

Fr. Eamonn Fitzgibbon- Newtownards



Eamonn introduced himself as a priest from Limerick Diocese and began by letting us know that there were similarities between what we had done in our Listening Days in Down and Connor Diocese and events they had held in Limerick a few years ago. Both had listened to the views of the people. In Limerick, their process has led to a lot of action, particularly in terms of Lay Participation. Eamonn told us there had been a particular focus on the forming of Parish Pastoral Councils, the clustering of Parishes to work closely

together and the development of Church Leadership skills. He told us that in the Pastoral Centre where he works they had learned a lot from Youth Ministry. Youth Ministry tends to have a dynamic approach and their learning was that the approaches taken by Youth Ministry teams also worked for adults. He challenged us all from the outset to think about the development of our theological knowledge and experience. Reminding us that for many their theological growth stops after Confirmation, he quoted Dermot Lane, *Vatican II: The Irish Experience*, Pg. 76 saying that the Church of the future would need **“mature, critically informed faith among the people of God”**. In the absence of this mature faith he told us that the Church runs the risk of being surrounded by ‘relativism or fundamentalism’. He offered that both of these can be seen in the Irish Church today. Instead, he told us, we should adopt a spirituality of communion. This, he said, would be central to working towards the future and is at the heart of all ministry. He told us that the Church needed to meet people where they were at in their lives and take account of the changing nature of the lives we live. In this way Eamonn was heartened that we had identified an Open Welcoming Community

as one of our core themes for Living Church. He told us that we had, in our Trinitarian vision of God a perfect example of communion. He quoted from Leonardo Boff who said,



“The trinitarian vision produces a vision of the Church that is more communion than hierarchy, more service than power, more circular than pyramidal, more loving embrace than bending the knee before authority.”

He challenged us to think that if we believe in the Trinity, then this we need to develop the type of Church Boff speaks of. He told us that one way to do this was to revisit the teaching of Vatican II. The failure to implement the Priesthood of the laity as envisaged by Vatican II was a serious neglect by the Irish Catholic Church he felt. He said that during and since the Reformation the Ordained Priesthood was elevated in importance while the Lay Priesthood was seen as being a thing for the ‘reformed’ and not privileged in our Church. However, we are all baptised to be Priest, Prophet and King and we are all equal members of the Church. He said that lay people had been kept passive but that the vocation and skills of all (religious, lay and clergy) needs to be recognised and given an opportunity to be fulfilled- we all share in the ministry of Christ. He quoted Pope Benedict when he said of lay people,

“They must no longer be viewed as “collaborators” of the clergy but truly recognized as “co-responsible”, for the Church's being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity.”

Eamonn recognised that there was a crisis in ministry for clergy in Ireland. He spoke of vocations to the Priesthood and Religious life ‘drying up’. However, he did not accept that there was a shortage of priests in Ireland. Rather, he said, we have a structure that does not work for the amount of priests we have. He argued that there needs to be structural change. One strand of this will be to recognise the vocation of all and to embrace co-responsibility. This will require a change of mindset from both priests and lay people. He reminded us that the majority of priests in ministry have been trained for a different context than that in which they now work. Priests need to ‘let go’ of some of their tasks and facilitate lay people to step up to those tasks. Lay people need to understand that they are not just ‘helping Father’, but are doing the jobs for which they have been baptised.

Eamonn finished by telling us of some of the developments he feels need to happen in the future in our Diocese:

- Clustering of Parishes- to facilitate sharing of talents, skills and resources
- Formation of Pastoral Councils
- Formation of Liturgy Groups
- Visitation Teams
- Youth Ministry
- Rationalisation of Masses

Bro. Pat Mullins(1)- Castlewellan

Pat spoke of what a Living Church would be like. He skilfully used the Gospel readings for this week (13th-20th May) to illuminate what he felt God was trying to say to us about the Living Church.



Quoting from the Gospel of John, he told us that there will be no Living Church without birth, baptism and rebirth into the Way of Jesus. He told us that just as Jesus tells us He is the bread of Life, so it is through Him that the Living Church will be nourished. Just as Jesus is the Good Shepherd, so we are all being called to be good shepherds to each other in the Church and to those who are outside the Church.

Pat spoke of his time working in a vineyard where he first truly understood what Jesus was saying to us about seeing Him as the vine. Pat told us that he was struck by the fact that at the start of the season the vine is stripped back to one old piece of wood, firmly rooted in the ground and from which each year grows the new branches on which the fruit will grow. Without the constant of the old vine and its access to the nutrients of the soil, the new branches will not grow and there will be no fruit. Equally, without the branches there will be no fruit. Pat felt that we are called to be the new branches in our time and that we can only produce fruit that lasts by connecting to and growing from Jesus, the old vine. What a beautiful image. Further, he told us that living a sacramental life will make us living branches.

