

## Listening Days, Spring 2010

### Preface:

*Arising out of a Council of Priests' brain-storming exercise on Pastoral Priorities in the Diocese, Bishop Treanor asked John Forsythe to establish a working party to work on a Pastoral Plan. The working party includes John Forsythe, Sean Emerson, Martin Magill, Declan Mulligan, Raymond McCullagh and Joseph Rooney, with Alan McGuckian as facilitator. They were asked to work on three areas: The Life of Priests; The Laity; The structures of the Diocese. The Working Party convened 3 Listening Days, attended by 91 priests. The Religious of the Diocese have been invited to a Listening Day on June 12<sup>th</sup> and the Clerical Students were consulted at Christmas. It is proposed that the process be extended to the Lay Faithful during the coming year. What follows is the working party's summary of what they have already heard at the Listening Days for Priests and proposals for a way to proceed.*

### Report:

On our three Listening Days<sup>1</sup>, held during Lent 2010 and well attended by priests of the diocese and some Religious priests (see Appendices 1,2,3), we put three questions to the priests:

- What kind of priest do I want to be - and do I need to be?
- What kind of parishes/ministry do we want to have in the future?
- List the three principal points I would like to make for inclusion in a Diocesan Plan.

After praying and sharing among themselves the priests spoke in open forum and we made a careful note of what they said. What follows is our group's distillation of what we heard them say. However, we attach in the form of appendices our minutes of what everyone said. The shape of this report is somewhat guided by the order in which we put the questions: life of priests, kind of parish/ministry, proposals for the future. However, the headings have been changed a little bit in response to what we heard: Reality of priests' lives today, Partnership with the Laity, Restructuring, Process and Diocesan Synod.

### Reality of Priests' lives Today

The overall message from the priests was one of deep commitment to their priesthood and to the mission of the Diocese. They want to be men of prayer, living authentic human lives, more focussed on 'Being' than on 'Doing', a source of joy and hope to themselves and to the people. However, they spoke honestly and frankly about the very serious challenges they face.

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<sup>1</sup> Drumalis, Larne, 23<sup>rd</sup> February: Ballymena, 10<sup>th</sup> March: Dromantine, Newry, 24<sup>th</sup> March.

### **Overburdened with administration**

One priest spoke for many when he said 'I feel I am a Manager rather than a Pastor'. The burdens of administration seem to be increasing, leaving the priest less time and energy for his own spiritual life or for the work of visiting his people and playing the kind of role for which he was ordained.

### **In need of Refreshment**

Priests spoke of a sense of weariness, of not being adequately nourished in their personal and spiritual lives: 'I am a person before I am a priest; I'm human, not superhuman.' One spoke of the need for priests to be supported in 'facing their own brokenness', acknowledging that neither the training nor the culture of the priesthood makes allowance for such a thing. Some priests spoke of a serious crisis of morale that requires urgent attention.

### **Adult Relationships**

Priests spoke of a strong desire for a sense of belonging to the community of the Diocese. They articulated a need to feel valued and respected. Central to this was a desire for an 'Adult' – and ongoing – relationship with the Bishop. Quite a few priests expressed a desire for a one-to-one meeting with the Bishop. The theme of adult relationships was emphasized in all directions: Priest to Bishop and Priest to People and Priest to Priest.

### **Diocesan Appointments**

One specific area where people felt a need for renewal is the way that Diocesan Appointments are managed. There was a call for more structured Consultation with each priest in order to balance their needs and the needs of the parishes and the ministry. There was talk of a system like a Personnel Board that would help discern changes and review them.

### **Ongoing Formation**

Priests feel that change is needed in both expectations and in structures to facilitate a Balanced Life. The option of Renewal Courses, Sabbaticals, in-service training and retreats should be a part of the system.

## **Partnership with the Laity**

### **Shared Responsibility**

"All the People of God are responsible for handing on the faith. People must take responsibility for their baptismal commitment and see their role as not simply 'helping the priest'." There was a widespread desire to develop the Church in such a way that there is a Shared Responsibility in mission. People said that 'Lay people, and especially women, must be involved in real decision-making with real power.' 'We need Pastoral Councils with teeth'. It was pointed out that many of our committed lay people are professionals of great expertise, with skills in organisational planning and strategy. The Church should be making far more use of them than it now is. Related to this 'Shared Responsibility' is the conviction that we must become much more 'Open and Transparent in our ways of working'.

