

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY?



JOURNEYING TOGETHER INTO A NEW CENTURY

In the Lenten Pastoral *We are God's Temple*, I tried to point to some of the issues about which we need to reflect as we move into the new century. I promised that I would issue some more detailed reflections on these matters. I now do that in the hope that these thoughts may be of use to clusters, parishes, schools, groups and individuals in looking realistically to the future. These reflections are by no means exhaustive, but they may be a start.

*Bishop Donal Murray
Lent 2002*

'*How Can We Know the Way ?*' could be described as a work in progress. By identifying and expanding on three essential strands Bishop Murray outlines a working framework for us in the Limerick Diocese.

We in the Diocese can contribute by reflecting and working with this framework as Clusters, Parishes, Schools, Groups and Individuals. Within the evolving process our contributions will aid future pastoral planning and development. As our experience and thinking evolve they will also contribute to the further development and expansion of the document as a way forward in Building the House of God in Limerick Diocese.

*Limerick Diocesan Renewal Group
June 2002*

INTRODUCTION

A Larger More Demanding Challenge

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself.
The fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything
apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road.

Thomas Merton

During the past few years, preparation for and celebration of the Jubilee Year provided a focus for our efforts to enrich the life of our parishes and our diocese. We are now in a different situation:

... it is no longer an immediate goal that we face, but the larger and more demanding challenge of normal pastoral activity... It is in the local churches that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified – goals, methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for necessary resources – which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture¹.

As we contemplate the challenge, and as we peer into the uncertainties of the future, we may feel, not for the first time, a certain sympathy with the question of Thomas at the Last Supper: “Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” (Jn 14:5) We are assured, as Thomas was, that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is present with us because our journey is with him and in him; he is also present because he is the goal towards whom we are travelling. Nevertheless, mapping out the details of the path that we should be taking in the next decade still requires deep reflection and courageous planning.

In the Lenten Pastoral **We are God’s Temple**, I pointed out that the very considerable task that we have had to undertake in restoring St John’s Cathedral symbolises, and may help us to focus on, the larger task. An even more important challenge is that of rebuilding God’s house, that is the Church in our diocese, for the new century.

St Francis of Assisi began his life of commitment to God by restoring ruined church buildings. But his true life’s work was to renew and give new vision and strength to the community of Christ’s followers, the Church.

In the pastoral letter, I outlined some of the questions we need to reflect on as we look towards our task of rebuilding God’s house in our diocese and promised that I would issue a fuller reflection which might be considered and discussed in parishes, clusters, schools, groups throughout the diocese, and which might be thought and prayed about in homes and by individuals. I hope that this booklet will be helpful in this important process.

The areas about which I want to reflect with you fall under three broad but overlapping headings:

- We need to reflect on how we can hear and speak the challenge and hope of God's word in a changed world.
- We need to ask how best to prepare ourselves for the future,
- We need to ask how we can reach out beyond our own communities to the wider world.

This booklet indicates more fully why those questions are important and the areas into which reflecting on them might lead us.

I hope that clusters, parishes, schools, groups and individuals may find this helpful in approaching questions about how we can rebuild God's house for the twenty-first century.

This is a process that will take us some considerable time, but it is a very important one. We are moving into a future which will be full of challenges, but which is also full of hope. The task we now have is to prepare ourselves as wisely as we can for the century that is just beginning so that we may bring our faith, vibrant and living, into the future.

PART ONE

Hearing the Word of God

A Prayer to Christ, the Way the Truth and the Life

O Word, you are Lord and God,
you are the light by whom the light was made,
you are the way the truth and the life
in which there is no darkness or error
no emptiness or death;
you are the light without which there is only darkness,
the way without which there is only error,
the truth without which there is only emptiness,
the life without which there is only death.
Say a word, O Lord, say
"Let there be light"
so that I may see light and escape darkness,
see truth and escape emptiness
see life and escape death.

