

Lift up Our Hearts

*An Advent Pastoral Letter
from Bishop Brendan Leahy*



Introduction

What a year it's been! The Collins Dictionary word of the year for 2022 is "permacrisis" referring to the almost permanent news of one crisis or another. So often this year we've heard of the refugee crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the cost of living crisis, the climate crisis, the Covid-19 crisis, the economic crisis, the energy crisis, the A&E crisis, the schools child abuse crisis. It's as if we are lurching from one crisis to another with the result that some can feel "bothered and bewildered", as one commentator puts it.

Thank God for Advent and Christmas. The power of these seasons is such that, at least for a while, most of us can suspend the 'living in crisis', and can enjoy time in the comfort and joy of loved ones, of family. These seasons remind us that we need to lift up our hearts and lift up each other's heart. The antidote to bewilderment is to focus on hope. The prophet Isaiah whose writings we read a lot during Advent encourages us to keep hope alive. He tells us: "Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord God you have an everlasting rock." (Is 26:4).

We can keep hope alive by remembering with thanksgiving the good things that are happening. We can put hope into practice by paying attention to small details where we can show love to others. And we nurture hope by focusing on prayer. I'd like to say a word about each of these.

Giving Thanks for Our Diocesan Life Post-Covid

Thankfully, activities and initiatives have taken on a new life across the Diocese. Although we still have to be careful, it seems the worst of Covid-19 is behind us for now. There has been good participation in training sessions put on for lay people in the areas of funeral ministries, Safeguarding and Eucharistic Minister preparation. I'm grateful for the many who attended the financial update meetings held across the Diocese in October-November. I'm happy also to report that the Lourdes workers have been getting together to begin preparing for the Diocesan pilgrimage that we hope will take place in June.

I'm glad to say a new Director for Youth Ministry and Lifelong Learning has been appointed in the Diocese as well as a pastoral assistant helping to create pastoral resources for us. Next month some 84 young people and 40 leaders will be taking part in the 'Anois' programme that has proven very popular in recent years. Later on next summer, we hope a group of young adults from across the Diocese will be taking part in the World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal.



A wonderful piece of good news is that the 20 participants from across the Diocese on the Certificate in Pastoral Leadership programme have now concluded their two years of study, reflection and prayer. I congratulate them and thank them for their commitment. They are now looking forward to sharing their talents and skills at the service of others in the Diocese.

Recently, we celebrated the launch of a new book entitled *Of Limerick Saints and Seekers*. It's a book about personalities linked to Limerick from diverse traditions who gave spiritual and social leadership over generations here or across the globe. It shows us we can be proud of the heritage and impact of people of our Diocese both historically and in current times.



JPII Award Candidates 2022

Giving Thanks for The Synodal Pathway

One of the initiatives that is generating hope across the Church worldwide is Pope Francis' proposal of a Synodal pathway. Of course, we in Limerick held a Synod in 2016. Now Pope Francis wants all dioceses across the world to engage in this way of trying to work more closely together in understanding what it is that God wants for the Church at this time.

In August, there was much media coverage of Ireland's national Synodal synthesis prepared in response to Pope Francis' invitation. That synthesis was written up on the basis of reports from each diocese and from various movements and associations. We in Limerick contributed to it and our diocesan synthesis document is available on the Limerick diocesan website. I invite you to read it.

The Synodal pathway now moves onto its next stage called the continental phase. In Europe, for instance, delegates will meet to review all the national syntheses and draw up a further report that will feed into the universal Synod to be held in Rome in October 2024. Meanwhile, we in Ireland will need to continue on our own Synodal pathway.

What's coming across clearly in the Synodal pathway so far is a yearning to reach out to those who for various reasons feel excluded in and from the Church. There's also a desire to go deeper in the knowledge of our faith, to renew our celebration of the liturgy and to explore new possibilities for the Church in passing on the torch of faith to the next generations. On January 28, in Rathkeale House Hotel there'll be a session to update anyone interested in how the Synodal pathway is progressing in the light of the various reports. You're welcome to attend and can register with the Diocesan Centre by calling 061-350000 or emailing reception@limerickdiocese.org.



Putting Hope into Practice in a Love That Pays Attention to Little Details

The Church, of course, progresses in hope not so much by activities and reports as by the love we have for one another. Jesus came on earth to bring heaven on earth. That comes about in small and big ways when we live like Jesus as we relate to those around us.

