
‘PUTTING OUT INTO DEEP WATERS’
(Lk 5:4)

TRANSFORMING PARISHES TOGETHER INTO
MISSION-CENTRED FAITH COMMUNITIES

*A Pastoral Letter from
Bishop Fintan Gavin*

Diocese of Cork and Ross

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‘I ask you to set out with the people of the diocese in unity on a path of renewal.’

— Pope Francis (*from his letter to Bishop Fintan Gavin on the occasion of his Ordination as Bishop, June 2019*)

Since I arrived in the diocese at the end of June 2019, I have visited many parishes, and have been gradually getting to know people. I met with various groups, including young people, religious, representatives of parish assemblies and parish councils, and visited hospitals, schools, colleges and other ministry settings. I also had meetings with the priests – individually and as a group. All this helped me to get to know the diocese, to listen to people and discern with them what that path of renewal, which Pope Francis spoke about, might look like.

I got a sense of a very strong faith tradition, built up over many years, of which parish communities were rightly proud. Many things are working well in parishes: choirs, altar servers, funeral teams — and so much more. Unfortunately, those visits to parishes had to be paused because of the pandemic and could only start again when it was possible to do so safely.

Significant moments on that journey of listening took place last November when I met with all the priests of the diocese for a number of days in Killarney where we had a time of listening and sharing. Then in May of this year people from across the diocese reflected together on the questions posed by Pope Francis as part of the synodal journey which will culminate in the synod in Rome in 2023. The fruits of this were captured in our synodal submission (available at www.corkandross.org). In June we also had gatherings in the diocese of parish leadership groups and priests. Over 350 people participated in these meetings.

Visiting parishes, I got a great welcome, and felt energy, hope and participation – however there was also an expectation of change in our faith communities, because people knew that everything around us is changing too.

Challenges we face

People have often said to me: “You have a very difficult job ahead of you, Bishop”. A system that served well in the past is crumbling. In the past, the local community was also the faith community – where going to Mass was the place where you met everyone, young and old. Many parents and grandparents now express sadness that their own children no longer practise their faith or seem

interested in Church matters.

Many lamented the fact that large numbers of our young people are not present in our churches on Sundays. At the recent CONNECT event in UCC, for young adults (aged 18 to 35) the loudest message of these young adults was how isolated and alone they feel at times at Sunday Mass — because most of the people there are ‘much older’.

The link between our parish schools and our parish faith community is weaker than in the past. This was highlighted in our submission to the Synod, where concern was raised about how we are doing sacramental preparation. While it is wonderful to see large numbers coming forward for First Communion and Confirmation, it is disheartening that so few actually participate in the local faith community — even the day after such important events where priests, teachers and parishes have invested so much energy.

There is an awareness that our priests are getting older and fewer young men are choosing to become priests. This was expressed in the November priests’ gatherings when we reflected on what was described as the “predictable future”. Some spoke of “the imminent retirement of more priests in an already tight situation – which for priests might mean more work, ageing, poor health and a fear of burn-out, a fear of being further stretched”.

In September our diocese will give thanks for the ordination of one young man who will serve in our diocese. However, during this summer, 12 of our priests will step aside from their former responsibilities. While a small number will continue to help out as assistant priests, most have understandably decided they would prefer to retire fully from their appointments. In addition, a number of religious provincials are recalling priests to their orders this summer and will not be in a position to replace them.

It is important to be aware that this picture is not unique to our diocese, but is replicated throughout Ireland, Europe and indeed in most parts of the Western World. It is part of a much larger societal change which we can’t control. In fact, the challenges we face are similar to the challenges being faced by big institutions throughout the western world.

We need to acknowledge these huge changes and the sense of loss we feel for times past. We need to allow ourselves to grieve, acknowledging this loss and the pain associated with it.

Crisis — or opportunity?

Every crisis also brings an opportunity for new possibilities. When we allow ourselves to dream, we can recover hope and the sense of opportunity.

One of the really powerful exercises priests of the diocese did in Killarney last

November was to complete the sentence:

“No matter what, I stand for the possibility of a Church where ...”

When the priests engaged with this exercise, the atmosphere in the room changed and a sense of passion, excitement, hope-filled positive energy began to emerge. Priests spoke of a Church where all people are welcomed, cherished, valued, especially the poor, where the role of women is appreciated and valued, and where all are involved in decision making.

Priests shared their dream of a Church:

- where the Word of God is alive and active, understood and lived ...
- where every human being reaches their God-given potential ...
- where we can meet Jesus in one another, in word and sacraments, and where we work together inspired by the Holy Spirit ...
- where we are fearless and courageous and not afraid of the future with Eucharistic energy as the heartbeat and source and radiating out into all facets of the Church’s life – akin to the early Church ...
- where all who are baptised will be allowed to live out that baptism.

The list went on.

Our submission to the Synod contained a similar call for a local Church where people are invited to engage and participate in parish and Church life.

People asked for more lay involvement in leadership and decision-making. There was also a call to re-invigorate and provide training and support for parish councils/assemblies. People’s hope was that the experience of strong teamwork with clergy and lay people working together in the ongoing pastoral and liturgical life of the community would be experienced in all parishes.

We move forward together

Change is inevitable. Our parish faith communities cannot stand still. Neither can we go back. But how we respond to change can vary a lot. The Holy Spirit is calling all of us to go forward with an active hope, not a defeatist resignation!

Walking together as a Church means we need to discern together our priorities



for these times, how the Holy Spirit is calling us to be the Church in this new reality; how we can proclaim the Gospel today, and respond to the great commissioning of the early Church to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). There is no instant solution to these challenges. We will need to let go of some of the familiar so that we can create room for new seeds to flourish and grow.

A vision based in the Scriptures (Lk 5:1-11)

The piece of scripture that comes to mind for me is in St Luke’s Gospel where Jesus challenges his fishermen-disciples. In that episode, he said to Peter and his friends: ‘Put out into deep water and pay out your nets for a catch’ (LK: 5:4). Just as he invited them to put out into deep water, Jesus also invites us to go out into new, uncharted waters.

It’s significant that Jesus didn’t abandon the disciples in the boat; He stayed with them. Similarly, Jesus stays with us as we listen to his Spirit guiding our Church forward today. His words to us today are those he spoke to Simon on the Sea of Galilee: “Do not be afraid”.

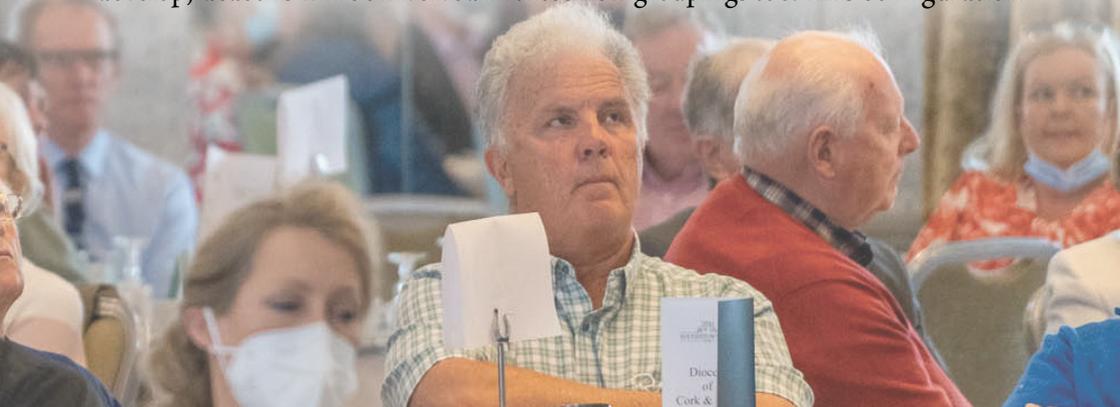
Matching challenge with reality

I would like to propose one of the models offered by the Church, which will allow us to organise ourselves differently, putting the mission of the Church at the centre. The hope is that the structure will follow the mission informed by the vision, rather than the structure being the starting point.

This is a radical new start, a new beginning. It reflects the phrase from Luke’s Gospel about the call to “put out into deep water”, responding to what the Spirit is saying to us at this time.

It is an invitation to our parishes to work more closely together in what we are terming ‘families of parishes’. Families of parishes are groupings of parishes with a minimum of three and a maximum of six parishes geographically close to one another where the priests work as part of a team across those parishes.

At the start, teams will consist just of priests, but over time lay leadership will develop; deacons will be involved in these new groupings too. This configuration



is being proposed *ad-experimentum* (which means that if it's shown that one of the parishes is clearly in the wrong family, the arrangement can be revised and the parish re-assigned as necessary).

Assignment of Priests

The arrangement of parishes into families of parishes asks a lot of our priests because it is a different way of ministering. Most of us priests were trained to work as individuals. In a family of parishes there will be a team of priests including a moderator and co-parish priests (all equal and with the same rights and responsibilities as they had up to now). The Co-PPs will work together across the parishes. This means that a priest will be appointed to the family of parishes and then reside in a particular parish but will minister across those parishes.

The task of the moderators will be to co-ordinate the work of the families of parishes. The hope is that each of the teams will have the help of a facilitator to enable them to work in this new way. There will also be a number of curates, assistant priests and deacons who will now be assigned to families of parishes rather than individual parishes.

Many priests have expressed their own concern at being isolated and just working on their own. This shared team approach allows for real concrete ways to support one another.

Priests are also concerned that they will be further stretched with the diminishing number of priests. As bishop, this is a concern which I also share. It is envisaged that we will agree certain ground rules to protect against this. One rule might be that a priest should celebrate no more than a Vigil Mass and two Sunday Masses on a weekend. The Masses should be scheduled so that the priest does not have to rush the Mass and has time to meet people afterwards and to comfortably travel between Churches and parishes.

This will mean that we will have fewer Masses and Masses won't be duplicated in the same way. Indeed, certain Churches may not have a weekend Mass as they did up to now. This is something that we will have to work on.



The call, both from the Killarney gathering of priests and from those who contributed to the synodal submission, was for liturgies that were enriching and life-giving where people would feel welcome and supported. A revised schedule should help to make this possible.

The number of priests available for ministry will be reduced this summer. This will inevitably mean that more parishes will no longer have a resident priest. This is one of the greatest challenges we face. This change will have the greatest effect locally. Our hope is that all the parishes in each of the families of parishes, including the parishes without a resident priest, will all be served equally by all the priests who will work across the parishes. It's like what happens in a family: those who need the most care receive the most attention from all.

Possibilities offered by families of parishes

'Families of parishes' present a real opportunity for much greater lay participation in the leadership of parishes. While initially the team will consist of priests, it is hoped that lay leadership and involvement will grow in time.

One of the other possibilities that the family of parishes allows is much greater co-ordination in the preparation and the celebration of sacraments. There can be shared preparation for sacraments such as Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation and Marriage and, in time, funeral teams can work together across each family of parishes.

One of the calls both in the synodal submission, and in the hopes that priests gathered in Killarney had for the Church, was for greater faith formation in terms of ministry, parish councils and indeed personal faith development. I believe that the family of parishes will also offer us much greater possibilities in all these areas. The hope would be that we would be able to employ someone to support the faith formation across each family of parishes. I hope that families of parishes will support young people, either at a particular liturgy geared more towards young people or in other gatherings.



Missionary disciples

Pope Francis continually reminds us that we are a missionary Church; we need to go beyond the boundaries of our parish to invite more to join us; a parish is never closed in on itself. There was a call, both in the synodal submission and in the hopes that the priests expressed in Killarney, of a Church that reaches out and connects with those who have left the Church or who no longer engage with us.

In the synodal submission, the Alpha programme was mentioned, as one means by which people are invited to meet Christ and form community. People who experience Alpha can allow the Holy Spirit to work in their lives, deepening their desire to belong to the Church and know more about the faith. The Alpha programme is just one example of a faith experience available. What is most appropriate can be decided locally and offered across a family of parishes.

Conclusion

Families of parishes give the people of Cork and Ross an opportunity to work together, united for mission, enhancing our own strengths collaboratively to build up our local Church into the future.

These are just first steps; exactly how they develop and emerge will depend on us, as we listen to the Holy Spirit calling us to be faith communities in a different way. While preserving the identity of our individual parishes, we work across parishes so that we can develop our Church.

We have a lot of work to do together to make these changes. But if we are not pro-active, we will be, in a short space of time, left with no choice. We have to embrace the opportunities while we still can. We are also preparing to recruit somebody who will help our priests and parishes to make these changes; this will take time.

Fundamentally, the Church is about helping people to encounter Christ personally, to become missionary disciples who build up God's Kingdom of justice, love and peace.

I believe that the family of parishes model will allow us to do this in a new way. It will mean we can respond to our present reality in a way that will help us to build the Church we dream of. It is not going to be easy and there will be challenges and teething problems — but, if we listen to the Holy Spirit working through us, I believe that we can build this Church together.

May the same Holy Spirit guide us, every step of the way.

✠ Fintan Gavin
Bishop of Cork and Ross