



Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

FAITH COMMUNITY AREA DISCUSSIONS ON THE FUTURE

May – June 2023

CLAREGALWAY — ORANMORE/MAREE — SHRULE/GLENCORRIB

Tuesday 2nd May 2023 — Community Centre, Claregalway

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.* ◀

Topic A: What are the challenges ahead?

- Need for more lay involvement in parish life.
- Over the years there has been a failure to attract more people to the Church, especially the young – could this be part of the reason for a lack of vocations?
- Another meeting like this one but specifically for young people in order to hear what they think?
- There is practically no follow-on with our children and youth after the Sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation. This will have to be addressed.
- There are many different groups within the church, and within our parishes. Clarity is needed for a greater understanding of shared responsibility and future planning.
- In our secondary schools while there is not a total lack of interest, there is a certain indifference to faith, God/religion. There is a hunger for an experience of God, but how do we tap into this, keeping in mind the mentality of today’s youth?

- While our traditions are important it was noted that we need to let some things go slowly, in order to prepare for the 'newness' of what is ahead.
- There was a concern that churches may be closed. Would it not be better to at least remain open, even if it was for one Mass per month? This would certainly be better than closure.

Topic B: the vision 5 years down the line

- We will probably be smaller yet more committed communities – there will be a need for a greater emphasis on families and faith formation.
- Need to check out what other dioceses are doing: no need to re-invent the wheel.
- Would it be possible to organise faith gatherings at a parish level in line with local, national or international "pilgrimages"?
- It was remarked that for our future each one should question whether she/he is doing enough in their own parish setting.
- There will be a need for more trust and better communication between the diocese and individual parishes, and within the parish community itself.
- The number and frequency of Masses was raised. Do we need to examine and/or change in this area? Will the training of laity be necessary for a future with fewer priests?
- We need to let go of fear and be brave in today's world – we must lead by example.
- What is needed at a diocesan level to support faith formation? Do we need one or more catechists for the diocese?
- Need for youth faith formation. The use of social media needs to improve, especially if we want to reach today's youth.
- Society is changing and, like it or not, the Church will have to change with it.
- Volunteers are very scarce in our parishes and sometimes they can be taken for granted. Do we need to change our attitude and realise that in the future we may need to make better use of our dwindling resources?
- We recognise the "lost" youth; but we also need to be aware of the "lost generation" of parents. Many of today's Catholic parents are only in church for special occasions like baptism, First Holy Communion or Confirmation of their children.
- We are aware of the challenges/competition other activities pose on Saturday/Sunday Mass.

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.