Recently I read a quote from Pope Francis that struck me. He explains the importance of paying attention to small details. He says, “Let us not forget that Jesus asked his disciples to pay attention to details. The little detail that wine was running out at a party. The little detail that one sheep was missing. The little detail of noticing the widow who offered her two small coins. The little detail of having spare oil for the lamps, should the bridegroom delay. The little detail of asking the disciples how many loaves of bread they had. The little detail of having a fire burning and a fish cooking as he waited for the disciples at daybreak.”[1]



*"The Widow's Penny" by
Édouard Louis Dubufe, public domain*

[1] Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter on Holiness in Today's World, *Gaudete et exsultate*, 144

Yes, the small daily acts of love go a long way to spreading hope. And now, not least because of the ‘permacrisis’, those small details may include just calling around to the neighbour, friend, relation that maybe, for reasons of Covid-19, we lost somewhat lost contact with. I’m thinking, in particular, of people living alone, people who are elderly, people who are ill, people who lost loved ones perhaps during the year. Sometimes it’s just letting them know you are there, that you are thinking of them that can make a difference, that can light that candle of hope. So if you have the slightest inclination that someone might appreciate that visit, that call, that small detail, please act on it. It could bring hope. And if everything is fine, you’ve, at least, reconnected. And that’s something we all need consider now that the worst of Covid-19 has hopefully passed. It is time to reconnect. It will bring hope.

Nurturing Hope by Dedicating Time to Prayer

As we come out of Covid-19, I think many of us find ourselves rushing around again. But let’s not forget what we realised during the Covid-19 lockdown – we had time to slow down, to be attentive to relationships and to give time to reflection and prayer. Covid-19 might pass but let’s hold on to the value of prayer, reflection and meditation.

The simplest definition of prayer is conversation with God. When we pray it's like returning "home" because our true home is in God. So often, in our generosity, we make the effort to help others with a heart and a half, but when it comes to God, we can be more like servants doing our duty for him rather than actually speaking to him as children who love their Father. I met a woman a few weeks ago who told me she was greatly encouraged by a homily from one of our priests who simply made the point that God listens and hears our prayers. He is all ears to listen to us and he wants us to speak with him.

As human beings we're actually built, as it were, to pray, to speak with God. Gandhi made the point that prayer is the food for the soul. The body can fast but the soul cannot. It's not that we have to say loads of prayers. But we should do well the basic prayers of every day – morning and evening prayer, grace before meals, the Rosary and small prayers made spontaneously during the day, prayers such as "I love you Lord, with all my heart", or "be merciful to me a sinner" or the Advent mantra (the last prayer found in the Bible) that could be repeated quietly a few times during the day, "Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus". It has been said that when you pray, remember this rule: it is better to say five words from the depths of your heart than ten thousand simply with your tongue.

Recently, Pope Francis recommended we take 2 minutes each day, simply going back over our day, looking out for where the Lord has been present and at work in our lives that day. In other words, count the blessings, notice how we've reacted to situations, ask for mercy for our failures in loving. It's important to carve out moments of prayer, silence and reflection in our lives. We can so easily slip into letting our soul, our interior life, become like a public square where everything and anything passes through.

We can find ourselves filled with so many noises that enter us simply from idle chatter or chat shows or sensationalist programmes with the result that the air we breathe is not life-giving and wholesome and can suffocate our soul. We need to breathe in the air of God's love, God's wisdom and God's closeness in our lives. Prayer gives us a chance to do that.



Conclusion

In wishing you well as we approach Christmas, I want to thank all the faithful in the Diocese for their commitment to the faith. It's not always easy to be Catholic these days. It takes a little more backbone than in recent times gone by. I am mindful too there are many changes happening in our Diocese in the light of a reduced number of clergy. I want to thank parishioners for embracing change and seeing how best to move forward. I am very grateful to clergy who minister so generously in an environment that can be hostile or simply indifferent and I ask you to remember them too in your prayers.

One final thought. Perhaps with Covid-19, people you know have lost regular contact with the Church. This Christmas might be an opportunity to invite them to re-connect. In doing this, I think you'd be helping them come "home" to God for whom our heart is made, the heart that, as the psalm puts it, will be restless until it rests in God.

+ Brendan Leahy

✠ Brendan Leahy
Bishop of Limerick



**"For to us a child is born, to us
a son is given; and the
government will be upon his
shoulder,
and his name will be called
'Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.'"
Isaiah 9:6**

"The Nativity" by Lorenzo Lotto, public domain



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