

Companions on our Journey



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LENT 1999

IRELAND MUST CHOOSE

It is almost twenty years since Pope John Paul visited Limerick. He came, he told us, to speak in the name of Christ, who gives dignity to every member of the Church and who gives a mission to each one.

In his closing words to us, he prayed that we would *"go forth in the power of the Spirit to continue Christ's work and to follow in his footsteps towards the end of the millennium and into the twenty-first century"*¹. The first part of that journey, *'towards the end of the millennium'*, is almost completed. We are on the threshold of our journey into the twenty-first century.

In his homily at Greenpark, the Pope put the challenge squarely. His call is even more urgent two decades later: *"Ireland must choose."* We have to choose whether we give first place to economic growth or to the dignity of every person – do we see ourselves first of all as an economy or as a community? We have to decide how we use the freedom and the possibilities brought by affluence, ease of travel and advances in communication. We have to consider our responsibilities in a world of grave inequalities -- and the Pope's call to alleviate or remove the crippling burden of debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations (Cf Pope John Paul II, *The Coming of the Third Millennium* [Tertio Milennio Adveniente] 51). We have to decide whether we are really prepared to put the Gospel at the centre of our lives. We have to ask ourselves what we need to do so that the people of the twenty-first century can hear the message of Jesus.

Our faith today has been handed on to us from the apostles, from Saints Patrick and Brigid, Munchin and Ita, Nessian and Lelia and Senan. It has come to us through ancestors who retained their belief through hardship and persecution, through war and famine. That long heritage could have been broken at any point by a generation which failed to live the Gospel with conviction. It is entirely possible that we might be the generation which allows the torch to fall. We must choose.

During our diocesan pilgrimages to the Holy Land, we often entered a town with a familiar name, like Naim, where Jesus raised the widow's son, only to hear the guide say, "There are no Christians here any more."

It is clearer now than it was two decades ago – there are no guarantees that Ireland will remain Christian. "You must work for the Lord with a sense of urgency", Pope John Paul said in Maynooth, "... this decade of the 1980s which we are about to enter, could be crucial and decisive for the future of the faith in Ireland. Let there be no complacency."

ALL ARE CALLED

The Pope left us in no doubt that the challenge is for everyone. *"Sometimes, lay men and women do not seem to appreciate to the full the dignity and the vocation that is theirs as lay people."* It is no use saying "I'm just an ordinary lay person". The Pope said bluntly that there is no such thing as an ordinary lay person. Every member of the Church has a part to play.

¹ The passages in italics are from Pope John Paul's homily in Limerick 1 October 1979

It has always been primarily in families and in parish communities that the Gospel message has been lived out and shared. Parents are "the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith"². God's gift of faith came to most of us through good parents, it was nourished by our wider family, it was fostered by committed teachers, it grew through our sharing in the life and worship of our parish.

Running constantly through the reports of our Listening Process in the Autumn of 1997, was a deep concern about how everyone, particularly those who feel marginalised, or who are suffering in many different ways, can be assured that they are welcome in the family of the Church and can be encouraged to appreciate and live the message more fully. The most frequently expressed concern was about how to share the faith and life of the Church with the young people whose task it will be to carry that faith and life into a new century.

Side by side with that was a repeated expression of a desire for greater involvement and participation in the life and mission of the followers of Christ.

I am struck by the extent to which these responses echoed two fundamental elements in what the Holy Father said to us.

- We have decisions to make about the kind of Ireland we want to leave to the next generation.
- The responsibility for bringing the light of Christ to our world lies with every one of us.

The challenge takes a new form today. The forces that influence us and which will shape our future are complex and varied. In Limerick, the Pope mentioned some of them: *"politics, the mass media, science, technology, culture, education, industry and work"*. These, he said, *"are precisely the areas where lay people are especially competent to exercise their mission"*.

The part played by priests and religious is changing and the role of the lay members of the Church is growing. There are several reasons for this:

- The decline in vocations is bringing huge changes in education, in health care, in parish life.
- Even more fundamentally, we are learning to realise that the tasks which were undertaken by religious sisters and brothers, often with the most meagre resources, were always the tasks of the whole Christian community.
- We are learning that a living parish is a family. A family only functions well when all the members feel they belong and have a part to play – and when they all do play their part.
- We are learning that the lay Christians who live and work in all the different spheres of modern society have the primary responsibility to bring the light of the Gospel into politics and science and business and social policy and information technology and so on.

² Baptismal Ceremony, Blessing

The factors that influence the kind of society that will exist in the next century are already at work in education, and health care and community building and in all the areas referred to by the Pope. These factors cannot be effectively touched by the Gospel unless *they "are guided by people who are true disciples of Christ, and who are, at the same time, fully competent in the relevant secular knowledge and skill"*. If that happens, *"then indeed will the world be transformed from within by Christ's redeeming power"*.

NO SMALL CHALLENGE

In the past, faith permeated the lives of individuals and communities. Now it is possible to live for days, even weeks, without ever really stopping to think about the deeper truths. Even Sunday Mass can pass in a flurry of distraction. Yet the truth is that the infinite God is present at every moment and in every place. We need to recapture that realisation. *"The task of this generation of Irish men and women is to transform the more complex world of modern industrial and urban life by the same Gospel spirit."*

We could find many reasons for thinking that the task is impossible. We are disturbed by the questions that have been raised about integrity in public life. We are shocked by the scandal of child sex abuse especially when it involves the betrayal of sacred trust. We see the visible decline in Church attendance and in vocations to the priesthood and religious life. We fear that we have not responded adequately during the 1980s, or indeed the 90s, and that the period may well have been, as Pope John Paul predicted, crucial and decisive for the future of the faith in Ireland.

