



Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

FAITH COMMUNITY AREA DISCUSSIONS ON THE FUTURE

May – June 2023

**ST JOSEPH — SACRED HEART, WESTSIDE
CATHEDRAL — KNOCKNACARRA — SALTHILL
ST AUGUSTINE — ST FRANCIS — ST MARY, CLADDAGH
HOSPITAL CHAPLAINCY — UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY**

Monday 15th May 2023 — Menlo Park Hotel, Galway

The meeting began with the Synodal Prayer, led by Fr Gerard McCarthy SVD.

BISHOP MICHAEL'S INTRODUCTION

Good evening and welcome! Thank you to the priests of this area and to all of you who have taken the time to attend. I would like to begin by: (1) giving you a bit of background to the meeting, and (2) outlining what we might hope to get out of it.

BACKGROUND

Last May, on the day of my installation as Bishop of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora, I spoke about the current situation we find ourselves in as a faith community and expressed the hope that we would dialogue together – bishop, priests, religious and people – in order to plan for the future. Last November, I set up a small committee of priests to see how we might bring this idea forward. At the beginning of February, we began the process with a two-day meeting of the priests of the diocese at Spanish Point. At that meeting we agreed we needed to broaden the conversation and include the voice of our parishioners. As a result, we divided the diocese into seven groupings of parishes/chaplaincies and asked priests to invite a representative body of key parishioners to meet as we are doing this evening. This is just the beginning of a conversation: more dialogue and collective discernment will need to be undertaken as we move forward together.

PROFOUNDLY POSITIVE ABOUT THE FUTURE

Let me preface what I am about to say by affirming that I am absolutely convinced that the times we live in are intensely blessed. Deep down, I am profoundly positive about the future of the Church. I believe that the Holy Spirit is powerfully active in our midst. Uprooting that which is no longer fruitful, planting new seeds, and pointing to new ways. My mother used to always say, “you do your bit and let God do the rest.” So what might be “our bit” when it comes to planning for the future of our parishes and our diocese?

CURRENT CHALLENGES

To throw the ball – let me paint a brief picture of the challenges of our current situation in 7 points.

- 1) For a variety of reasons, regular participation in our parishes has rapidly decreased over the last decade and looks likely to decrease even further into the future. While this is a reality in all our parishes, it is perhaps more obvious in small rural parishes than in larger urban ones.
- 2) For the most part, those participating regularly in the life of our parishes are advancing in age. It is a visible fact that there are fewer and fewer people in the pews between the ages of 20 and 50.

- 3) In many places, the decline in participation and the ageing of our congregations is resulting in a lack of volunteers and difficulty paying the bills.
- 4) At the moment, we do not have a single seminarian. Over the next twenty years or so we will be left with approximately 20 diocesan priests to serve 40 parishes and chaplaincies. At the moment, we have three parishes without a resident priest and more to follow?
- 5) There is only so much a single priest can do especially as we advance in age. Our hard-working priests have never had as much demands upon them. We simply cannot divide the same workload among fewer priests. Something has to give.
- 6) We do not have a long tradition of lay involvement and lay led faith communities; there is a great need for training and education so that laity can minister with insight and confidence.
- 7) While we need to celebrate Mass and the other sacraments and bury the dead, this will only maintain what we have and only for a limited time at that. Do we not need to focus on rekindling the faith, especially among the young and become more missionary in our practice?

“FREEDOM FROM” – “FREEDOM FOR”

We owe a debt of gratitude to the selfless work done over the years by our priests, religious, and key lay people. I believe that changing circumstances now mean there are many structures and practices that have served us well for a long time but are now no longer as fruitful as they once were. Let me elaborate a bit. Do we need all the Masses we have at the moment? Does a priest need to do a lot of what he is currently engaged in – or could appropriately trained laypeople do some of it? What role should our Parish Pastoral Councils play in shaping the future? Will we be able to keep open all the churches that we now have? Are there things that we are currently doing that we need to “free ourselves from” in order to be “free for” something better? Would fewer Masses mean more people present, more people to take part and a more meaningful celebration for those who come? How might we ensure that our parishes are genuinely life-giving communities of faith rather than mere anonymous convenience stores where we go to pick up this or that spiritual product? Could appropriately trained lay people do a lot more? How are we going to train suitable lay people? Who will do it? How will we pay for it? What of our outreach and ministry to the next generation – young people and young families? Should we be focusing more on preparation for the sacraments? How can we have a more meaningful encounter with the bereaved, the sick, the poor, those on the margins of Church and society? We spend so much money on our buildings – by comparison how much money do we spend on people and faith enhancing initiatives? Would groups of parishes working more closely with each other and sharing resources mean that they could do more together than they might be able to do on their own? *Ní neart go cur le chéile* - there is a special strength when we come together with a common purpose.

