



Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

FAITH COMMUNITY AREA DISCUSSIONS ON THE FUTURE

May – June 2023

**CRAUGHWELL — CLARINBRIDGE — KINVARA
BALLINDERREEN — ARDRAHAN — KILCHREEST
KILBEACANTY / PETERSWELL — GORT / BEAGH**

Thursday 4th May 2023 — Lady Gregory Hotel, Gort

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.* ◀

- Laypeople will have to be involved and trained – but all will need education on changes. There is still a preference for priests, as opposed to lay people, running services.
- Is it time to look again at the training of deacons (male and female)? It was discussed 10 years ago but no movement since.
- As Church, why are we excluding half the population from ministry? Question of the role of women in the Church.
- With all the different attitudes to religion – in schools/sacraments etc – where does it all converge? There are so many differing views of religion in our education system. Society has changed – but it brings challenges to us.

- Churches should not be closed. Age group 20–50 don't want to be involved. There is a fall-off in families attending Mass, except as the sacraments approach. This led to a discussion on GAA clubs and the training sessions during Mass times.
- Need to re-examine the number and times of Masses.
- Is there some things we need to let go of to cope with our local situation?
- Better preparation for Communion /Confirmation. We rarely see the children/youth at Mass after Communion or Confirmation.
- We have to remain positive – teenagers need church – we can't raise our kids like we were raised. We need new/modern strategies with today's youth in mind.
- Talk is ok but it must lead to action!
- More and more the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation are a day out – more preparation is needed.
- There is surely a way for religion to tap into sport: famous sportsmen bless themselves prior to games!
- Mass servers are a great entry to religion and liturgy. They can eventually become Eucharistic Ministers and readers.
- Are there many places in Ireland with deacons? Do we need them in our diocese?
- Again are there too many Masses throughout the diocese?
- If things keep going as they are do we foresee the closure of some churches? If so, what then?
- We need to invest in our youth. The Church is changing and we need to ask students what kind of Church they would like to see.
- The Church is also worldwide and we must realize that what we do here effects other areas of the world. We have a collective responsibility for what we do as a community to care for the earth.
- It would be good if priests let everybody know the problems facing the Church on a regular basis.
- Training of laity for funerals, services of the Word and other duties.

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.