



Killaloe Diocese

Going Forward

In

Faith, Hope and Love

A letter from Bishop Fintan Monahan

Autumn 2023

Introduction

I am addressing this letter to all the people of the diocese to bring you up to date on the conversations regarding the future of Killaloe diocese that were held last spring at various venues. You may have attended one of those meetings or contributed to the questionnaire on the same topic – thank you for doing so.

The future is something we can only plan for and we know that plans will change according to circumstances and that no plan is perfect in itself. Likewise, our pathway to the future has to be how we live in the present. If we do not implement change now in the present, then we cannot expect to do so in the future.

With that in mind, I would like to say that there are many positives in the life of Killaloe diocese today. As bishop I find myself privileged to witness so many of these life-giving experiences such as celebrations of the Eucharist and Confirmations at parish level. I have seen sacramental celebrations in schools, churches, homes and many occasions of pilgrimage and prayer apostolates.

Likewise, on the positive side, a large number of people have been and continue to be committed to their faith and generously give of their time, talents and resources in support of their faith communities. In particular, our recently commissioned volunteer ministers of pastoral care and catechesis have greatly enriched our faith.

It is my sincere hope that in this letter I will be able to give you a fair and honest report of the conversations regarding the future. May we all explore and accept new ways to enable us to have an encounter with Jesus Christ the source of all our hopes for the future.

Dóchas linn...

Going Forward in Faith

The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.
(Pope Francis)

Pastoral Planning

For the years 2013-2020 the diocese was guided by a Pastoral Plan called *Builders of Hope, Diocese of Killaloe*. Some amendments were made to this plan in 2018 so as to support the vision of living the Gospel. The main feature of the amendments was a change from the old cluster system of parishes to that of pastoral areas and the introduction of co-parish priests with shared responsibility for groups of parishes. These developments met with mixed success, not least due to the global pandemic.

In the intervening five years (2018 -2023) the rate of decline in church life accelerated much more dramatically than had been anticipated. This led to an acceptance that the Pastoral Plan of 2013 had run its course and new initiatives were called for to steer the diocese into the future. Now, more than ever before, the Diocesan Church needed to hold conversations with all its faithful to draw up guidelines for change following such conversations about the future.

I spoke in the Introduction about the positive signs of a vibrant faith among a very large number of people who are deeply committed to their faith. It is important that we view any future planning in the context of faith. As a diocese, we also have a past rich in faith and in our faith journey to the future we should foster a continuity of faith handed down from past to present and into the future. It is a faith blessed by our Baptisms and grounded in *One God Father Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth. (Apostles Creed)*.

Our Christian life is a Journey of Faith. As a diocese, we go forward in faith.



Going Forward in Hope

Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you. (Psalm 39:7)

Hope is the spiritual muscle that enables us to go forward on our journey as a diocese. This hope was evident throughout the conversations held with people who had taken time to give their views. One felt that though voices were often raised in criticism they were people who spoke out because they cared. That gave me hope.

The steering committee were quick to point out the model of vibrant Christian community that Pope Francis speaks of:

“We do well to keep in mind the early Christians and our many brothers and sisters throughout history who were filled with joy, unflagging courage and zeal in proclaiming the Gospel.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* # 263).

Our pastoral area meetings, while acutely aware of the significant challenges, were hope-filled gatherings. Committed people with a sense of ownership and love of Church shared a burning desire for their Church to be as vibrant and life-giving as possible for generations to come. There was also a strong sense of realism that things have to change, if we are to meet the faith and pastoral needs of the believing community in the diocese.

An Outreach of Listening

It was necessary to have some methodology in order to listen at the wide reach of an entire diocese. The Synod called by Pope Francis presented a ready-made method of listening that we adopted for our diocesan conversations. It has three parts:

- 1. Encounter** – meeting with one another as Church and Diocese
- 2. Deep listening** – at these meetings to what God, Holy Spirit and each other are saying.
- 3. Discernment** – careful judgment of what we are called to do.

In spring of this year (2023) with a view to implementing this methodology two large plenary gatherings or assemblies were convened in the diocese. These assemblies consisted of conversation evenings to address issues arising, to present ideas, to stimulate debate and to discuss and tease out many of the items that surfaced.

Following on from that, fourteen local meetings were held in the pastoral areas. There was general agreement that significant change is essential if our faith communities are to thrive. Feedback was duly collated and assembled. A steering group comprising representatives from clergy, volunteer ministers, pastoral development and the diocesan pastoral council was convened to oversee the process and collate, interpret and present the concerns, ideas, themes and possibilities that were arising.

Space in a letter such as this precludes my giving a full account of all the issues raised, but they are available online on the Killaloe Diocesan Website for anyone wishing to explore a fuller account and working document.

Priests and People Together

It was considered important to develop a culture of teamwork allowing clergy and laity to minister hand in hand. Considering the decrease in the number of priests and our ageing population of priests this model of teamwork is crucial to our going forward in hope. The assemblies urged effective communications at all levels of parish and diocese. I urge all the faithful in parishes (people and priests) to make a special effort to work together to implement any necessary change and do so with courage and a sense of doing the right thing for the good of the Church at this time in our history. May no one person or group of people

exercise any veto on building up and revitalising our parish communities.

Pastoral Areas and Fears for the Local

It was recognised and accepted that there is an immediate need to work and minister as a pastoral area rather than parish in order to maximise limited resources. The centralisation of administration within this structure is also an important step forward and I wish to see this implemented in the current plan, with relevant support available followed by ongoing review and accountability required.

