easily settle into certain ways of doing things and we often become attached to routines and systems that we have put in place. We can be somewhat reluctant to do things differently.



Freedom From

Perhaps we now have to muster the courage to free ourselves from many of the things we are currently doing that are no longer fruitful and that are, at times, counterproductive. Many of these things we have been doing for so long that we might even find it difficult to conceive of our Parish or our Diocese without them. However, this time last year who would have thought that we would have had a year of no Sunday obligation; or that for most of the year we would have had no congregations at Mass; or that instead of receiving communion in church people would be making spiritual communions in their homes!

Over the years, we have spent much of our time and energy trying to revive parishes, movements, and initiatives. We have tried to keep a familiar version of the Church and faith practices on a sort of prolonged life support system. Does there not come a time when we have to let them go? Last December, the Carmelite Sisters in Loughrea gave us a real-life example of such a situation.

After much prayerful discernment, and not without its fair share of heartbreak, the sisters made the brave decision to end 340 years of their presence in Loughrea and to move to a new stage in their mission.

Changing Times

People no longer attend Church in the numbers they once did. While some young people and young families are active in their local parishes, most of those who attend are in the upper age bracket. Every year, our pews get emptier and emptier. Financial support for parishes is challenging almost everywhere. Some of our parishes now have too few practising parishioners to be sustained into the future as life-giving faith communities in the same way as they have been in the past. Our situation is such that we have not had an ordination to the priesthood in many years. Our priests are advancing in age. Many of them have already given so much selfless service. In reality, there is only so much that we can expect of any one priest.

Over the year, I appointed two Parish Moderators with a team of priests to serve the Parishes of Lawrencetown and Kiltormer and Killnadeema and Aille. I am not sure if this is the new model of pastoral ministry needed but new models need to be devised and tested. It is encouraging to see how committed parishioners are already beginning to take their rightful place as partners in these new models of maintaining and nurturing the faith life of parishes.



Can We Really Continue As We Are?

We will have to make brave structural and pastoral changes. Can we really continue with the number of Masses we have? Can we really keep all our churches open? Can the priest really be expected to do everything? How might competent, trained, willing laypeople contribute to the work? Perhaps there is some truth to the idea that a subconscious and even conscious clericalism means that we priests have to be at the centre of everything? How will we practically administer our parishes or groups of parishes in the future? Can our models of worship, our sacramental preparation or catechetical programmes continue as they are? Can we continue to celebrate Baptism, First Confession, First Holy Communion and Confirmation as we do and when we do? What is our future role in Catholic Education? Can we continue to act as Patron of so many primary schools? Where is our outreach to the young, to those who are coming after us? We need not be afraid to turn our backs on mere maintenance for maintenance sake and free ourselves of so many things that, although useful in a time gone by, have

now become obstacles to progress in the faith. In the process, we need to avoid the temptation to turn our churches into mere sacramental dispensing stations – where people come to pick a religious product rather than to be nourished to live the Christian life.

Prayerful Pastoral Discernment

For the journey of pastoral conversion, there will need to be much prayerful pastoral discernment (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 33). Such discernment will need to be done together. It must include, by right, both priests and laity. It must move away from asking questions like “what do I want” or even “what do we want”. It must be focused on asking: “what does God desire for us here and now in the world in which we live”. Just like the infant Church after Pentecost, we must open ourselves in a profound way to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We must allow the Spirit to lead us on new and exciting paths. Ultimately, there will be much that we will have to let go of if we are to free ourselves to do what now needs to be done to live out and present the Gospel in a meaningful manner to the people of our day. We need to be “free from” to be “free for”.



