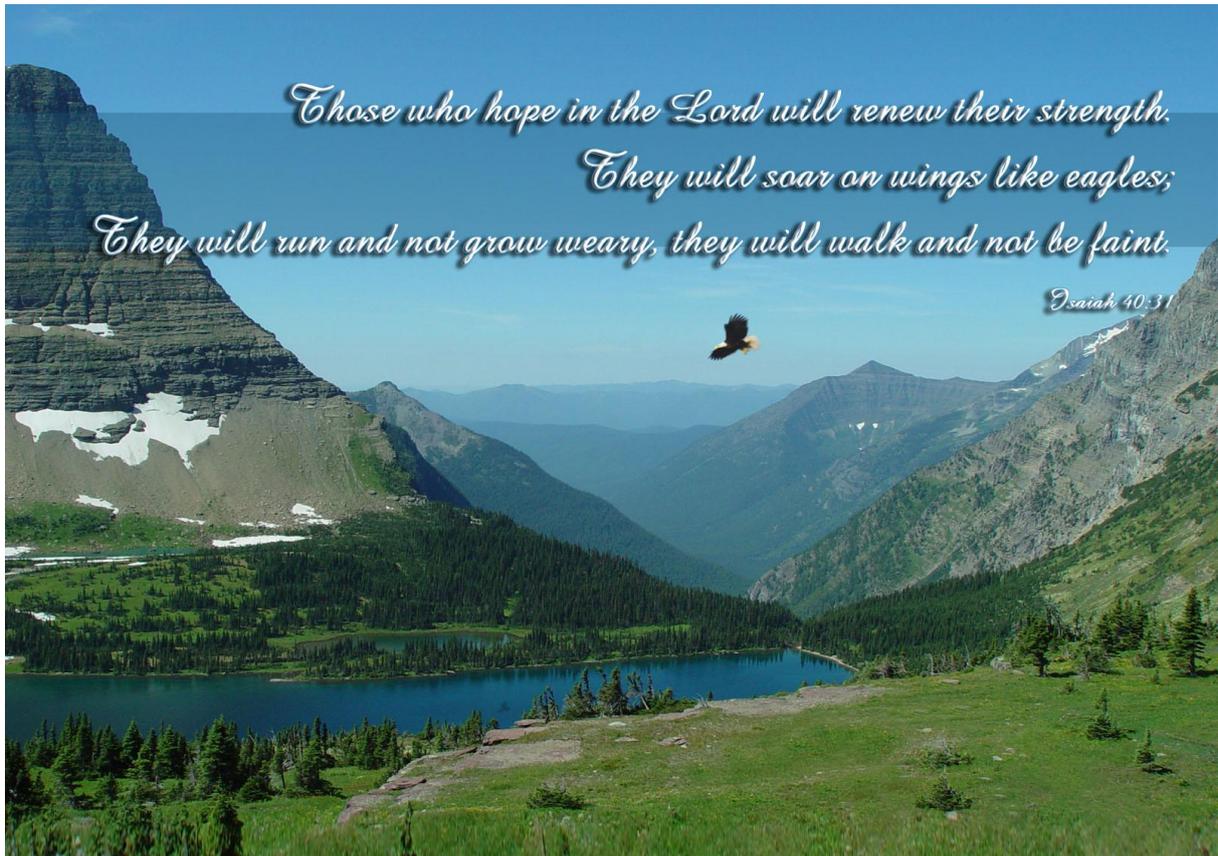


UNITED IN HOPE



Your servant is listening

The story in the First Book of Samuel speaks to all of us. The young boy, Samuel, is lying down in the temple, close to the presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant. He is probably restless. He hears a voice but he is confused. He does not know who is calling or what he is being asked to do. Three times he runs to the priest, Eli, saying “you called me”. Eli eventually realises that God is speaking to Samuel: “If he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening’” (1 Sam 3:1-18).