Pat went on to speak of the Doctrine of the indwelling of the holy spirit, so fundamental in the conversion of Blessed Cardinal Newman. He spoke of the sanctifying spirit of God being at work in all the people, but of that special Spirit of Regeneration (the indwelling Holy Spirit) that dwells in a special way only in baptised Christian people. He described this Spirit as the 'sap' which flows through us as living branches.

The way to stay living branches of the true vine is to keep God's commandments and not to get into seeing spirituality and the sacraments as two separate things- as so many have done before but especially after the child abuse scandals of the 1990's onwards. It is when we are keeping God's commands, living the sacramental life that we can experience the true joy of being in communion with a God who loves us. Pat went further saying that to keep God's commandments means living a life of services- 'washing the feet'- and that this is a key part of a Living Church: everyone will have a role to play in providing Pastoral Charity.

Pat concluded saying that a Living Church is a loving Church, which works in the communities, with all of us as good shepherds willing to 'wash the feet' of our neighbours (especially those who have left or never knew the Church).

Bro. Pat Mullins (2) - Ballymena

Pat spoke of 'Living in Communion with God'. He skilfully used the Gospel readings for this week (20th-27th May) to illuminate what he felt God was trying to say to us about the Living Church.

The Gospel reading of the day was from John Chapter 17 and it spoke of the relationships of love between us as Christians- this could apply to Parish and to Diocese. Pat highlighted the need for unity, but that Disciples of Christ cannot achieve unity by themselves- we need Christ. Our Catechism tells us that while the perfect Christ (our Head) has ascended to heaven, those of us who remain on earth (the Body) are imperfect. Pat highlighted this by saying that while in *Lumen Gentium* from the Second Vatican Council, we hear that we all have gifts given to us as baptised Christians (the hierarchical gifts given to the ordained and the charismatic gifts of the lay), in our imperfection, tensions arise between the two sets of people and these two sets of gifts. This tension can lead to break down in Parish and indeed, in Church. So even though we pray in the creed, 'I believe in one Church' tensions and divisions do arise. The unity we have, however, is set out in Catechism (n866) where we read about 'one Lord...one faith...one body...one Spirit...one hope'. Pat told us that the Living Church process in our Diocese has a job to be a witness to this unity, recognising the gifts of all, lay, religious and clergy.

Pat quoted from John 17: 20-24 to illuminate the words of Jesus in relation to the issue of unity. He argued that Jesus is telling us clearly that he wants us all to be one in Him (as He is one in His Father), recognising our imperfections and that we will only attain glory at the end of time when we ascend to heaven to be with Him. Pat reminded us that we are in this world but not of this world and that we need to seek the glory of Christ, not the glory of this world. While the worldly cannot know and accept Jesus, those who do so will have this glory in the next life. The witness of this is the immeasurable love the Lord showed in allowing His Son to die for our sins and the power of His resurrection.



Pat went on to speak about St. Jeanne D'Arc whose feast day is on 30th May. He spoke of her as a young woman who had a God given commission to challenge the gender stereotypes of her day and who lived and died bravely in the name of her faith. He spoke of the fact that she was put to death by the Church despite being a woman of great faith herself. And like many, after her death her faith was recognised and she was canonised. Pat told us that this was an example of where the Church on earth is not in unity with the Church in heaven- sometimes the Church on earth gets is very wrong. Pat summed up by saying that we should not take the unity between the Church on earth and in Heaven for granted. In the same way we must realise that at times it is through the charisms of the lay (as in Jeanne D'Arc's case) and not the sacramental gifts of the clergy that we become a Living Church in communion with the Church in heaven.

Martin Kennedy- Drumalis, St. Bernard's, St. Anne's

A this point, we introduced the guest speaker for the evening, Mr. Martin Kennedy, asking the people to allow the words from Martin to sink in and in particular to see how his words resonated with them when they thought of the themes of Living Church.



Martin spoke with great energy and humour. He began by offering us a model for understanding the levels of involvement different people of faith had in the Church. He told us that one group could be called the C's. C's are people who get involved in meetings, in organising and in courses. He suggested that we who had gathered that evening were mainly C's. He then went on to say there was a second group, he called the B's. These people went to Mass regularly, prayed regularly but would not in general come to meetings or get

involved in C type of groups. He completed his model by saying that there was a group called the A's. These people are disconnected from the Parish. They rarely go to Mass, except for Christmas and Easter or weddings and funerals. He reminded us that these were also good people and commented that God hadn't deserted these people nor vice-versa and indeed he felt that God's spirit was working across the A's, B's and C's. His challenge for us gathered was that we needed to think 'out of the box', as C's, if we are to get those A's and B's involved in the Church or just to reach them about the Good News. He reflected his experience of organising alternative ways to engage people rather than inviting them to a meeting. He spoke about making a DVD and holding information mornings in schools for families for example.

