



Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

FAITH COMMUNITY AREA DISCUSSIONS ON THE FUTURE

May – June 2023

**CARRON / NEW QUAY / NOUGHAVAL — BALLYVAUGHAN / FANORE
ENNISTYMON / LAHINCH — LISCANNOR / MOYMORE
LISDOONVARNA / KILSHANNY / DOOLIN / TOOVAHERA — KILFENORA**
Wednesday 17th May 2023 — The Ritz Hotel, Lisdoonvarna

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.* ◀

- Support was expressed for all the priests in the area. The same speaker spoke of the need for the communities to come together and connect more. Challenges will need to be faced together. This will build up the communities and the faith of the participants. It will also help us to think outside our own particular parish.
- The numbers at our Masses are small and the congregations are of a certain vintage. Younger members are not there. Those involved in the Church need to be more proactive in expressing their faith.
- We are spreading our priests too thinly on the ground. If that happens none of us will get the flavour. Regarding our young, we have to meet them where they are at. We cannot inflict something on our youth that is no longer relevant for them!

- It was noted that not many parents of a certain age are not going to Mass. The Church has to become more missionary.
- We have to start from the reality of where we are. Our society, our culture, has changed. The management of the parishes has to be looked at. We need a more collaborative model. We are also over-dependent on our schools and teachers for the faith formation of those preparing for First Holy Communion and Confirmation. There has to be a more family/parent involvement.
- If we tidy up our own area or the patch in front of our houses we can start the ball rolling. Let's all do our bit.
- The whole area of third-level students and those in secondary schools: they are at a crucial time in their lives with many struggles. They need help and guidance, especially those who are away from home. We have to help them find God.
- Most of us got our faith from our parents and grandparents. We got our faith in the home. We have to focus on how we can support the family in the passing on of the faith at home. This can all be linked in to the school programme and the sacramental preparation for the sacraments.
- We have to focus more on the preparation for First Holy Communion. We also have to encourage them, give them something to remember.
- We have to develop the habit of going to Church. There are so many other things happening now that it is hard for the young to develop the habit of even attending church.
- We encourage the young to participate: altar servers, collecting the baskets, children's choir ... let them see the other parts of what it means to be Church.
- We have to get the parents to bring their children to Mass and we have to learn as a Church to adapt to people and their needs.
- Are we talking about simply going back to Church or believing in Jesus? The idea of the person of Jesus as being part of our lives. Our young people need community, a sense of belonging, of meeting their friends. We have to become a more missionary Church and learn how to gather people and give them a sense of belonging.
- Priests should be able to marry.
- Women priests. Too many male clerics. The Church has missed on the female presence as priests and deacons.
- Clericalism is detrimental for the Church.
- Young people need to feel a little more empowered in their faith. We need to work with teenagers in particular. They are searching. We have to show them that the Church is more than an institution or building.
- Have a meeting like this in the universities. Allow the young to speak up and listen to them; they need to feel listened to.
- The training of priests is eight years! We need to set up courses for the training of the laity. Lay involvement is the way forward.
- The laity need to get more involved. It can be done but they have to be given the opportunity and encouragement ... and the training.
- The number of Masses: have we too many and too close together, albeit in different churches?
- The seven points that Bishop Michael made need to be promulgated.
- The foreign nationals that are living among us: how do we reach out to them and get them involved in our parish life? Surely this would boost our numbers and enrich our celebrations.
- The laity have probably gone as far as they can go ... but how much further can they go under present Church regulations?

- The point was made about the involvement of the Ukrainian people in this area of the diocese. Some are more integrated than others, even to the point of volunteering to clean the Church. Most mornings that are there praying in front of the icons.
- We need to reach out to families. We need to ask them what they need from us or expect of us!
- Priests who are out of ministry: how do we reintegrate them into the Church?
- It would be wonderful to see larger numbers at Mass. Maybe the solution is fewer Masses and more would then attend. Maybe we are also too focused on repairing buildings and not enough on faith formation.
- Sunday was always the day for going to Mass. But now there is so much going on for our youth during or at Mass times. How can we adapt to this new Sunday-morning society?
- We need to free up our priests from all the administration they are involved in. We need to get lay volunteers involved. Maybe one centralised office? Maybe one secretary for a number of parishes?
- Are we overly focused on Mass? Should we not also have other community/Christian events that can bring us together? Inter-parochial events?
- Life is overly busy now. Can we not promote Mass as a peaceful moment, a time for slowing down?
- In years to come we may not have any priests at all; but there will always be ministries. Maybe we need to focus on ministers and ministries in the future? The priest will serve but so will the 'ministers'.
- We have to focus on socialising together across our parishes. We also need to make better use of social media.

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.