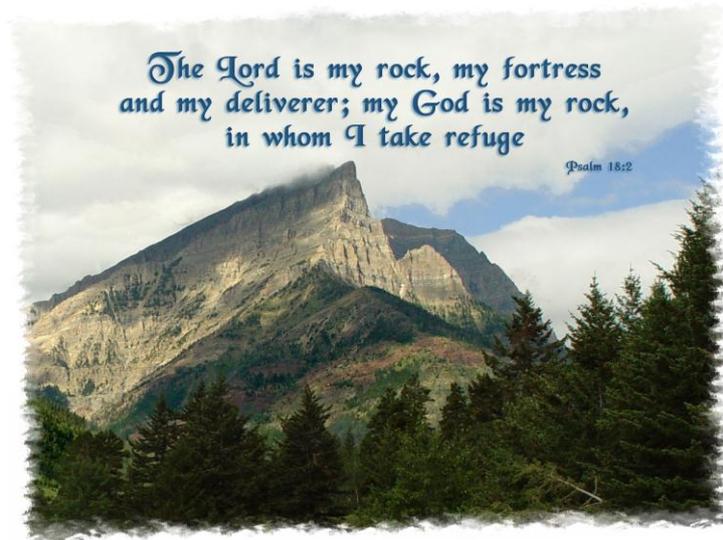
We have many calls on our attention, many competing priorities; we experience many contrasting kinds of restlessness. Often we are confused and do not know how to interpret these calls and how to respond to them.

We are caught between a feeling that Ireland has grown up and been freed from the past and the anxiety that we are losing something essential. We have been rocked by revelations about corruption and greed and fraud and prejudice and, most horrifying of all, about the neglect, the cruel treatment and the sexual abuse of children. We have suddenly gone from talking about the country being “awash with money” to a deep economic crisis. It is no wonder we feel anxious and uneasy.

It would not only be insensitive but much too easy to say that the recession will be good for us. It will bring great hardship and suffering. People are painfully recognising the fragility of what seemed to be stable jobs; they worry about their mortgages; they are afraid that their children will have no choice but to emigrate; they fear that the hope brought by the Regeneration Project in Limerick will be undermined by the stringency of the new economic atmosphere; those who remember the hard times dread the prospect of the return of large scale unemployment. Obviously none of this is to be welcomed. No doubt some people grow and even flourish in adversity, but others risk being broken in spirit and in health. Many of the things we hoped to do in education, in health care, in improving the situation of the least advantaged will become far more difficult.

But in all of this confusion and restlessness there is a Voice that speaks to us as it did to Samuel. It has been speaking to each of us since the very beginning of our existence: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer 1:5); "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine (Is 43:1).

God's infinitely powerful, infinitely merciful love for us is the reason why, even in the midst of agonising grief and confusion and hardship, we can look at our own suffering, the suffering of those dearest to us and the suffering of the world, without losing hope. That is why the scriptures refer to God as our rock (Ps 18:2).



God's love is at work in our situation, no matter how raw and hurt and devastated and defenceless we may feel. But we are not expected to recognise that truth in lonely, isolated anguish. God speaks to us not as unconnected individuals but as a *people* called to believe that God is love.

We are meant to encourage and support and carry one another in the strength of the love that raised Jesus from the dead. Our love is meant to "overflow with more and more knowledge and full insight" to help us to know what is best (Phil 1: 1, 2) so that we may live our lives "in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27) and so that we may look to the interests of others rather than of ourselves (Phil 2:4).

Suffering but trusting

Above all we need to learn to trust and to hope. The Gospel of Christ means that hope is never defeated. Jesus, helpless and dying on the Cross is the most powerful force in the whole of creation, drawing everybody and everything to himself (cf. Jn 12:32). This scene of agony and horror, rather than any of the triumphs or successes of history, was the beginning of the new creation. It was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit who renews the face of the earth, Let us be clear: we would be fooling ourselves if we thought we had fully learned that lesson. All of us are only in the process of understanding that God's plan does not depend on our hopes, our expectations and our achievements. With God, "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

This is not because God's plans for us are less than our own hopes, but because they are infinitely greater. If our happiness depends on our own plans and our own strength, then we are lost. Our own plans cannot overcome our mortality and fallibility; they cannot guarantee the life or the health or the happiness of the people we love. That can be very hard to accept when someone close to us is seriously ill, when a confident expectation collapses, when everything seems to be going wrong, when we helplessly feel that 'there must be something we can do'. Coming to terms with such calamities is difficult and painful; we have to try to deepen our understanding and our trust again and again. Every time we face disappointment, illness, prejudice, hatred, anxiety or grief we pray for the strength to believe what our faith tells us – that whatever happens, we are in the hands of God who is unlimited love. Our faith does not guarantee that terrible things will not happen; it guarantees that God's love is at work even – and especially – when we are at our lowest.