GRACED DAYS TO “DO OUR BIT”

Let me finish by repeating: I am not panicked or despondent. I am convinced that these days are “our days” – graced days to “do our bit”, to make wise choices and brave decisions that will with God’s help secure a bright, albeit different, future for the faith and for our faith communities. It is in this spirit that I welcome these gatherings. It is in this spirit that I hope we will all become involved in positively shaping the future not as passive spectators but as active participants. Thank you so much for being here.

➤ *The meeting was then opened to the floor.* ◀

- There was a lot of discussion about a missionary way of thinking. We cannot move forward without changing our mindset. There are many matters to be discussed within the diocese over the next few years.
- We may be aware of a Church that is afraid; we are afraid to say what we stand for. This is not the way to live our faith. We have the example of those who have gone before us. There is no point in looking to teenagers and those beyond that age; it is already too late. We have to start with the very young. We have to think about the prospect of Sunday school where young people would be taught in a way that would help them understand their faith.
- In our diocese we have no seminarians at this time. Could we examine the Holy Family Mission – where young people give a year or two of their lives to mission? They ‘receive’ catechesis while living in a community of like-minded young people. Catechesis in our parishes is fundamental. I am a trained catechist along with five others trained in my parish. We want to be used because we want to pass on the faith. We

were trained through Maryvale. We have spent the time learning and we want to be used. I would love to be doing this more. I don't believe in cutting Masses as I believe it is the summit of our Catholic faith. The youth are not the future, they are the now of our church.

- We need catechists. We need evangelisation in order to establish a personal relationship with Jesus. This is the most important thing. We should make more use of social media. Parish websites could be developed further.
- We need to re-examine sacramental preparation for baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. We should also look at the age our children make their First Holy Communion and Confirmation.
- We need a Church where no one is excluded, where everyone has a space and made feel that they have something to offer. We need somewhere where groups of adults/children can come together to develop their faith. Is there not also a need for 'street ministry' where we encounter young people, drug addicts, he homeless, and invite them to new initiatives?
- Is there something we need to let go of, so that we can meet this new future that awaits us?
- In today's world we need to be freeing up our priests. There are so many rules and regulations to comply with and it seems that the parish priest has to sign off on all of them. Practical measures should be taken. Maybe as a Church we need to be employing more lay-people to take on the admin that is presently taking up so much of our priests' time. This is especially true in the financial running of our parishes. The Church's main mission is to spread the faith; but we spend so much time doing administrative work.
- In times gone by priests didn't recognise the talents of those around them. We need to go back to the basic relationships with each other. We need to build up personal relationships within our parishes. We are blessed with the talents and skills in all of our parishes. We need to harness these skills.
- The most important thing for our future is young people; they are our future. It is the sad thing in parishes that our liturgies seem to be geared for an older generation. We need to bring the liturgy alive for our youth and young children. Can we introduce, or re-introduce, children's liturgies? This can attract young families. A lot of young adults don't know their faith and cannot pass on their faith to their children. We have to make the children welcome.
- Sacramental preparation in the schools is a waste of time. Parents need ongoing faith courses, and not just a few times a year, to help them prepare their children for the sacraments.
- Formation of our laity is going to be fundamental for the future that we are facing. Can we look again at having deacons in our diocese? Just a point – eight years is too long to spend training to become a priest!
- Working with youth, I realise that it takes years to get across an intellectual argument for God. Liturgies don't mean anything for most of our youth. They don't connect or believe: they come to Eucharist and even come to receive Communion without knowing the basics of their faith. Today's young people are not getting their questions answered, and yet people who come into schools to share their faith testimony have a big impact. The youth want to hear why their elders have faith. They need that more than simply jumping into Sacraments which they don't understand.
- We need to sow the emotional seed of faith from an early age. Children respond to this. Children's liturgy is really crucial; it becomes a place where they can participate and develop their own understanding. The intellectual aspects of our faith can be dealt with later on.
- Children have a massive openness to God. As they get to senior level they then become more interested in the testimony of Jesus' life. They want to be caring, charitable and they have the attributes that echo a Christian society.
- Important to get volunteers involved. Getting young people involved and getting them trained, however, is going to be a huge challenge.
- It was noted that most people at the meeting were women. The role of women in the Church needs to be examined. Could we train women to take on the ministry of deacon within the Church?
- While there are big issues that are beyond our control, it was felt that we should focus on what we can actually do right now in our Church.

The meeting came to a close with a brief summary by Bishop Michael. He thanked all who attended, while reminding them that this was the beginning of an ongoing process.