(St Augustine)

The Word was made flesh and lived among us.
May our ears be ever more ready to hear the word;
May our hearts and minds be generous in welcoming the
word;
May our lives be willing to accomplish the word;
May our lips be eloquent in speaking the word.
When our life is done, may the incarnate Word welcome
us
into the glory which he had with the Father and the Holy
Spirit
before the world was made.

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Mary, our Mother,
in you, the Word became flesh.
You pondered the truth about your Son in your heart.
You instructed the servants at Cana
to do whatever your Son told them.
You heard the word of God and kept it.
Teach us to listen faithfully to the word
and to speak it effectively in the world.

We need to hear the Gospel speaking to us in our own day. The Word was made flesh. In other words God's eternal Son became a human being in a particular culture, in a particular place, at a particular moment of history.

The Gospel was first expressed among the Jewish people of first century Palestine. It has been expressed in countless other languages and cultures for two thousand years. It brought light and hope to situations indescribably different and sometimes unimaginably more difficult than ours. The same liberating and transforming message now has to be spoken in the world of the twenty-first century. It is we, the Christians of this time, who must speak it.

The Gospel "does not spring spontaneously from any cultural soil"². Each new generation, including our own, has different experiences, different questions, different priorities, different strengths, different blind spots. Each generation "speaks a language into which the language of Jesus must be translated with patience and wisdom and without betrayal"³.

The first question is for ourselves: 'how can we "understand more profoundly and carry out with renewed vigour" the message and the mission Christ has given us?' Pope John Paul clearly spells out the foundation of every genuine answer to that question: "First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to *holiness*"⁴.

Holiness is the key. Rebuilding God's house in this diocese is not, first of all, about having the most eloquent statements of theology, or the most streamlined structures, or the healthiest finances, or the most impressive plans. Rebuilding God's house is first of all about deepening our knowledge and acceptance of Jesus as Lord of our lives. It is about knowing him not as some external pointer or signpost but as our way, our truth and our life, as one who lives in us and we in him.

The model of holiness, of receiving the Word wholeheartedly and bringing him to others, is Mary, his mother. She consented to the Incarnation by responding to the angel, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). The only instruction she is ever recorded as giving was to hear and obey the word of her Son: "**Do whatever he tells you**" (Jn 2:5).

There are many different ways in which individuals, groups and parishes might try to focus more on that central call to grow in closer to Christ. Efforts to celebrate the liturgy better, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, personal prayer and prayer in the home, *Lectio Divina*, prayer groups, the recitation of the Rosary, Scripture Reflection Groups giving people a sense of ownership of the Gospel, reading spiritual books, learning from the lives of the saints, these and many other ways of growth in holiness and toward an adult faith have a part to play in our response.

It is vital that we do not simply read the Pope's words on the centrality of holiness and then move on to what we regard as more 'practical' things. Everything else must be set in relation to holiness. ***There is nothing more practical in the renewal of the life of the Church than growing closer to Christ.***

We could become so absorbed in the scale of the work on the Cathedral and the challenge of collecting money that we might risk forgetting what the Cathedral is for. There would be little point in having a magnificent building but no living community of believers in Jesus Christ to worship in it. In the same way, our attempts to renew the life of the Church in the diocese could get lost in details about structures and finances and buildings and statistics.

Every element in the life of the Church – buildings, structures, plans, institutions, roles and organisations, even sacraments and liturgy – has one primary purpose: to unite us more closely to Jesus Christ. The most important question to be asked about any aspect of the Church's life is not how financially viable it is, or how admired it is, or much influence it wields on society, but how far it brings people closer to the Way, the Truth and the Life. Isolated from that deeper purpose, the other questions would bear an embarrassing resemblance to the temptations of Jesus in the desert – temptations to material comfort, popularity and political power.

Every meeting, every discussion, every step taken in these areas must be 'set in relation to holiness'. ***In practice this means that nothing should be thought or done in any area of the life of the Church except in an atmosphere of prayer.*** To approach these questions as if they

were merely about structures or institutional arrangements would be totally to miss the point. Every moment in our efforts of renewal should begin and end in prayer.

That, after all, was the context in which the mission of the Church began, with the coming of the Holy Spirit. That is the context in which it must continue: "(The apostles) were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14).