This is the core of our call to be followers of Christ – to try to place our trust ever more completely in God, his Father and ours. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector says it very clearly. It was the sinful tax collector rather than the exemplary Pharisee who went home justified. The Pharisee thought that his good deeds would win him favour with God; the tax collector knew that he depended utterly on God's mercy. It was the tax collector who understood the nature of our relationship with God – total dependence and trust.

The Anglican Bishop of Durham, a respected scripture scholar, represented the Anglican Communion last October at the Synod of Bishops in Rome which reflected on the Word of God. In a speech earlier last year, he spoke about how hope can be distorted into a caricature of itself. There is a false gospel which is not about being saved by God but about our own self-discovery and our individual self-fulfilment. He sees this as a modern version of the ancient philosophy of Gnosticism which is alive and well in such phenomena as *The Da Vinci Code*.

“The Gnostic does not want to be rescued; he or she wants to discover ‘who they really are’, the inner spark of divine life’.... And in some of our most crucial ethical debates people have assumed for a long time that ‘being true to myself’ was all that really mattered... This is a religion of pride rather than of faith, of self-assertion rather than of hope, of a self-love which is a parody of the genuinely biblical self-love which is regard for oneself, body and all, as reflecting the image of the creator”¹.

We have props and plans on which we rely; we have assumptions and expectations that give us comfort; we have possessions and positions that give us an apparently secure identity. But Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead, is the only name by which we can be saved (Acts 4:12). Hope in Christ is not one outlook, one priority, one comfort, one support, one hope among many. Any other foundation on which we build our hopes will ultimately collapse, but he has already overcome every threat: “Take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33).

The Apostolic Exhortation after the second Synod of Bishops for Europe, in which I had the privilege of participating, expressed it like this:

“Jesus Christ is the First and the Last: in him all history finds its beginning, its meaning, its direction, its fulfilment. In him and with him, in his death and resurrection, everything has already been said... The persecuted Church of God [in the book of Revelation], which struggles against evil and sin, yet nevertheless has every right to be joyful and victorious since she is in the hands of the One who has already triumphed over evil”²

The Synod expressed a “clear and passionate certainty” that what we have to offer Europe is “the most precious of all gifts, a gift which no one else can give: faith in Jesus Christ, the source of the hope that does not disappoint”³. We have the task of offering that gift to one another and of encouraging each one another to believe that the Lord has already triumphed over everything we fear. That belief is one that speaks directly to the unpredictability, the fear and the hardship that the coming years will bring,

[The weary world rejoices](#)

Faith in Jesus Christ, the source of hope, is the gift that we are meant to offer to each other and to the world. All other hopes finally disappoint. We cannot overcome all the evil of the world; we cannot preserve ourselves from suffering and death. Each person has many hopes and desires but, important as they are to us, they remain always too weak and too small to be the answer to all our longings.

We open ourselves to receive the gift of hope by recognising, like the tax collector, that we are not able to save ourselves from fear and loss and pain and guilt, and by recognising too that there is a greater, invincible, hope in which we can fully trust:

“We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only

¹ WRIGHT, N. T., Address to the Lambeth Conference, 30 July 2008

² JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, 6.

³ *Ecclesia in Europa*, 18.

be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow on us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain”⁴.

The news on so many fronts is depressing. It seems unrealistic to think of ourselves as a community living and spreading hope and joy. But that is what we are meant to be: a community full of vigour and life.

“If in fact the Church, regenerated by the Holy Spirit, in a certain sense constitutes the true youth of the world, as long as she remains faithful to her being and to her mission, how could she fail spontaneously and preferably to recognise herself in those who feel themselves to be the bearers of life and hope and of the task of ensuring that there will be a tomorrow for the history of today?”⁵

If we really believe that in Jesus Christ we find the only hope that can truly satisfy the human heart, we carry a great responsibility. Jesus said to his disciples: “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it” (Lk 10:23,24). We have seen the hope that the world longed for down the millennia, the hope that is stronger than evil and death.

Almost thirty years ago Pope John Paul wrote;

“The most valuable gift that the Church can offer to the bewildered and restless world of our time is to form within it Christians who are confirmed in what is essential and who are humbly joyful in their faith”⁶.

