



Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh & Kilfenora

FAITH COMMUNITY AREA DISCUSSIONS ON THE FUTURE

May – June 2023

**MOYCULLEN — OUGHTERARD — KILLANNIN
COLLINAMUCK — GLANN**

Thursday 1st June 2023 — The Forge, Moycullen

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.* ◀

- The importance of choirs for liturgy and for bringing people together, forming community. It can really attract others, especially young people. We could take our lead from the types of ‘societies’ formed at the beginning of college/university years.
- The importance of a ‘location’ or ‘training centre’ for the formation of lay people in our diocese.
- The issue of administration for our clergy. We need to apply a ‘business’ model to this issue: administration and operation. Regarding administration, a team could be set up in the various parish areas. The same would apply for the pastoral needs. Get all the different functions/areas to work together.
- The need to be careful about getting rid of or losing ‘traditions’. We seemed to have ditched a lot of what was important; the Muslims go from strength to strength by holding firm to their traditions. Maybe we can learn something from their way of doing things. Reducing the number of Masses per se is not necessarily a good thing. Maybe in our Church, in our communities, we have taken too much for granted for far too long.

We must keep encouraging our faithful make a real effort to go to Mass, to come to Church. We must be aware of the personal journey of each one.

- We must be aware of the 'competition' on Saturday evening or Sunday morning for our time. How do we change people's attitudes so as they can actually want to come to Church over and against the other options or choices that are there? Can we look at adjusting Mass times so as to facilitate families in this situation? Can we also look at other forms of 'gatherings' besides Mass that could happen outside of the regular Mass times?
- How can we give more support to our R.E. teachers so as they can actually enjoy teaching religion and passing on the faith? Could we bring them together maybe once a year as a way of offering them some support, some spiritual input?
- Traditions by their very nature have to change and we should not be afraid of this.
- We live in a world where depression is prevalent. Can the Church not focus a little more on 'ministering' to this? Can the Church not promote itself more a haven for peace? This could be a way of attracting people back, back to a loving caring God. We have a lot to offer as Church. We should be reaching out more to those who are suffering from depression, the negativity of social media or loneliness.
- We need to be conscious of the need for our Catholic images or symbols in our schools. Our children need to be taught about these.
- The importance of visual 'signs' of our Christian faith in our Churches, schools, and homes. We also need to be 'promoting' the person of Jesus.
- We have to be seeing more the connection between our Mass/Sunday liturgy and life. It has to be relevant and made relevant to our lives if we are to attract, especially the younger generation.
- Maybe we need to look at what we can do together after Mass, especially on a Sunday morning. How about gathering for a cup of coffee or tea? This is a great way of getting to know others and break down barriers. Could we do this even once a month?
- There is already great co-operation between our local national schools but maybe we need to look at developing this further. What can we do together?
- How can we give people a personal experience of the power of God? We have to stop hiding this power of God. As a Church we do not proclaim enough the power of Jesus to heal. This healing presence of Jesus needs to be promoted much more strongly in our Church. Jesus is alive, but do we show this? This is what touches people.
- We need to focus on the importance of Eucharistic adoration. More volunteers are needed in order to pray for those who are evangelising. The power of prayer.
- We are all gifted people and we need to recognise the talents that we have. Our gifts can and should be used in the handing on of our faith. But training and formation is necessary. We need to be singing from the same hymn sheets so we need direction and norms and guidance as we move forward together.
- The Church, like all organisations, is in the process of change. We need to be aware of what we need to let go of and what we need to hold on to and promote. Respect and relationships are going to be fundamental as we move forward. Covid reminded us that there is a different world out there. Maybe we need to slow down to see this, to see the beauty of the world that surrounds us. How can we as a Church energise this awareness?
- Evangelisation: as Catholics we need to get more excited about our faith. We also need to show this in our modern world (the example of shining shoes where we may not be able to wash feet). We have to be able to 'show' our faith to the modern world.
- Training of the laity is hugely important. The issue of the role of women and women priests needs to be looked at. At the same time it would be a big mistake to close our smaller churches.
- The ordination of women is not possible at the moment; but that doesn't mean we should stop looking at what is possible for us to do right now!

- The idea of summer camps/weekend camps for our children and youth? Maybe the three parishes could come together and do something? The areas surrounding our churches could be used as campsites.
- We do things so well — Communion, Confirmations, etc. Let's develop more along these lines. We are capable of so much more. Be aware of who we are and what we can do together.
- Healing services are something we need to look at and promote. This can draw a huge number of people.
- We need to develop a proper catechism through which we can learn about our faith and why it is we do what we do. This is essential for our ongoing formation.
- The priests need to be aware of the congregation that is in front of them at any given liturgy. Communication is vital. They have to be aware of who the message is being pitched at while realising the make-up of their congregations. The message needs to be communicated in a better fashion, otherwise the message is lost.
- How to promote, through modern technology, the good work that the Church has done and continues to do. While recognising the mistakes of the past, we have to be speaking about the good that is being done.
- The importance of our baptism and the use of our gifts in the Church.

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.