

‘GOD HAS PLANS FOR HIS PEOPLE’  
JOIN IN THE MISSION OF PRAYER, EXPLORATION AND  
RENEWAL

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Donal McKeown  
Diocese of Derry  
January 2023



‘I know well the plans I have made for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for disaster! Plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says the Lord.’

Jeremiah 29:11-13

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH lived some centuries before Christ. In his lifetime, the Jewish people saw Jerusalem destroyed and their leaders exiled to Babylon. That seemed to be the end of the Chosen People.

But the prophet was told to proclaim that, despite all appearances, God had great plans for His people – and a future full of hope.

I share this scripture passage with you as we in this diocese today face a time of change and a change of time. Sometimes, we can be tempted to believe that all is lost. In such a negative narrative, some frightened voices talk of coming disasters and judgement.

But the message of the scriptures is always one of hope. God has plans for His people. Faith means believing that God is at work, even in difficult times. Faith involves discerning where God is in the middle of fear and loss, anger and division.

It is very clear that, like much of Europe, the Diocese of Derry faces many difficulties:

1. The model of Church that seemed so confident 50 years ago is no longer marked by large numbers at Mass. Where smaller numbers attend Mass, there is a lesser chance of bringing people to know and love Jesus, of numerous vocations to priesthood and religious life.
2. The scandal of abuse and cover-ups from the past have damaged our ability to speak about Jesus with moral authority.
3. To a large extent we have failed to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to young people.
4. We face a secular culture which has little time for faith communities. Along with other Christian churches, we know that the problem in the future will not be religious difference so much as religious indifference.
5. Our society is stalked by fears of poverty, war in Europe and a climate emergency.

But the scriptures tell us that, despite obvious problems, God has a future full of hope for the Church in the Derry Diocese.

### **A future full of hope will involve change**

In our time of listening and sharing during our parish synodal conversations, there was a recognition of change in our faith community. There were suggestions about how we need to change as a Church. Many suggestions focused on the role of women, on the disconnect of life and faith, on who should be ordained and sexual morality. All of these are important issues.

But the key question is not merely how we change so that we can maintain the current model and structures. With that model we have been failing in our mission of bringing people to know and love Jesus.

If we ask the right question, we discover that renewal is not only a question of managing changed structures and rescheduling parish Mass. This is a time where we need to make space for grace so that God's plans - and not our limited imagination - can renew the mission of the Church. Merely tinkering with the current system is not the divine solution.

### **So, what is the right question to ask?**

At the end of St Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives the apostles a commandment - *go, make disciples of all nations?* (Mt 28:19). In renewing the diocese, our main question has to be, "How do we use our resources and people so that we make new disciples for Christ in this diocese?"

And, in seeking that way forward, the New Testament tells us that there is another vital consideration.

Since the Church belongs to God and not to us, we have to discern where God wants us to go in 2023. That is why all parish conversations need to be synodal and steeped in prayer. Otherwise, we end up merely with our limited answers to our narrow questions.

### **What is our model for church?**

In the Gospels, Jesus is quoted as using the word 'Church' on only two occasions (Mt 16:18 and 18:17). But there are many times when both Jesus and St Paul and St Peter use images to describe who Christ's followers are.

Some images refer to a very intimate relationship between Jesus and the Church

- *Head/body, vine/branches, shepherd/sheep, bridegroom/bride*

Others point to how we are closely connected with one another in Church

- *Body, Living stones, Pilgrim people, God's family*

Another set of images speaks of the purpose of the Church, namely to bring Christ to the world

- *Salt/light, mirror, ambassadors, soldiers.*

A Church that merely provides religious service to those who come is not an image of Church found in the Bible!

If we take seriously St Paul's image of the Church as the Body of Christ where we are all living cells, each person is uniquely gifted because of our baptism. Each of us at baptism received the seeds of Christian life which grow and bear fruit as we develop our relationship with God during the course of our lives. This means that each of us has a role in building up the Body of Christ. We all can play a part in searching out God's way forward.

### **A ministry-rich Church, a faith-rich people**

The Church has always been at its best - at home and overseas - when we have cherished a range of God-given ministries. Ask those who went from our parishes to work in Asia, Africa and Latin America - and they will tell you about the role played by local faith leaders and parish catechists.