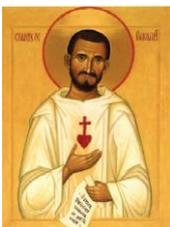
The responsibility we bear, as individuals, parishes, pastoral areas and diocese is to live as people of vibrant, vigorous hope in a world that has become weary and fearful. Many people feel swamped and battered by the pressures of life. Often we are like Peter, confidently answering the call of Jesus to walk across the water: But like Peter, the storms we meet lead us to lose confidence: “But, when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14:30,31) We find it hard not to give in to doubt. We find it hard not to cling to hopes that we know to be fragile. But the Lord calls us to trust.

A call to each person

The first call is to **each individual**. We can help one another, we can pray with and for one another, but, in the end each person has to say, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening”. That means taking the time for honest heart-searching prayer. It means trying to recognise the places in our lives where we are clinging to lesser hopes as if they were identical with God’s love and God’s promise. It means asking the Lord to fill us with love, joy and peace – and all the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It means opening ourselves to the merciful, healing love of God. We cannot give this hope and joy and mercy to ourselves. We have to try to open our hearts to believe in and accept the gift of God.

This is not simply an intellectual notion. It is the fundamental truth of our being. We depend for our very existence and for our fulfilment on the gift of God who is love.

Blessed Charles de Foucauld’s Prayer of Abandonment frightens us, but it also expresses what this trust in God means. Are we really ready to say these words and mean them?



*“Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.”*

Bl Charles de Foucauld

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, [SS] 31.

⁵ PAUL VI, *Gaudete in Domino*, VI.

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, [CT] 61.

If we are to mean those words, we need to realise that God is love and that our only hope lies in God and that in 'whatever he may do' we can find the love that is for every human being the great hope that surpasses everything else.

Blessed Charles knew that this complete love of God is never fully attained in this life: "The love of God, the love of neighbour... there is found the whole of religion... How can we reach it? Not in a day because it is perfection itself: it is the goal to which we should always aim, the goal to which we should continually draw closer and which we will reach only in heaven"⁷.

Lent is a time for prayer. If we are to grow in trust, we have to be ready to take the time to reflect on our own need and on God's goodness. We need to take the time to ask God to open our minds and hearts to the love which is our hope; we need to ask God to show us when we are placing our hope in things that can never satisfy the longings of the human heart. We need to ask that the Holy Spirit in our deepest selves will give us a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 18:31; 36:26). We need to ask Jesus to help us to follow him through the agony of the Cross to eternal glory.

Lent is a time of penance and repentance. In the period of the Celtic Tiger it was much too easy for many of us to decide that whenever we wanted something we simply got it. Christmas sometimes posed the dilemma, 'What do you give the person who has everything?' Lent is a time when we recognise how easy it is to become dependent on immediate satisfaction of needs, on our possessions, our comfort and our plans in a way that disguises our deeper needs. That is why Lent is a time of fasting. It is a time for recognising that our real happiness lies not in fulfilling our own wants but in being in harmony with God whose love drew us out of nothingness and into the family of his Son who died for us:

"True fasting, as the divine Master repeats,... is to do the will of the Heavenly Father, who "sees in secret, and will reward you" (Mt 6:18)... The true fast is... directed to eating the "true food," which is to do the Father's will (cf. Jn 4,34). If, therefore, Adam disobeyed the Lord's command, "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat," the believer, through fasting, intends to submit himself humbly to God, trusting in His goodness and mercy"⁸.

During Lent, it is particularly appropriate to receive the Sacrament of Penance. Some people see this as an ordeal and find it difficult to face the prospect of confessing their sins. The preparation for the sacrament should not consist in "anxious psychological introspection but a sincere and calm comparison"⁹ of one's life with the Gospel. The sacrament is not an exercise in self-disgust. It is a proclamation of the goodness God who is mercy and tenderness (Ps 111:4).

Like every liturgical act, the sacrament of Reconciliation is, first and foremost, an act in which the penitent, the confessor and the whole Church praise God the Father¹⁰. One of the most powerful ways of opening our hearts to hope is to allow our failures, our weakness, the things we are ashamed of, the desires that can never completely satisfy us, to be touched by the healing mercy which is the Creator's "most stupendous attribute"¹¹. The life of the Church is authentic when she professes and proclaims God's mercy¹².