Freedom For

As for what exactly we must convert to, this needs more discernment too. I think we have to turn to a model of Church that is more “synodal” in the true sense of the Greek word *synodos* – which means “walking together”. The whole people of God – priest and layperson walking together, trying to read the signs of the times and striving to discern the will of God in their lives. All the while, renewed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Like the early Christian community, we need to focus on and prepare ourselves to share the Good News of Jesus and his wisdom with others. Firstly, by forming welcoming Christian communities – they will be small in number. Communities where people are enlightened by the Scriptures, supported in prayer, sanctified by the Sacraments and assisted in understanding the faith as full of life-giving meaning. Our witness as a people who work for justice and who look after and care for those who are on the margins of society needs much work. To use the words of Pope Francis how do we become a faith community “which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a



Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security." (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 49) How might such faith-filled communities become launch pads for such missionary activity to the larger community, which is no longer interested in faith? How might they become places of outreach especially to young people, young families and to those seekers and searchers who amid our growing secular society are still looking for that meaning and purpose in life that only a faith in God can bring.

A Challenging Task

As I say this, I acknowledge that many of you may already feel overwhelmed. The Catholic Church in Ireland has taken a considerable battering over these last few decades. Regrettably, some of it has been well deserved. Sometimes, it is difficult enough for both priests and laypeople to keep going – not to mention change direction and do new things. We also have to find ways to address this crisis in our hearts as a Catholic faith community. Ways to rekindle our somewhat broken confidence in the

faith and to reenergise our somewhat dampened enthusiasm for the life-giving message of Jesus Christ.

Building on Work Already Done

As a Diocese, some valuable work has already been done. In 2017, after a wide and comprehensive consultative process, *The Clonfert Development Committee*, a group of laypeople and priests convened by Bishop John Kirby and the Council of Priests, produced a comprehensive report on the Diocese and outlined a way forward. Last October, I appointed Fr. Iomar Daniels as Episcopal Vicar for Parish Restructuring and Renewal to chair a committee to implement the findings of this 2017 *Report*. This new committee of laity and clergy, has continued to meet remotely during these last few months with a view to breathing new life and direction into the process of that pastoral discernment and conversion about which Pope Francis speaks.

Discussion, Discernment and Feedback

It is my hope that this Pastoral Reflection will provide an opportunity for parish pastoral councils, parish groups or church organisations, those involved in catholic education, groups of priests, religious and interested families and laypeople to discuss the ideas I have raised. Once you have had time to reflect, I would also welcome your feedback, which you can send by post to Clonfert Diocesan Office, Coorheen, Loughrea, Co Galway, H62 TD82 or email to office@clonfertdiocese.ie



A Spirit of Excitement

I do not wish in any way to cast doubt on the enormous amount of selfless work done by so many bishops, priests, religious and laypeople over the years and that selfless work that continues today. The achievements of the past, no matter how great, will always stand in need of renewed discernment and conversion in order to face the particular challenges of experiencing and presenting Jesus and his wisdom as meaningful in each and every age. I offer these thoughts in a spirit of excitement at the possibility of genuine renewal that has always been part of the life of a living Church.

In these days, between Easter and Pentecost, when we reflect on that Spirit filled and Spirit led development of the early Christian community found in the Acts of the Apostles, let us pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Christian community of the Diocese of Clonfert. As we do so let us also commend to God all those who have suffered because of the current Pandemic, those who have been sick, those who have died and those whose livelihoods have been lost.

Come, Holy Spirit,
from heaven shine forth with your glorious light.
Come, Father of the poor,
come, generous Spirit,
come, light of our hearts.
Come from the four winds, O Spirit,
come breath of God; disperse the shadows over us,
renew and strengthen your people.
Most kindly warming light!
Enter the inmost depths of our hearts,
for we are faithful to you.
Without your presence we have nothing worthy,
nothing pure.
You are our only comforter,
Peace of the soul.
In the heat you shade us;
in our labour you refresh us,
and in trouble you are our strength.
On all who put their trust in you
and receive you in faith,
shower all your gifts.
Grant that they may grow in you
and persevere to the end.
Give them lasting joy! Amen.

St Brendan, pray for us
St Joseph, pray for us
Our Lady of Clonfert, pray for us



Photo - Our Lady of Clonfert



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