



Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

FAITH COMMUNITY AREA DISCUSSIONS ON THE FUTURE

May – June 2023

**GOOD SHEPHERD — BALLYBANE — BALLINFOYLE — CASTLEGAR
ST PATRICK'S — RENMORE — MERVUE**

Tuesday 30th May 2023 — Cumasú Centre, Doughiska

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.

Bishop Michael’s introduction was followed by a PowerPoint presentation on the makeup of this eastern part of the city of Galway. (See information below the meeting discussion points.)

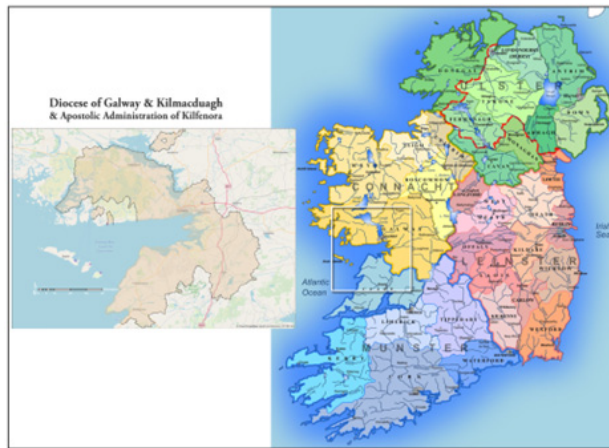
➤ *The meeting was then opened to the floor.* ◀

- The question of deacons was raised and why it was that this diocese never really ran with the idea.
- It was questioned as to why St. Patrick’s had been grouped with this particular group of parishes and not with the city grouping?
- The question about the present situation of the diocese vis-à-vis seminarians was raised. This had already been answered by Bishop Michael in his presentation.
- The sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation – many come forward to receive these sacraments but there is a huge fall-off in Mass/Church attendance afterwards. Ongoing formation of our school children and young adults needs to be carefully examined. An area that really needs our attention. Something new is also needed to attract this particular group of young people.

- The Church is in 'competition' with other organisations (GAA, scouts, etc.), especially on a Sunday morning. Maybe we need more interaction/communication/collaboration with these organisations.
- Are we getting some help from the religious orders in the city? Are we making the best use of their presence among us?
- Could neighbouring parishes working together not do a lot more than when they work as individual entities? The pool of volunteers available would at least be greater. This would be very beneficial as we try to better support our parents of young children.
- The idea of spiritual book groups was put forward. This would be modelled on a regular book-club, but the reading material would be of a spiritual or faith-based nature.
- The question was raised as to what the parishioners would do if on some Sunday morning the priest took sick and was unavailable to celebrate Mass? In the past prayers services were held, but these were stopped for some unknown reason.
- The suggestion was put forward that the priests of this area should give more time to the young in the schools. This would nourish a connection with the Church and be very effective for the future. This would also help in deepening the preparation for First Holy Communion and Confirmation.
- We need to continue with altar servers and reinstate them where perhaps they were discontinued because of Covid. The servers can have a great influence on their parents, siblings and friends.
- The times we are living in, and the times ahead ARE exciting. Sometimes in the past, and maybe even in the present, we simply 'go' to Mass. We go through the motions; a re-evangelisation is needed. We need adult faith-formation.
- We need to look at initiatives outside of the Sunday Mass. Art and music are great means of attracting youth. Future initiatives, however, need to be well organised and follow certain norms and protocols if they are to last. The arts and youth ministry is a great way to attract our young people. This way of attracting youth has proved very successful in the past.
- The religious sisters who have returned from their missionary activities overseas: how can they share those experiences with us and, at the same time, inspire another generation? These sisters are among us and have great gifts and experiences to share.
- The need to re-animate our liturgies, especially through our choirs and music.
- The question of the number of Masses in the area, especially on any given Sunday, was raised. Would it not be better to have fewer Masses and then perhaps we would get larger congregations and more meaningful celebrations? It might even be a way of getting larger groups of children to attend: a place where they could meet their friends?
- The youth are not going to Mass. For whatever reason they have turned away and we need to focus on this. What do we do? How will we attract the youth back? We need to be aware of the lay involvement that is going to be needed to bring this about, but it will have to be a lay involvement of their own peers!
- The difficulty was brought up of trying to establish a parish council with twelve members for each parish in the area. Could we not have a parish council for the whole area?
- Again the question of youth — if we can attract them to the Church through the arts and music they will undoubtedly have an impact on their peers.
- The situation we are in is not unique to Ireland or the Irish Church. Are we looking further afield, or even to neighbouring dioceses, to see how they are responding to these challenges? Can we get some inspiration from what they are doing?
- We are all aware that change is very difficult to deal with, but when we start collaborating together, as is being done in this pastoral area, we can see how things develop and happen. This collaboration also helps to build up a feeling of community between all the parishes. The challenge is to keep searching for new ways we can collaborate and grow as a pastoral area.
- Our parish boundaries are not so rigid and defined. Look at where we live, where we go to school, we go to participate in sports, etc. We are all crossing over the parish 'boundaries'.

- People are sometimes afraid to volunteer for committees or parish teams or councils for fear that they will be left on them for years!
- There are some things that cannot be continued. Some things have to be allowed to die in order that new seeds may sprout. We are people of hope so let's not be afraid of what's ahead. Green shoots will appear!
- Again the idea of looking at some cross-parish event or events that can bring us all together? How can we celebrate outside of Mass?
- We need to target young parents and young children and give them meaningful support.
- The priests in this area meet every Monday. Should this not be a policy for the whole diocese? It is a very fruitful experience.
- The lack of vocations. Should we not be praying constantly for vocations especially at the end of Mass?
- We keep talking about getting the youth 'back to Mass'. But should we not be thinking outside the box? Is there not another way that we can attract them to the Church that will eventually lead them back to Mass?
- There needs to be more focus on sacramental preparation of our young people and youth. During this time we 'have their attention'. Later on we lose them and it is more difficult then to 'bring them back'. We also need to focus on teaching the catechism of the Catholic Church.
- We need to become better users of social media in order to reach out to more people, especially our youth.

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.



DIOCESE OF GALWAY, KILMACDUAGH AND KILFENORA: 38 PARISHES		
<i>7 Faith Communities:</i>		
<i>Ballinfoyle – Mervue – Renmore – Ballybane – St Patrick's – Castlegar/Menlo – Good Shepherd</i>		
NUMBER OF CHURCHES AND HOSPITALS IN THE AREA		
Churches: 9	Hospitals: 4	Nursing Homes: 2
Ballinfoyle	Bon Secours	Castlegar
Ballybane	Galway Clinic	Coral Haven
Castlegar & Menlo	Galway Hospice	
Good Shepherd	Merlin Park	
Mervue		
Renmore & Garrison		
St Patrick's		

NUMBER OF CHURCHES AND HOSPITALS IN THE AREA			
Primary Schools: 8	Special Needs: 3	Post-Primary: 3	College: 1
Ballinfoyle	Ballybane	Educate Together	A.T.U.
Briarhill	Lakeview	Merlin College	
Castlegar	Rosedale	Moneenageisha	
Gaelscoil Dara			
Menlo			
Merlin Woods			
Mervue			
Renmore			
<i>Nearly 3,000 primary school children</i>			

NUMBER OF SACRAMENTS ADMINISTERED	
Sunday Masses	18
Daily Masses	30
Baptisms	185
First Holy Communions	301
Confirmations	207
Marriages (marriage papers)	25
Funerals	160
TOTAL:	926

NUMBER OF PRIESTS IN THE AREA	
Diocesan Priests	4
Diocesan Priests under the age of 68	1