His second theme was that of Co-responsibility. He began by saying that the Priest in a Parish could not be expected to run a Parish on his own- it was unfair. He went on to say that the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) was the structure whereby a Priest could be supported and lay people could claim their right to co-responsibility. He described his experiences of being on a PPC and offered a six step method for working in a PPC:

- Gather information about an issue
- Share the information at the PPC
- Clarify the information
- Pray about the issue at hand
- Hear all voices in the PPC- this needs good leadership to ensure all are heard
- Make a decision- is there a pattern or consensus?

He concluded by saying that Parishes needed people of great passion and resource.

Tony Hanna- North Belfast, Coleraine

A this point, we introduced the guest speaker for the evening, Mr. Tony Hanna, asking the people to allow the words from Tony to sink in and in particular to see how his words resonated with them when they thought of the themes of Living Church.

Tony proceeded to give us a very interesting talk that began by asking us to consider what co-responsibility meant. Tony informed us that Pope Benedict had used this word to describe to priests how they should consider lay people- not as collaborators, but as people who are co-responsible for the church. Tony used the analogy of parenthood to describe what co-responsibility was. One parent may deal with one particular area of parenting or another. Yet both parents use their skills in their own way in a partnership of co-responsibility for their family. He acknowledged that this is a new dispensation for the Church and for some priests in particular and that they may need to 'relearn' to be priests in this new dispensation. He challenged lay people as well: lay people need to be equipped for this new dispensation. He reflected that people in Ireland have low 'theological literacy' with their understanding of God and education in theology stopping for the most part after primary school. He told us of an initiative in Armagh where they have run firstly informal and then formal theology courses as a way of preparing the lay people for their role in a co-responsible Church. He affirmed that, through baptism, we are all called to ministry in the Church and that we cannot be Church on our own- we need to work together. He challenged us to think about what being Catholic really means in a world where some surveys show that while 85% of people call themselves Catholic, perhaps only 35% attend Mass. A Living Church, he told us, will have to go to the people as opposed to wait for the people to come to the Living Church. Tony finished by saying that this makes the call we all have at baptism even more important. In hearing some questions from the floor it is clear that the people there were keen to see some actions in the Living Church which would bring the spirit of Vatican II alive. There was also a note of caution from some who felt that there was a schism in the Church at present. Tony held us in this by saying that the Spirit of God was at work in all of this, even the conflict and problems. Tony's talk was well received and certainly got the group thinking.



Sean Goan- Downpatrick, St. Paul's

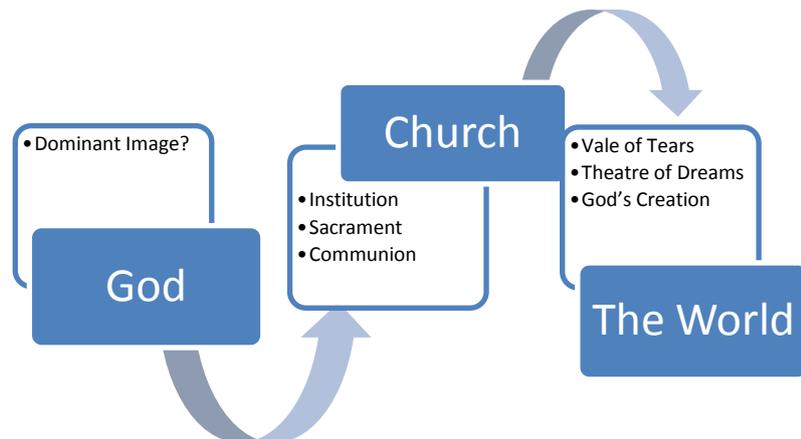
At this point, we introduced the guest speaker for the evening, Mr. Sean Goan. The title for Sean's



talk came from 1Peter and was, 'The reason for the hope that is in you'. He told us that the letter was written to a group of people a generation after Christ's death and resurrection when he told them that they needed to be ready with an answer to the questions others would pose to them about why they believed in a God revealed through a crucified man (this was radically counter-

cultural to the people of the time- and perhaps still is). Sean then challenged us to think about how we saw God and where we found reasons for the hope that was in us. One way for us to do this, he told us, was to think in terms of 'mental models', those ways we describe and understand concepts. He presented us with this diagram and explained that how we understood God will impact on how we see the Church and in turn both of these will impact on how we see the world and our lives in the world.

