



# Be part of God's amazing dream!

Pastoral Letter from  
Most Rev. Donal McKeown D.D.,  
Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Down & Connor.  
Pentecost Sunday, 28th May 2023

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the frightened, confused and disheartened followers of Jesus. This powerful jolt, this dramatic moment of grace, transformed their entire way of seeing. Once fearful disciples, huddled behind closed doors, suddenly became bold proclaimers of a new dream, an amazing dream, the dream of new possibilities, not just for themselves and their own, but for every language, tongue and nation!

As the followers of Jesus here in Down and Connor, united by the common bond of the Holy Spirit, I wanted to take this opportunity of Pentecost to reflect on the new possibilities the Spirit is calling us to in the Church today. In particular, I wanted to encourage each of us to participate in the ongoing Pathways to the Future initiative established by Archbishop Treanor before his new appointment. This initiative, led by lay women, men and clergy from across the Diocese explores, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, how we can best respond to some of the very practical challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in this time of transformation and change. Part of the context of this call to prayerful discernment and change is the Synodal journey of the Church at a local and universal level.

## Moving forward with Easter joy!

In the weeks after Easter, leading up to Pentecost, the Church's Eucharistic liturgy has put before us readings from the Acts of the Apostles. That book, attributed to St Luke, tells how the early disciples were amazed by their growth from a small frightened group in Jerusalem to an established presence in the heart of the Roman Empire. Incredibly, this development happened in merely 30 years - without any modern means of communication.

No wonder the early believers in Jesus were astounded at what was happening through them and in spite of their fears and failings.

Two themes in the Acts of the Apostles strike me very strongly.



## Dying to be reborn!

Firstly, the story is told as a repeated process of growth through dying! Jesus had died on Calvary. Some of his followers saw him being buried. And some of those who loved him most - and some of those who doubted him most - encountered him after the Resurrection.

The early church kept dying to its own predictions in order to be reborn - again and again. On Pentecost, the Apostles and others were pushed out of the locked upper room, where they were prisoners of their own limited imagination. The Holy Spirit destroyed their protective illusion that they had to be in charge. (cf. Acts 2-5)

Some time later, the Deacon Stephen spoke out strongly against opposition from the elders and the High Priest in Jerusalem. For this he was stoned to death. Many in the early church must have seen Stephen's actions as rash and damaging. But the death of Stephen and the subsequent persecution of the Jerusalem church were key to the development of a mission outside the city. (cf. Acts 6-8)

Similarly, Peter's baptism of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, was heavily criticised as Cornelius had not first become a Jew. The early church had to die to that limited idea of who could be a follower of the Risen Christ. Dying to old certainties was central to the new life of the early believers. (cf. Acts 10)

## God calls us as we are!

The second theme that strikes me is how the divine call comes to the most unlikely people. On Pentecost day, the apostles are mocked by some as mere Galileans and drunk with new wine!

The conversion of St Paul was also difficult for many around him to take in. After all, he was one of those who had helped at Stephen's death and who was set on rooting out anyone who dared to follow Christ. The early church had to die to its fears of God's work in Paul. And Paul had to die to those things in which he had been so secure, the key elements of his identity.

As the Church is born at Pentecost, Christian tradition places Mary at the birth. This is the same Mary who, as a young woman, said "Yes!", in perfect faith, to God's amazing and saving dream for the world! For her, in spite of her fears and confusion, she trusted that nothing was impossible to God!



So, the scriptures remind us that, in the face of a frightening Divine, the human question is not only 'Am I strong enough to do this?' Those chosen by God to do incredible things were always conscious of their weakness and fears. At the heart of saying yes to a mysterious calling is the conviction that my weakness makes me more use to God. Reflecting on the Cross, Paul would later write to the proud, argumentative Church in Corinth that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness stronger than human strength. (cf. 1 Cor 1:25)

### **The Irish Church in the 21st Century.**



In many parts of the world, Christianity is young and thriving. Here in Ireland, as well as some encouraging signs of new life, the church is going through a period of great challenge and change. Some feel disillusioned and angry. But the scriptures tell us that dying and being brought back to new life are partners, a constant cycle of renewal and rebirth, not a one-way street to the dustbin of history.

Good Friday and Easter Sunday are two inseparable sides of the one coin.

Church history in this country shows that challenging times are often the very times that give birth to great renewal and reform. As the once unbeatable Roman Empire collapsed in Europe, the Irish sent waves of missionary monks from its monasteries to re-evangelise those places where Christian communities had floundered.

With the demise of the Celtic monasteries, people like St Malachy set up the Irish diocesan structures that have supported the mission of the Church to this day.

Similarly, despite the effects of the Penal Laws and the Famine, the 19th century church developed an enormous wave of outreach in Jesus' name to those who had no access to education or healthcare. And our predecessors looked beyond our shores and developed an immense missionary outreach. It has been estimated that, at the First Vatican Council (1869-70), over a quarter of the world's Catholic bishops present were Irish or of Irish descent!

20th century Ireland gave birth to such groups as the Maynooth Mission to China (the Columbans), St Patrick's Missionary Society (the Kiltegan Fathers), the Medical Missionaries of Mary and the Holy Rosary Sisters, as well as the Legion of Mary. People in this diocese set up the Apostolic Workers, ACCORD Catholic Marriage Care Service and the Knights of St Columbanus.