During Lent there will be an opportunity in parishes to take part in Penitential Services in which this personal encounter with the healing love of God will be offered in individual confession. Confession gives us the opportunity to put words on our failures. That is an essential part of really recognising them. In all apologies, articulating what it is we are apologising for is an indispensable part of seeking pardon. Confession is an act of praise because we are proclaiming our faith that God's mercy is stronger than the guilt and failure that we are acknowledging. It is a profession of hope in God who is full of compassion. It is also a recognition that all of us are sinners (cf. I Jn 1:8) and that we share the same confident hope in the power of divine mercy.

The task of Lent, the task of our lives, is to make room for God by recognising and rejecting all the ways in which we are tempted to find in lesser things the fulfilment that only God can give. At the beginning of our Christian lives our parents and godparents rejected in our name "all the empty

⁷ Quoted by SARAIVA MARTINS, Card J, *Beatification Homily*, 13 November 2005.

⁸ BENEDICT XVI *Message for Lent 2009*.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 31, III.

¹⁰ Cf. VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Liturgy Constitution), 33, cf. the Great Doxology in Eucharistic Prayers, summing up our praise of the Father in the Son and the unity of the Holy Spirit.

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, [DM] 13.

¹² Cf. DM, 13.

promises” of Satan. We were anointed with chrism so that we might “live always as members of (Christ’s) body, sharing everlasting life”. We were clothed with a white garment as a sign of the dignity we were to carry into everlasting life. We received a lighted candle to burn brightly until we would go out to meet the Lord when he comes. Baptism is a sharing in the death of Jesus so that we may rise with him to new life (Rom 6:4,5). The whole of Christian life is about that sharing in his death and resurrection. That is why the summit and source of that life is found when Christ’s death and resurrection are truly present in the Eucharistic mystery.

The identity of the parish

The call is to **every parish community** to learn how to deepen our trust and hope in God. Recognising our individual weakness and our individual need of God means recognising that God’s mercy offers hope to *everyone*. Together we make that acknowledgement, to God and to one another, in the Penitential Rite at Mass.

The more we understand the greatness of the hope we have been offered, the more we will long to share it with others. A parish is a community which is meant to be a welcoming family home where we “become aware of forming the People of God”¹³. In families, in neighbourhoods and in the whole life of the parish, we are meant to grow, and to help each other to grow, in the realisation that we are loved by God and that we are united, inspired and given courage by the great hope which surpasses everything else¹⁴.

This understanding of the parish requires honest heart-searching prayer and a readiness to listen to the voice of God speaking not only in our own hearts but in all those who are part of the family of the parish. Could it be, especially in these times of hardship and anxiety, that people in our parish, people who share our belief in God’s love, nevertheless feel lonely and isolated in facing their pain and despondency and their difficulties in coping? Could it be that young people facing a newly frightening and uncertain world cannot see in us the hope that surpasses everything else? Could it be that they cannot see in us a community that hungers for the gifts that they can bring to the life of the parish? Could it be that people living in our Christian community do not know where to turn when they suffer violence, abuse, hostility or injustice? Could it be that we are so preoccupied by our own worries about the future that we fail to see the same worries in those around us? It is not an adequate answer to any of these questions to say or to think that this is “someone else’s job”:

The laity have special responsibility... for evangelizing culture, making the power of the Gospel part of the life of the family, the workplace, the mass media, sports and leisure, and for promoting Christian values in society and public life, both national and international. By the fact that they are in the world, the lay faithful are in a position to exercise great influence on their environment and to offer great numbers of men and women broader horizons of hope”¹⁵.

It is especially true in urban areas, though not exclusively so, that modern life has brought a certain anonymity and isolation. The task of being a community in which everybody has a sense of belonging and which lives by a shared hope is challenging in a new way. It requires serious effort and courageous creativity to make that a reality which is living and visible.

Sometimes the fear is expressed that, with the decline in the number of priestly vocations, the identity of the parish may be diminished. The truth is that it is more important than ever that each parish should look for ways of rising to the challenge of being what it is meant to be, “a lively community, firm in faith, united in hope and persevering in charity”¹⁶. To the extent that any individual or family or group believes that this is not their challenge, our parish community is weaker. To that extent the parish is deprived of the variety of gifts that the Spirit gives “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7).