However, despite this acceptance people have expressed a genuine fear that any “changes” will involve not only fewer Masses in their parishes, but a closure of their actual church building. While this might be realistic and necessary in some cases, due to lack of resources, it is my view that the absence of a regular Eucharist in a Church does not mean that the building is now defunct and should be shut up.

It is my hope that rather than closing down churches we will in the near future be *opening up* our churches and enabling communities with fewer or no priests to take responsibility for the daily upkeep of their local church. More importantly, the local church building will be a genuine community centre at the heart of a parish’s spiritual and social life. For this vision of hope to succeed it is vital that priests and people work together in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

The Role of Women

The role of women in the church was a theme that emerged at every meeting. I respect those women and men who hold the view that women should be ordained to the priesthood and that priests should be allowed marry. These are points of view that should carry forward into our changing Church and respectfully discussed at all times in prayerful discernment.

I acknowledge the real fact that women in every parish make a major contribution to the life of their individual communities. In many instances women are more to the fore than men in building up

community. This is a great blessing in itself, and I would like women to know that they are appreciated for the work they do in every parish. I urge an increased awareness of gender equality in all lay-led activities in parish life. We must scrutinise the issue of equality in the Church so that women will not feel patronised or merely accepted in a token fashion.

+

Going Forward in Love

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13)

The diocese of Killaloe has reached a most challenging time in its history. In terms of listening to one another we are in the third stage of our approach which is **Discernment** - careful judgment of what we are to do (*once again, for further detail I remind you to see this link.*)

Many Voices One Church

This tried and tested proverb is worth repeating:

You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time.

The way forward requires that all the voices in the listening process are treated with respect. Realistically, every single point of view cannot be built into our future model of diocesan church. I think there should be a happy meeting ground between those who wanted radical change to our diocesan structures and those who were genuinely fearful of sudden major change. I welcome this idea of a middle-ground or *via media*.

I do not see this as compromise but rather as a respectful recognition of the diverse voices in our church. This recognition calls for some sacrifice on all sides. The more definite unflinching voices for particular forms of

change should temper their voices so as not to exclude the right of others to be heard. Likewise, the entrenched viewpoint that holds no truck with change of any kind should open itself to the real need for change.

I cannot put it any better than to say that all sides - all of the people and some of the people - should at all times nurture in themselves a spirit of Christian Love. It is our only way forward: this journey of mutual love for one another.

Evangelisation, Mission, Inclusion, Justice, Ecology

People rightly feel the local faith community will only lose its identity when there are no people present to worship and witness. What we are endeavouring to do as a diocese is to ensure that there will be people in the future to run the good race that St. Paul speaks of (2 Timothy 4:7). It is necessary that some new administrative structures will be put into place to facilitate the future of local faith communities.

There was a clear call in all our conversations for *a way of being* Church that would bring us beyond management mode into the realm of mission, to be outward looking, not just looking after, and maintaining what we had from the past. There was acknowledgement that some elements of the Church of the past were dying, in order to give way to a new Church fit for purpose for the world we live in at present.

Many expressed the desire that outreach to young people, justice issues, care for the earth, the poor, displaced people, the developing world, issues of justice, inclusion and welcome for all despite difference, colour, creed, sexual orientation should be firmly to the fore in the Church of the future.

Liturgical Renewal

I am greatly encouraged by the emphasis on better liturgies that came up in most of our discussions. There was a heartfelt desire that people

would leave our Sunday liturgies with an equally strong desire to return next week. It is my vision for the diocese that the Eucharist will continue to be the mainstay of people's spiritual nourishment in the years ahead. This should be facilitated by Priest led Eucharist as well as Eucharistic style para liturgies led by lay ministers.

This all echoes the strong voice of the people surrounding Liturgy and Eucharist. Practical and aspirational suggestions abounded at all meetings. Details are available on the longer version of this pastoral.

Care for Priests

Great respect was shown to the issue of priests assigned to each pastoral area (in consultation with pastoral area and parish pastoral councils). People were sympathetic to the ageing profiles of the priest population as well as being grateful for the service they have given to their various parish communities. (Details again as above.)

The Way forward in Faith, Hope and Love

I fully endorse the following key recommendations that arose at our gatherings:

- Training in ministry for lay people.
- Broadening the vision from parish to pastoral area.
- Easing the burden of administration and compliance by means of enhanced co-operation in pastoral areas.
- Importance of local identity and the fear of losing this.
- Importance of effective communication at all levels.

I quote from Pope Francis in his first Apostolic Exhortation: "I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this moment to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day." (*Evangelii Gaudium* #3).

It is such openness to Jesus Christ that will enable us to go forward in faith, hope and love.



+

Conclusion

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
(Psalm 119:105)

I conclude this letter by encouraging you to find joy in your faith and a wish that hope will prevail in all our lives as we face the future. These are challenging times and to paraphrase the words of Pope Francis from 2015 “today we are not living in an epoch of change so much as a change of epoch. That is certainly the case as we move forward in trying to find a way to not only survive but to thrive into this third millennium of Christianity.

These are also worrying times for many as we find ourselves dislodged from the comfort of the familiar and the security of our own views on life. No one welcomes sudden change and I want to assure you that there will be no sudden shocks but a gradual pathway to making the necessary changes our diocese requires as we journey forward.

I myself find comfort and inspiration from Saint John Henry Newman's words on change: “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

May the Lord Jesus be our companion on the pathway of change and bless all our endeavours.

Rath Dé ar an obair thabhachtach amach anseo.

✠ Fintan Monahan



