



Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

FAITH COMMUNITY AREA DISCUSSIONS ON THE FUTURE

May – June 2023

AN SPIDÉAL — BEARNA / NA FORBACHA — LEITIRMÓIR — ROSMUC

Wednesday 3rd May 2023 — Connemara Coast Hotel, Furbo

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.* ‹

- Priests are double jobbing, and so much more. It is clear that we have a problem as we face the future. The age profile of our priests cannot be ignored.
- The meeting was held in Irish and English. We were asked not to worry about the language barrier – the opinions expressed, in whatever language, are the most important thing and what we are here to listen to. The second thing that is important is that the people of our parishes are coming together. This is a listening for the people of our different Christian communities.
- This is just the beginning of the process which we will be working on in the years ahead. It is similar to the processes that are happening in other dioceses.
- We cannot continue as we have been doing. Each priest must protect his own health. He can be his own worst enemy, however, because of his sense of duty to the parish. The laity need to see where they can help the priests.
- The demands in all of our parishes have increased, and the volunteers have decreased.

- We have to be concerned about the parish age profile. How do we attract the youth? There is no doubt that we are in a time of change, but the pity is that we haven't 'gradually' changed down through the years. This is the time for change. The young won't come with the old-fashioned music and things being done in 'the same old way'. We are still not ready for change, but we have no option except change.
- Many parishioners have not returned to church after Covid. What can we do to attract them back? Do we need to look at other forms of worship or services; a spiritual experience and mindful type of service rather than religious? The word religious puts off a lot of people.
- We live in each other's shadows; we are stronger together. Maybe we need to be looking at what we can do together in a more collaborative way, a more inter-parochial way?
- There is an awareness of the damage that the abuse scandals have caused. The term 'priest' seems to be attached to the term 'paedophile'.
- We are looking for the spiritual as a people. There is a hunger for a deep/deeper spirituality.
- We need to develop a better understanding of our faith, and indeed of the Eucharist itself. We need a more solid adult faith formation, along with a deeper understanding of the Mass.
- The biggest weakness in the formation of our young may be the Catholic schools themselves. What are they in today's world? We go through Alive O and Grow In Love programmes and the syllabus is well covered. But the parents are not strongly involved. The parents also need some preparation and help in passing on the faith. They need to prepare themselves and discuss why and should their child be making their First Holy Communion or Confirmation. Like for sports, training is also needed for reception of the Sacraments.
- It was felt that the 'fight' for numbers attending Mass has been lost. It was also pointed out the amount of money spent on the churches, on buildings – but they are not the houses of the community anymore! Where are we going? The spiritual aspect – a display and experience of the spiritual – is needed.
- The young people do not see the importance of spiritual matters. They are listening to the media and their friends on social media. We have to connect with them through these means and not simply through the schools. Both the church and the family have huge roles to play.
- We need to focus on catechism for adults. Adults are the ones who can most appreciate the value of faith, not children. Unfortunately, the catechetical process in church focuses on children. Parents come to the church so that their children may receive the sacraments. These parents need to be helped to focus on their own spiritual growth as well and the awareness of what it means to be a member of a parish community.
- It is a fact that after First Holy Communion, many children are not seen again until Confirmation! This is a reality.
- As members of our church do we have any real sense of what it means to be church, to pray and to live as a community? The early church followers came together to pray and break bread.
- It is noticeable in our churches the absence of the 20–35 age group. This is especially so at Mass.
- The church now has to compete with so many other things happening on Sunday morning or Saturday evening. Choices have to be made between church or training. But why do these have to clash? This needs to be examined. There is no doubt that the parish community is associated with the GAA. Indeed, the GAA are a measure of strength of the parish community.
- We are in the midst of structural change. If you asked someone today which parish are you in or from, they probably wouldn't know. There are now 'intentional communities'. People travel from far over to gather. The boundary doesn't come into it. The old structures are wanting in this new age.
- The world has changed, and we are a church in this world. Five years down the line, what part of our structures are we willing to let go of? To continue with what is not working is nonsense.
- Are the scandals the only reason for the numbers who have left, and are leaving, the Church? What are the important things we want to keep and other things that we are being called to let go of?

- Is there a need for the priest to do everything? Surely the training of our laity is urgently needed. Can we be a community without a priest? Are we empowering the members of the community for this eventuality? We can support each other. We are a community where we learn from our neighbours. In our community there are people who are quieter, in need of courage and support who could be empowered. Could we begin by doing the First Friday visits or do prayers in the graveyard, for example? Courage! We need to give support to the priests.
- We have the responsibility for our faith – to both share it and carry it on. We have to walk with those who may have lost their faith, we have to be open and not insult them.
- Within a family it is hard to answer the question of why we go to Mass – and those who don't go won't even accept the answers that we do or can give! We don't have the answers, but neither did our ancestors. We have to remain hopeful although it is hard. We have to meet and accept people where they are. We are living in a different time and culture to the one many of us grew up in – do we have the confidence to share our faith with others in our new situation? That is the challenge.
- We need a safe place to share our faith. How can we create this space? People are craving for a deeper meaning. We have to learn to 'think outside the box'. We are not just isolated, individual parishes: we are a missionary Church responsible for one another.
- There are a lot of people who don't practice but still go inside a church for the quietness. They might not believe but they like being in the church, they like the place. The church provides a place of peace in the midst of worry. We have this wonderful resource.

Bearna and na Forbacha parish met before this meeting and had some recommendations to present:

1. The steering committee should have a balance of laity, clergy, women and men.
2. The following definition of parish is helpful for future use: "Parish is a community of people – including, of course, at least one who is to be a light, a guide, a power, a strength, an inspiration. This community associates with one another in an organised way, and avails of all means which help them to come to know him (the Lord) more deeply and to follow him more closely." (Enda Lyons, Partnership in Parish).
3. How will the diocese support parish communities to grow, to be vibrant faith communities?
 - Reinforce the status of the parish community. Parish community must continue to be the prime mover and pre-eminent place for catechesis (Catechesi tradendae 60).
 - The need to re-evaluate the present catechetical focus so the 'catechesis of adults is the principal form of catechesis into the future' (Catechesi tradendae).
 - Parish ministry: diocesan training for members of the community – Services of the Word and Communion Services, sick calls, care of the dying, funerals, baptisms, weddings, visitation to nursing homes.
4. Can we re-look at the question of deacons in the Galway Diocese? In light of the current Synodal discussions: the review of the status of deacons would include women.
5. The establishment of a Diocesan Pastoral Council.
6. Lay hospital chaplains to be re-introduced and local training for hospital chaplains.

In light of the need to continue with these present diocesan/parish initiatives, ensure that the parish representatives are kept up to date and consulted.

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.

An Irish language version of this summary will be made available when it has been prepared.