The decline in the number of priests highlights something which was always true. The parish is not just the priests; it is not just the people who have special roles in the liturgy or in the schools or in Parish Pastoral Councils. All of these are an important part of the richness of parish life, but the parish needs every one of its members and all of their gifts. A vibrant parish is one where all the parishioners understand that the life of each one contributes to the well being of the parish. The life of

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, CT, 67.

¹⁴ Cf. SS, 31.

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores Gregis*, 51.

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II *Homily in Frosinone*, 16 September 2001.

the parish involves family life, organisations and associations, friendship and mutual support and the whole life, work and recreation of all the parishioners. No part of our lives is irrelevant to the God who gives hope and meaning to everything that we do and offers eternal joy to each human being. That means that every moment of our lives has its part to play in the rich variety of our life as the family of God.

The parish is more necessary than ever, but its future depends on looking honestly at the needs and possibilities of our present context.

Today it seems that many people find it difficult to hear the voice of God who calls them. They do not hear it in the life and liturgy of the parish or in 'the institutional church'. This is not something we should simply look at with helpless regret. It is a call to mission. As Pope John Paul put it in Knock, each new generation "is like a new continent to be won for Christ", and the Church "must constantly seek for new ways that will enable her to understand more profoundly and carry out with renewed vigour the mission received from her Founder"¹⁷.

Parishes have done a great deal in recent years in the development of Parish Pastoral Councils and in many pastoral initiatives and activities. In the years ahead the ongoing task of sharing our faith and hope and our belief in God's infinite love will lead us to recognise many other 'new continents' that need to hear the Gospel. The new continent is within every parish and within each person. All of us need to hear more clearly and with new vigour the message received from Christ.

The parish primary schools do a magnificent job in sharing the faith with a new generation. The work of teachers in preparing pupils for the sacraments is something I admire and appreciate especially when I see its fruits on the occasion of Confirmations. In recent years Baptismal Teams and *Do This in Memory*, and the Confirmation Preparation Programme, which has been worked on by a sub-group of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, have begun to make us more aware of the essential role of the parish in these sacraments of initiation. Like every sacrament, these are actions of the whole community of the parish, and indeed of the universal Church. In each of these sacraments, the parish welcomes young members and commits itself to pray for them, to encourage them, to support them, to guide them and to value and make use of the gifts that God has given them.

All of that requires continual effort, as does the challenge of making good that commitment to those young people in the years after primary school, when they move to second level schools, which also do excellent work, but which are often outside the parish. It cannot be the case that the parish has nothing to contribute and nothing to gain from the energy and idealism – and the questioning and the turmoil – that can mark the lives of teenagers.



World Youth Day, Sydney 2008

We live in a world which is full of new situations and new demands. We seem to be surrounded by crises and suffering but also by extraordinary new possibilities. There are moral issues that nobody could have foreseen a generation ago. There is the question of how we follow Jesus the Way in the unmapped territory of a new continent where we feel the danger that we may lose our sense of direction. There are the opportunities provided by new means of communication and by a growing realisation that the mission of spreading the Good News is a mission for every member of the parish. It is important that we realise that this is a journey we have to take together,

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Homily in Knock*, 30 September 1979

It is a journey that we also take with other Christians. "Cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the relationship which in fact already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant"¹⁸. It is also a journey we take and with people of good will who join us "in the search for truth and for the right solution to the many moral problems that arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships"¹⁹

But this means that the parish, and groups within the parish, should be looking prayerfully at what the Gospel asks of us in our community, in relation to the wider society, to the issues that arise in responding to the economic crisis, to questions about moral issues. It means searching for the Holy Spirit's guidance in the many dilemmas of the uncertain world in which we are to be the witnesses to the hope of Christ and the truth of our own humanity. If the world seems to be one in which faith is increasingly disregarded, this is partly because we have not yet articulated even for ourselves how the Good News affects our understanding of these dimensions of life.

That does not mean that everybody has to do everything, or even that every parish has to do everything. There are varieties of gifts (1 Cor 12: 4). What we have to do is to try to ensure that all our gifts are being welcomed, encouraged and used. There is no detailed blueprint as to how each parish has to respond to the challenges it recognises. The parish which prays, which reflects honestly, which listens to the Spirit speaking through its members, through its situation and through the needs within it and around it, will not lack for work that cries out to be undertaken!