I believe that we will be more like the Holy Spirit-filled Body of Christ when our diocese is blessed with many:

- Families which hand on the faith;
- People of all ages exploring and developing their faith;
- Lay people with the official ministries of Lector, Acolyte and Catechist;
- Consecrated Virgins - who publicly dedicate their lives to the Lord but live and work among their fellow-parishioners;
- Female and male religious (such as the Carmelites and various communities of religious Sisters and Brothers);
- Permanent Deacons; and
- Ordained priests.

### **What structures best serve the mission?**

How might we review our current parish structure so that we are better prepared to bring Christ to our contemporaries?

One of the challenges is that, by 2032, we might expect to have about 35 priests for the current 51 parishes in our diocese.

The large city parishes will remain as individual parishes with at least one priest. But, for the parishes outside Derry city, we have two choices. Either, we plan to load multiple rural parishes on individual priests, or we aim to create missionary pastoral communities with at least two priests in each.

Having talked with clergy, I propose the second of these.

That would mean that we have:

- In County Derry, five pastoral communities with 14 parishes;
- In County Tyrone and Finn Valley, five pastoral communities with 17 parishes;
- In Inishowen, three pastoral communities with 8 parishes.

In Derry City, because of the larger populations, the parishes will remain distinct.

The emerging Church is called to be rich in ministries. These will include:

- The new ministries of lay Catechist, Lector and Acolyte;
- Consecrated Virginity;
- Male and female communities of consecrated religious;
- Permanent Diaconate; and
- Ordained clergy.

All of this implies major changes for clergy and lay people regarding:

- The celebration of Masses, funerals, baptisms, etc;
- How parish communities work to teach and hand on faith;
- Developing new ways of learning and practising our faith;
- Developing new ways of gathering as parishes for prayer in the absence of a priest;
- How Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Councils work to plan the ministry of their community.

These challenges and changes will involve letting go of some of the familiar. It will give parishes more of an opportunity of working cooperatively with neighbouring parishes, sharing their gifts, talents and resources. Parishes will retain their individual parish identity but will share a priest. These changes will involve imagination, training and a gradual introduction over a period of time. In some parts of the diocese, however, sudden changes have already been forced on us.

### **A future full of hope and renewal**

As we face the future,

- We have the conviction that Christ is with His Church until the end of time.
- We have many people of good will who are keen to be involved in the mission of the diocese and its parishes.

There is a beautiful phrase in the Book of Revelation '*behold, I make all things new*' (21:5). Christ renews his Church in every generation to make us more like what we should be.

On their journey through the desert from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites were often tempted to go back. But they discovered that God was with them and that the Promised Land always lay ahead of them, never behind them.

## Next steps

Every journey begins with the first steps, even when we are not sure where we are going or when we will arrive.

In our synod conversations it became clear that the Church in the Diocese of Derry is in a period of transition. There is recognition of the need for a new model of Church which may require a certain mind-shift in all of us.

I invite all our local parishes to have prayerful discussions about how each can explore and review our way of being Church so that we:

- Build an open and welcoming community, reaching those who feel like outsiders in our churches;
- Grow in faith together throughout our lives; and
- Make Jesus known and loved.

It entails what Pope Francis calls ‘a pastoral conversion.’<sup>1</sup> St John Paul II also wrote that each parish community must become ‘a school of prayer.’<sup>2</sup> This period of transition will involve many conversations at local and diocesan level - and new openness to the Holy Spirit.

But none of the conversations will bear fruit if they are not held up by prayer. I encourage each parish to promote a specific period of time to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament to pray and reflect on this mission of renewal. Only by being open to the Sacrament of the Cross will we be renewed. Unless changes in Church are rooted in the foolishness of the Cross, they will be built on the shifting sands of human agendas.

In 2032, Ireland will celebrate the 16th centenary of St Patrick’s arrival in this country. We walk forward in hope, as our national patron did. A hurting world still needs to hear the message of God’s abundant mercy revealed in Jesus.

In a context of prayer and of openness to the Holy Spirit, I invite the parishes of the diocese to set out on this mission of renewal, believing that if we listen for the voice of the Lord, we can enter into His peace. Like generations of missionaries before us, we walk into the future, filled with hope, that the Lord has already prepared for us.

✠ Donal  
Bishop of Derry  
January 2023

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<sup>1</sup> Instruction “The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church”, of the Congregation for the Clergy (vatican.va)

<sup>2</sup> Novo Millennio Ineunte (6 January 2001) | John Paul II (vatican.va) para 33.