It is clear that today we face another historic moment of change and opportunity in the Church in Ireland, involving the move from one particular model to another. We have much to let go of. Harshness and arrogance were often to be found in the midst of great generosity and heroism in the Church in Ireland. As acknowledged in the Irish Synodal reflection, the legacy of abuse is and will remain an open wound. To quote Jesus, we have to take the plank out of our own eye before we demand that others take the speck out of their eye. (cf. Mt 7:3-5)

## **The Pathways to the Future Initiative.**

But there is little value in naming the problem without offering a way forward. God can bring a new spring from the apparent frozen grave of winter. Renewal means not merely changing structures and doing the same old thing but expecting different results. A Holy Spirit-driven renewal means finding ways to proclaim Good News and healing to our society.



Over coming weeks and months, responding to the call of the Spirit, the Pathways to the Future initiative will support our entire diocesan family in a process of prayerful discernment and reflection on the mission, structures and priorities of the Diocese for the years ahead. This process will seek to discern together how, from our common baptism, all the people of God can play a greater and more active role in the life and leadership of our Diocese and parish communities. It will be a prayerful process of synodality, or journeying together, and of regular, open, and meaningful communication and engagement.

Living in a time of major change, and guided by the Holy Spirit who continues to rebuild and renew the Church, the Pathways initiative encourages all of us to play our part in building a more loving, welcoming, and inclusive community of faith.

In undertaking this journey, it is clear that we urgently need to move from a Church where ministry and leadership was exercised primarily by priests and religious to one where all the baptised take up the call to minister and to lead. The history of our island also reminds us that it is precisely when we have vibrant communities of lay leadership in faith, missionary and evangelising, that vocations to the priesthood and religious life are nourished and sustained.

### **Some of the challenges ahead.**

In this time of transition, leading to rebirth and renewal, there are certainly challenges to be faced. It will be necessary to adapt how our priests are supported, how parishes are structured, how liturgical services are celebrated, and how all the lay faithful can work together in the service of God and each other. Change will be inevitable in order to meet the ever changing sacramental and pastoral needs of parishioners.

The statistical realities convey the urgency of this challenge, but also the many opportunities for new approaches to leadership and ministry.

- The diocese of Down and Connor currently has 86 parishes and 146 churches ministered to by around 84 priests in active ministry.
- Only seven priests in the Diocese are aged under 40 years of age. In just over 10 years the number of priests in active ministry will be almost half what it is today.
- Within 15 years, and for the first time in the history of the Diocese, we will have more retired priests than priests in active ministry.
- Twenty years from now, we forecast there will only be approximately 24 priests available for our current 86 parishes.

It is clear, therefore, that we must urgently become that vibrant, missionary and evangelising Church in which all the gifts of all the baptised are engaged. The alternative is to ask our priests to continue to manage workloads and demands that are unreasonable and not sustainable, with the consequent impact on their welfare and well-being. The approach to ministry and leadership we have been used to for many years, simply has to change.

As a local Church, we have become accustomed to daily Mass being available in all parishes, a range of Sunday Masses being celebrated in each of the parishes and churches across the Diocese, and the 3,000 funerals and the 800 marriages celebrated in the Diocese each year being priest-led and celebrated in the context of the Mass.

As early as this summer, some parishes will be engaged in a pilot project of lay women and men helping families prepare for funerals and leading the prayers at gravesides or the crematorium. Very soon, it is also likely that in some parishes, the celebration of a Requiem Mass for every individual as part of the funeral rites may no longer be the norm.

### **Baptised and called, we all have a role to play!**

Across the Diocese, it will be necessary to reflect seriously upon these customary practices and unsustainable expectations, considering new ways of being parish and celebrating faith. This is a time to critically consider the role that each one of us can play in the life of the Church in order to meet the ongoing pastoral and sacramental needs of all. Greater collaboration between parishes will also be necessary, in a future where one priest will be responsible for a group or 'family' of parishes.

Exercising the spiritual gifts received at baptism in the service of God and each other, each lay person is called by God; called to share in the life of the Church, called to collaborate alongside priests and deacons to build and renew the Church, called to exercise an increasing range of lay ministries such as funeral ministry and catechesis that can be undertaken by commissioned parishioners after appropriate training and formation.

Being called by name lies at the heart of our identity as baptised people. Baptism is not merely an entry point to other sacraments. It is making ourselves available to be used for God's greater glory and for the salvation of the world. The acceptance of Baptism says that our first vocation is to become saints, dying to ourselves so that Christ's new life can be born in us. Ministry is a calling for all of us.



### **Let us move forward with joy and hope!**



This is an exciting time to be church in Down and Connor. We can choose to stay locked in the upper room of our fears, nourishing one another with sad tales of past glories. Or we can pray together that we can discern where God is calling us to walk, despite our limited courage. My simple invitation in this letter, is to dare to be part of God's amazing dream for God's people in this Diocese, and for the Church throughout the world. The Spirit which acted with such unexpected force and fulness in Pentecost is the same Spirit we can call upon and put our entire trust in today.

Together, we are called by God to respond to the challenges which confront us at this time. Together we can renew and rebuild the Church. Together, we can become part of God's amazing dream for ourselves and for the whole of creation. Like the disciples at Pentecost, let us embrace God's amazing dream for the future with confidence and hope.

*Donal McKeown*

Most Rev. Donal McKeown D.D.,  
Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Down & Connor