But we must not think only of jobs to be done. We have to begin at the beginning, listening as individuals and as a community to the voice of God. We have to begin by hearing that God is with us and in us, that therefore we are deeply united to one another in our sorrows and joys and in the hope that surpasses everything. This is an attitude that Pope John Paul called a "spirituality of communion". It is founded on our unity (communion) with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and our unity with one another in God. It is an essential foundation for anything else we try to do. Without that, all our plans and structures would be empty: We work as conscientiously as we can, but in the end we rely totally on God.

"Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth"²⁰.

It is not simply a matter of making our parishes more efficient or measuring the effectiveness of our structures. It is first and foremost a matter of being a family home in which we become aware of forming the people of God. Every pastoral initiative has to be founded on holiness, on unity with God, on a real awareness of what it means to be the people of God; the whole life of the Christian community must lead to holiness. But holiness is not some extraordinary existence possible only for the few²¹. "It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life"²²:

"If in the planning that awaits us we commit ourselves more confidently to a pastoral activity that gives personal and communal prayer its proper place, we shall be observing an essential principle of the Christian view of life: *the primacy of grace*. There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that 'without Christ we can do nothing'²³.

The Pastoral Area as a sign of hope

The individual needs the prayer, the encouragement and the support that comes from the awareness of forming the people of God, the Body of Christ. In the same way, the parish cannot regard itself as isolated with no contribution to receive or to give to the parishes around it. We have seen in recent

¹⁸ VATICAN II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 12.

¹⁹ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, [GS] 16.

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, [NMI] 43.

²¹ Cf. NMI 30 – 33.

²² NMI 34.

²³ NMI, 38.

years that there is great potential for mutual support and enrichment when parishes work together in clusters.

For several months we have been looking at our experience and at the needs that arise and asking ourselves how we can strengthen that cooperation. It is clear that we need to rationalise the existing divisions of the diocese into Clusters, Priests' Areas, Deaneries and Vicariates. At Eastertime we hope to launch a new arrangement in which all of these will coincide in new Pastoral Areas. Each of these will have a Pastoral Area Team which will work with a priest-leader helping him in identifying the pastoral needs that exist and in encouraging and developing the gifts that are to be found in the people and the parishes of the Area. They will also try to ensure that priests and people have the support they need in developing the life, the prayer and the pastoral energy of their parishes.

This is not just a matter of altering structures. It is about finding new ways to hear the voice of God speaking through the needs and gifts that are present in the family of God. If this development is to allow the hope of Christ to speak to the restlessness and confusion of our time, it has to begin by listening to the voice of hope.

This is not about taking over the role of the parish. On the contrary, it is being done to deepen our awareness of what it means to be a living parish; it is being done to strengthen us in carrying out the task that we have as a local community filled with the hope of Christ and believing in God's love for us.

Just as it is supportive and encouraging for an individual trying to communicate the richness of the Gospel message to know that he or she is working with others, so it is a strength for a parish to know that it is part of a larger effort. Parishes can offer their gifts to their neighbours and receive in turn the gifts that they have to offer; Parishes can cooperate on initiatives which can be better done together.

This cooperation is necessary because of the kind of 'new continent' that surrounds us and is within us. We live in a culture which does not readily recognise the central role that faith plays in our lives. It is not one priority among many; it is about the very core of our being and about our destiny. It is almost impossible to counter the influence of a prevailing culture and to open up the possibilities that the new continent offers unless we are rooted in another kind of culture – the culture of faith.

It is right that this process should be reaching a decisive stage during this season of prayer and penance which is also a "great season of grace" in which we receive "strength to purify our hearts and control our desires" and which teaches us "how to live in this passing world with our hearts set on the world that will never end"²⁴. This season culminates in the celebration of the life of the new creation which began in the Resurrection of Christ.

I hope that Lent will be a time that we pray that our efforts will lead to a community more ready to listen and more ready to share the good news of hope which our world, our country, our diocese and each of us long for. God spoke down through the centuries, but the eternal Word finally became flesh and he is "the joy of all hearts and the fulfilment of all aspirations"²⁵.

In all the fear and uncertainty and pain that we find around us and in ourselves, that is the Good News that we have to offer, the most precious of all gifts. Pray this Lent and always that we may be witnesses to that gift:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved (Rom 8:18-24).

²⁴ Preface of Lent II.

²⁵ GS 45.