He explained that this was a very challenging task to undertake and may involve us re-evaluating how we see God. He offered us a mental model of a God who loves all of the world- everyone; a Church which is needs to be built on community, love, prayer spirituality, outreach to others and faith formation and; a world where every small action we can perform for God and His Church counts- even if we think we are insignificant.



Sean went on to quote from Teilhard de Chardin who tells us that we are Spiritual beings on a human journey, and not the reverse. Sean affirmed for us that we are in essence spiritual and our sense of this comes from our Post Vatican II rediscovery of the scriptures- not as a history book but as a theology book.

He finished by encouraging us to look to the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:42-45) for a description for what a Living Church is like. He told us that a Living Church would be like a table with four legs- Community, Prayer Spirituality, Social Outreach and Faith Formation- and if any one of these legs were missing the table would fall. In this way he challenged us to look at how we could reveal a Church built on these principles.

Fr. Jim Corkery, SJ- St. Michael's, St. Colmcille's

In a wide ranging talk Jim began by reflecting that in the media and indeed in how we often talk about the Church we do so by objectifying the Church. We speak of it as an institution- a thing. The

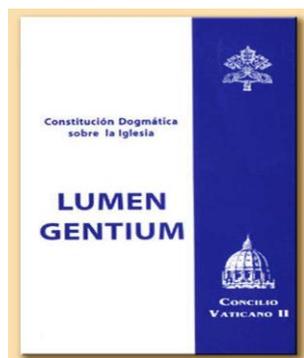


Church 'condemns', the Church 'slams' were two examples he gave us of this kind of reference. However, Jim reminded us from the start that the Church should be spoken not in terms of 'it' but in terms of 'we'. The Church is a living thing. It is us, the People of God, gathered around someone who is alive- Jesus Christ. The Church can only be alive because He is alive and when we are gathered in relationship with Him.

Jim told us that, having read the Living Church Report he sees that we conceive of our Living Church not as an object, but as 'we' or 'us'. He proceeded to tie up our 5 themes of Living Church into one well crafted sentence. He said a Living Church would be:

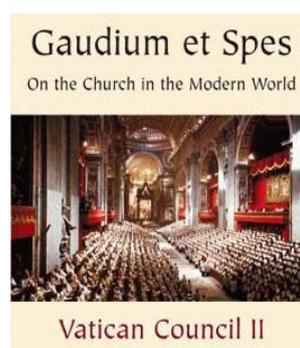
"An open, welcoming community of active participating laity and renewed, supported clergy engaged together in common worship and understanding in which all can grow and which they will share with future generations."

He went on to say that much of what we have set out in the report has already been said in the reports of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) 50 years ago. Jim reflected on two documents of the Council: Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et spes. The first he would tell us is about the relationship of the Church with itself; the second the relationship the Church has with the world.



Jim told us that Lumen Gentium set forward an ecclesiology of Communion (communion). It envisaged us as a 'Pilgrim People' moving together in relationship with God. Indeed, Jim told us that the Trinity models this communion, with each in a 'loving dance' with the other. In this way, Jim was glad to see that between Lay Participation and Clergy sections of our report we have put the need for an Open Welcoming Community. He told us that it is only by developing this community (in communion) that we will develop as the People of God- lay, clergy and religious alike.

Gaudium et spes dealt, not with internal relationship, but with external relationships. That is, how the Church interacts with the world. Before Vatican II there had been a vision of a perfect Church whose job was simply to correct and inherently evil world. Gaudium et spes sets out a different vision. Yes, the Church still has a role in educating and challenging the world and in particular in righting wrongs. However, Gaudium et spes spoke of a 'mutual' relationship with the world. This mutual relationship meant that the Church could learn form the world, the signs of the times, the 'other'. He told us



that this would mean that, even within our own Church, there should be dialogue between those of differing opinions. He spoke of a learning Church as well as a teaching Church. In a challenging statement he told us that, while central tenets of the faith are unchangeable much of what is accepted as Church teaching now was shaped by the lived experience of Christian people. He wondered if there were enough people who wanted dialogue on Church teaching, why this would not happen. Acknowledging the Church as not a democracy, explained that mutuality allows for real and open dialogue. A culture of synodality is being called for right across the traditions within the Church and he felt that the Church would be enriched on its journey by this culture.

Jim went on to 'hold a mirror' up to some of the problems within the Church which he felt could be addressed by creating an Open Welcoming Community in communion with itself and in mutual relationship with those who differ from us. Two of these were; the overly male nature of the institutions of the Church (and the failure to appreciate the talents of women) and; the central nature of the Church (in this case those on the periphery suffer). He concluded by encouraging the Church to be a place where we can speak freely and hear openly.