Anyone who has seen the vitality and the commitment of our Listening Process and the subsequent efforts in parishes and clusters, knows the potential and the talent and the energy which is there. We will take our first steps into the new century with some awareness of the gifts with which God has blessed us for the task ahead.

It is no small challenge and we can only rise to it if we recognise that it is a challenge for **everyone**: "The work that awaits everyone in the vineyard of the Lord is so great that there is no place for idleness"³.

If we feel overwhelmed by the challenge, we might think of what the beatified martyrs of Kilmallock and Limerick faced. We might think of the hundreds of young men and women who left our diocese to bring the Good News to Africa and Asia, to Latin America and Australia, often at great risk to their health and even to their lives. We might think of young Patrick dragged to Ireland as a prisoner who changed this country more profoundly than anyone. We might think of our patron saints like Munchin and Ita and how astonished they would be that their names are still remembered and honoured a millennium and a half later. We might think of the twelve uneducated apostles who set out to convert the mighty Roman Empire.

THE VITAL CENTRE

Above all we might think of the Lord, dying in agony, yet entering into the glory that was his before the world was made. That is both the core of the message and the source of confidence in proclaiming it.

We touch that core in the celebration of Mass: The Eucharist "is the vital centre of all that the Church is and does, because at its heart is the real presence of the crucified, risen and glorified Lord, continuing and making available his saving work among us"⁴.

The picture of 'the Church', which most easily springs to mind is an image of buildings or structures of clergy or institutions. But the truest image of the Church is the congregation gathered for Mass.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *On the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful* [Christifideles Laici], 3

⁴ CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCES OF ENGLAND/WALES, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND, *One Bread One Body*, 3

"The Church is most fully and visibly itself when it gathers for the Eucharist. There the Church expresses what it already is by God's gift, and what it must more truly become – a community of faith and love, one in Christ, holy by the power of the Spirit, catholic in its integrity of faith and the universal scope of its outreach, apostolic in its living continuity with the faith and mission of the apostles and the Church throughout the ages". (*One Bread One Body*, 1)

That community which gathers for the Eucharist is meant to be an effective sign, a sacrament, which makes Jesus present in the world. There is no place for idleness because every Christian's life is meant to be part of the sign. There is no place for idleness because, in a family, every member counts. At Mass, each of us addresses God as 'our Father'. "To believe in God is to enter the 'we' of the family of God"⁵.

Why should we be surprised that people do not seem to listen to the Gospel if our own lives do not speak it? Why should we bewail young people's lack of commitment to the Mass if we are not clearly committed ourselves? Why should anyone feel entitled to complain about the deadness of their parish if they are not bringing life to the community themselves?

Taking part in the Mass commits us to sharing our faith and our resources with others: "You cannot be a genuine Christian on Sunday, unless you try to be true to Christ's spirit also in your work, your commercial dealings, at your trade union or your employers' or professional meetings. How can you be a true community at Mass unless you try to think of the welfare of the whole national community when decisions are being taken by your particular sector or group? How can you be ready to meet Christ in judgement unless you remember how the poor are affected by the behaviour of your group or by your personal life style?"

The Eucharist makes present the sacrifice, the self-giving of Christ to his Father for us so that we can be united to him in that giving without limit. To share in the Eucharist means being a sacrificial people, giving ourselves to the Father and one another, "and sharing all that we have and are with those in need"⁶.

The sign which makes Jesus present is the whole Church, all of us: "The Church as a community must be an effective proclamation of the Gospel, 'the living Gospel for all to hear'⁷.

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

We are companions on the journey. The word companion originally means one who shares bread. We are companions above all because together we receive Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life.

"We receive the body of Christ so that we may go forth as the body of Christ into the world, the living sacrament of his presence in the midst of others. Through the Eucharist we become more profoundly the Church and we are sent forth as the Church to fulfil our mission in and for the world"⁸.

Our preparations in parishes and clusters have made it clear that we all need to be involved together in that mission. We have made progress along the road that Pope John Paul mapped out for us when he spoke in Limerick about the role of every member of the Church: "*Lay people today are called to a*

⁵ *One Bread One Body*, 11

⁶ *One Bread One Body*, 34

⁷ *One Bread One Body*, 16

⁸ *One Bread One Body*, 66

strong Christian commitment, to permeate society with the leaven of the Gospel, for Ireland is at a point of decision in her history".

The generous involvement of facilitators and parish teams and the Jubilee Steering Committee has been very heartening. The progress made towards one of the goals which we set ourselves – of aiming to have a Parish Pastoral Council in every parish – is encouraging. The projects and plans undertaken by parishes have been very impressive.

We are already nearly one quarter of the way through 1999. I hope that the remaining months may see a final effort to finish the 1900s well and to move with new hope and vision into the Year of the Great Jubilee.

The journey towards the new millennium is only a part of the greater journey towards the house of our Father. In the celebration of Mass we see what we are and what we must more truly become.

The Eucharist is the source of our strength for the task of bringing the Good News to the world.

- It is the celebration and the deepening of our unity with one another in that task.
- It is the presence of the life death and resurrection of Christ: "a sacred gateway into living communion with God in his work for our salvation" (One Bread One Body, 33).
- It is the pledge of what awaits us – a share in the risen life of Jesus, when death is no more and every tear is wiped away.

The communion which we celebrate in the Eucharist and which we try to live in our lives "will be complete only in the final fullness of the Kingdom of God, but it is already visibly present here and now in the Body of Christ, his Church" (One Bread One Body, 13).. That is the journey we are making together into the twenty first century and, ultimately into the eternal home of our Father. As the Pope did in Limerick, I pray that, on that journey, Mary may keep us all "close to him who is 'Father of the world to come'."

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