



Diocese of
Ardagh & Clonmacnois



Pastoral Letter July 2024

So then, now that we have been justified by faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is through him, by faith, that we have been admitted into God's favour in which we are living, and look forward exultantly to God's glory. (Romans 5: 1-2)

Since my appointment as your bishop last year I have been travelling around the diocese visiting parishes, churches and schools, and celebrating Confirmation and other ceremonies. I have been struck by the beauty of the countryside, towns and villages in our diocese and I am deeply grateful for the hospitality and welcome you have given me in every corner of the diocese. Thank you so much.

As I reflect over the last year, I am very conscious that we need to plan and prepare for the future of the church in our diocese. As I remarked during my Ordination ceremony, the model of church we have at present cannot continue. We simply do not have the numbers of priests and religious necessary to sustain it. There has been and will be a continual decline in the number of our full time priests and religious. In March 2017, Bishop Francis wrote a pastoral letter to you which outlined this reality. He pointed out that by 2030 there would be at best twenty five full time priests ministering in our forty one parishes. Everything that has happened since has re-enforced and confirmed that trend.

Much work has been done since then to prepare for the future. In particular, the Diocesan Assembly was a grace filled event which brought together representatives from all over the diocese. It identified three main priorities for the future – Family ministry, Formation of the laity and ministry to young people. And despite the interruption of the Covid pandemic, a start has been made in all these areas, particularly in the area of family ministry. Many parishes across the diocese now have a dedicated family Mass on Sundays. In addition, our parish councils have been involved in the synodal reflection begun by Pope Francis. One of its key themes is co-responsibility where by working together, everyone in the church has a role in its future.

In tandem with all these activities, Bishop Francis consulted widely regarding nine pastoral areas, essentially groups of parishes co-operating together regarding the formation, promotion and practice of the faith along with maintaining the physical structure in these parishes. The nine pastoral areas are clearly outlined on the map of the diocese on the back page of this pastoral letter. As Bishop Francis emphasised, this is not about closing churches or parishes but rather about reimagining how we worship and pass on our Christian faith to a new generation of believers. This process of grouping parishes has already begun. **Carrick-on-Shannon** has been grouped with **Annaduff** and **Kiltubrid**, and **Lanesborough** with **Killashee** and **Newtowncashel**. And the reality is that in the very near future your parish may not have a resident priest, or if you have, then your priest may be called upon to provide pastoral care in a neighbouring parish that does not have one.

Shortly after my arrival in the diocese a new Diocesan Pastoral Committee was established with the objective of mapping out our future with the theme of ‘Travelling Together’. Its work has been closely aligned with the Synodal process. In May of this year, it met with representatives from every parish in the diocese. From those meetings has emerged the need going forward to provide training and support for parish pastoral councils. And in the medium to long term, to establish a network of parish secretaries, catechists and pastoral workers who will work with our clergy to ensure the future of worship and faith formation.

As a result of these meetings the Diocesan Pastoral Committee has established, as a first priority, that there will be a restructured pastoral council in every parish in the diocese by the middle of 2025. A new template for parish pastoral councils is being prepared and will be ready by the autumn of this year. A network of trainers and a programme of training will also be made available to assist parishes to roll out the new model from the end of this year into 2025. We will also have a commissioning ceremony for all our new parish pastoral councils in the Cathedral.

It is very important that everyone in our diocese knows and understands what is happening, as inevitable changes occur. That is why I writing this pastoral letter to you now. As we travel this journey together, please pray for the continuing help and guidance of the Lord as we strive to do His will. It is of course vital that we also continue to pray for and promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life. That men and women, young and older will answer the call to serve the people of God. This year for the first time in a number of years we hope to have two seminarians beginning the journey to priesthood. Please pray for them in particular.

For many centuries now, the Church has celebrated a special Jubilee Year every twenty five years. Next year we will be celebrating a Jubilee year to which Pope Francis has given the motto – ***Pilgrims of Hope***. In the heart of each one of us is a desire and expectation that good things will come our way, despite our not knowing what the future may bring. For all of us in our diocese, may the Jubilee be an opportunity to be renewed in hope. That hope which as Christians encourages and sustains us as we journey through life towards the goal of unity with the Lord Jesus. St. Mel and St. Ciaran pray for us.

Not only that; let us exult, too, in our hardships, understanding that hardship develops perseverance, and perseverance develops a tested character, something that gives us hope,

And a hope which will not let us down, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. (Romans 5: 3-5).

+ Paul Connell,
Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnois