

Good Shepherd Sunday: Facing the Changes & Challenges Together

To the People and Priests of Kildare & Leighlin,

Since becoming Bishop in 2013, now close to four years ago, I had my first opportunity to attend an *Ad Limina Apostolorum* visit last January. This visit occurs every five or six years when each Bishop is required to present a report on his diocese to the Pope. The preparation for my visit to Rome in January involved composing a narrative and compiling statistics about the diocese. Understandably such a Report can be challenging as the average age of those in ordained ministry continues to rise and the demands on lay people and priests who care deeply about their parish, incrementally increase. Equally the report tells me as Bishop, that the diocese continues as it has in the past to be a place where so many people feel a real involvement and engagement in the Church's mission.

In reflecting upon the call of Christ on this Good Shepherd Sunday, we continue to pray that those He is inviting to the priesthood and religious life will open their hearts to respond in a generous way to that invitation. However, we must also reflect on the broader aspect of vocation and ponder the call that is issued to each one of us in baptism. How we live this call, as I said in my recent Chrism Mass homily *'is the work of today, the mandate of the present, the mission of now'*.

As our country continues to change, new opportunities arise for us all to offer the Gospel as the anchor and source of holiness, community and celebration. From my visits to every parish in the diocese over the past four years, it is obvious that the people of the diocese of Kildare & Leighlin have a great commitment to living their faith by proclaiming gospel values. As your Bishop, I find this very humbling. This is evident in every aspect of the mosaic of diocesan life from ordained to lay ministry, from catechetics to education, from liturgy to youth ministry, in choirs, school boards, finance committees, to mention but a few. The level of volunteerism in so many aspects of parish life continues to be staggering. I deeply appreciate all your work, time and energy ministering in the name of Christ, in reaching out to those on the edge of the parish and often to those who do not walk with us.

I am, on this Vocations Sunday, inviting all people, priests, permanent deacons and religious to walk with me as their Bishop, as we together face the task of initiating a new phase of discussion for the emerging situation in our diocese. This new reality will see fewer priests in the not too distant future. At the moment, there are 90 priests ministering in our diocese, 27 of them are over 75. This stark figure points to the clear realization that unless there is a radical reappraisal of what a parish community should be, how it should be organised, co-ordinated, funded and ministered, there can be no real progress.

There will be changes for priests in trying to find new ways of serving their people and being with them. In light of the number of priests in active ministry in individual parishes, and particularly those over 75, the following questions need to be urgently addressed: Is it time to welcome more priests from abroad and work with them to make sure they are fully integrated and welcomed into the life of the diocese? Ought there be more concern with mission than with maintenance, with priests being willing to delegate more so that there is a greater importance given to 'a team' and not an individual leading our parish communities?

There will be changes for lay people who, for example, are perhaps used to having a Mass at a certain time and place. A revision of Mass times, funeral times, wedding and baptism times are obvious issues in our diocese, as is the ongoing viability of some churches in lesser populated areas continuing to have weekly Mass. Is it time to consider lay leadership and chaplaincy in some of our parishes, schools, hospitals and prisons and how can this be achieved?

I draw great encouragement from the recent preliminary returns from Census 2016, which suggest that 78% of the Irish population see themselves as Roman Catholic. This is at a time when priests, religious congregations and committed people of faith find their deeply held beliefs under daily attack. I believe all of us who love our diocese and parish must realise the work that remains to be done to reach out to the 78%, and beyond that percentage.

In the gospel on this Vocations Sunday the word “*voice*” appears three times; it is the voice of the Shepherd. In facing the changes and challenges together I need to hear your voice. St. John Paul II reminds us that “*every Christian, by virtue of baptism, is called to be a ‘good shepherd’ in the environment in which they live*”. I pray that all of you will hear the good shepherd’s voice calling you into the realisation that every baptized person must be encouraged and enabled to play their part in this process. Parish communities must continue to pray to the ‘Lord of the Harvest’ to bless His people with priestly and religious vocations who will encourage, enable, and empower all the people to fulfil their baptismal calling to bring Christ to the world.

In order to plan for the future, a series of meetings will take place in deaneries and in the diocese over the coming weeks and months. There will a meeting of all the priests in the three deanery areas during May, leading to a meeting in Mount St. Anne’s on June 20th for priests, involved lay people from each parish, permanent deacons and religious. There will be further meetings of priests and lay people in each deanery area into the Autumn, to which all of you are invited. These meetings will include discussing topics such as:

- What people want from their Church, their parish, their diocese in 2017
- Appointment of priests
- Outreach to families
- Chaplaincy in schools, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons etc.
- Outreach to minorities and those on the margins
- Permanent Diaconate
- Parish and diocesan resources

Together may we face these changes and challenges and may the Holy Spirit guide all of us as we embark on this journey together.

Blessings and good wishes,

✠ Denis Nulty
Bishop of Kildare & Leighlin

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