## **What is a parish?**

In the future, indeed already, we have to face that a parish is no longer strictly a geographical entity and may require a new definition like: 'A parish is place/entity that helps people identify their gifts and places them at the service of community.' One man spoke strongly and said; 'It is Their parish, not My parish.' Another said there is often a spirit of passivity in parishes which runs along these lines: 'Why bother if a new priest can come in and change everything?' We need a 'template' to guide our understanding of parish life. The man who spoke of a 'template' referred to the clear guidelines as regards financial stewardship in parishes and suggested that there should be a similar 'template' to help guard against the imposition of changes in the pastoral area on the whim of a new pastor.

'We want to create a vibrant church for people. What we now have is neither vibrant nor viable. Now we are tied to geography, with the goal of keeping the maximum number of masses supplied.'

## **Restructuring**

### **Administration**

A basic insight must be that the burden of Administration is an impediment to Pastoral effectiveness. Therefore, we must look for new ways of organising ourselves in order to allow pastors to be pastors. Plant and fabric take up huge time. Is it possible to investigate ways of centralising that work in professional hands? As it is we have too many churches and buildings for our needs.

### **Other Workers**

It was noted that the discussion should begin about the Permanent Diaconate and/or the inclusion of trained Lay Pastoral Workers. 'We must Invest time and money in enabling lay people to play their proper role in the church.' A related proposal was that Confirmations could be done by Parish Priests.

### **Vicariates**

The Vicariates as they now stand are not 'fit for purpose' and they need to be re-evaluated in order to serve the needs of today. It is no longer clear what purpose they serve or are meant to serve. If their goal is, as it should be, to foster collaborative Team Ministry, then this needs to be made clear. With a clear mandate, Vicariates (perhaps better thought of as Pastoral Areas) would be revamped and given a shape and size best suited to their purpose.

### **Training**

There is a great need for ongoing training and formation, in catechesis and other disciplines, for both Lay people and priests.

## **The Immediate Future**

It must be said that on each Listening Day we heard priests issue a note of warning along the following lines: 'We have been consulted and canvassed for our opinions in ways like this before and nothing came out of it!' It is imperative if the process is to go further that it begin to bear fruits as soon as possible.

Our group believes that there are certain matters that could be addressed almost immediately. The Bishop could announce the setting up of two groups, comprising priests, Religious and Lay people to make concrete proposals regarding:

- The Life and Ministry of the Priests: This group would look at the Spirituality and Personal Development of Priests, Sabbaticals and how Diocesan appointments are organised.
- Review of the purpose, size and shape of Vicariates/Pastoral Areas with a view to supporting Team Ministry which is essential for the future.

## **A Diocesan Synod**

### **Ongoing Planning**

At each Listening day support was voiced for the calling of a Diocesan Synod. The working party would recommend that such a Synod should be convened as it would be an opportunity for Bishop, laity, religious and priests to work together and develop a pastoral plan. The process - before, during and after the Synod - is vital and the Synod should not be seen as a final goal but a means to encourage the Church in our Diocese to grow and meet the very real challenges of the present time.

Such a Synod would need careful preparation and Lay people, with their unique skills, should be involved from the very beginning. We propose that the process of listening begun with the priests should be widened out, first to the Religious who play such a key role already, and then to the Laity. After the listening it would be necessary to identify the key issues facing the Diocese. This would be followed by a programme of catechesis [making use of *Novo Millennio Ineunte*] and discussion from which would emerge the agenda for the Synod. After the Synod there would need to be a clear commitment to the implementation of the pastoral plan agreed.

## **Conclusion**

We have presented our review of the process so far in the above fashion as it seems to embody a sense of movement. There were a few other headings which would be addressed in time as a result of the movement pointed at above. Many priests spoke passionately about a great need for Adult formation for the people to help them own their baptismal inheritance. There was a consistent reference to the challenge of reaching out and trying to include people who feel themselves on the margins of the Church. Additionally people saw that the Church must work hard on its ability to communicate effectively in the modern world, using the modern means.

Finally, there is a spirit of openness among the priests and a stated readiness on the part of many to embrace change and a more collaborative future. They are somewhat weary, needless to say, but express a quiet sense of hope in better days to come.