Three times in the last twelve months we found ourselves unexpectedly looking towards deeper truths. The foot and mouth crisis, the visit of the relics of St Thérèse, the horror of September 11th, led people to prayer and reflection on a scale that, perhaps, surprised them.

There is a danger that we soon leave such moments behind in order to return to what we call 'the real world'. The truth is that in those moments we were in touch with the real world. We knew our vulnerability and our need of God's love and we expressed the unlimited longings for happiness and the hopes of the peace for the whole human family that too often lie hidden in our hearts.

When he was Archbishop of Milan, Pope Paul VI spoke to his priests about the way in which even the great truths of faith – the birth and passion and death and resurrection of Jesus – can become habit and routine:

All these mysteries... must become fresh again, immediate, and I must rejoice at their beauty, greatness and the miracle of the goodness of the Lord. To see! To see! To let our soul exult in the contact with the divine⁵.

Answering our first question is primarily a matter for each one of us. No one else can provide the determination and the effort that refreshing our faith requires. When Pope John Paul said that Ireland must choose, he meant that every single one of us must choose. The question we face is nothing less than this: 'Do we wish to live our heritage of faith in such a way that it can be carried vibrantly into the future?' Anyone who believes that this is not his or her problem is, in effect, saying 'NO'.

Asking how we can hear and speak the Word of God today is also a matter for us to address together. There are many aspects to that question:

- Learning through prayer and reflection to understand more fully the wonder and freshness of the Gospel and how we can share it with others;
- Asking how we can approach and celebrate and appreciate more fully the meaning of the liturgy and the Sacraments in our parishes;
- Looking to the place that prayer and religious symbols have in our homes and families;
- Seeking to discover what the presence of Christ means and what he asks of us in our area of work, in our neighbourhood, in our responsibilities towards others at home and abroad;
- Communicating to young people that they are welcome and essential participants in our efforts to share and live the message of Christ;
- Facing Pope John Paul's challenge that we should be promoters of the culture of life as against the culture of death in its many forms – "murder, genocide, abortion euthanasia, wilful self-destruction... subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, as well as disgraceful working conditions" etc.⁶.
- Reaching out to those who have not heard the message, or who have lost sight of it, or who feel that they are in some way outside our community of faith and life;
- Reflecting on what the Church's social teaching has to say about our society, about politics and economics, and about how the underlying vision of the dignity of the person can be communicated and lived;

- Responding to the flood of new issues we will face in areas such as cloning, genetic interventions on human beings, experimentation on embryos;
- Understanding and acting on our responsibilities towards the environment, towards developing countries, towards the building of peace in the world.

These are only some of the issues. Obviously nobody can deal adequately with all of these areas, but if the Gospel is to be alive and active in the twenty-first century, we have to bring the vast range of gifts and experiences and opportunities that exist in our diocese to bear upon these issues in all sorts of different ways. We should also recognise and rejoice in the way that many individuals, families, associations and parishes are already doing so. We caught a glimpse of the great variety of those efforts in the *One Diocese, Many Stories* gathering at the end of the Jubilee Year.

There is no sphere of life in which the Gospel is irrelevant, but we sometimes have to work and think and pray hard in order to recognise its relevance. If we fail to do that in our own lives, no one can do it for us.

The answer to our question about how to hear and speak the Word of God will raise issues about how people can be encouraged and enabled to “exercise to the full their Christian powers which often lie buried and suffocated”⁷.

The Diocesan Pastoral Centre has done great work in recent years. The Centre has provided support to parishes in training of readers and special ministers, in introducing parish councils, in enriching the liturgy and in other ways. It is a centre for Youth Ministry in the diocese. It provides guidance to people, in how to pray, in coming to know the scriptures, in understanding our faith. It provides courses that help in dealing with personal and social problems. It seems clear, however, that this work needs to be expanded and that we need to make adequate provision to ensure that it can be adequately resourced.

The communications explosion must have implications for how we proclaim the Gospel. We will need to look at how we use the new technology both for communications within the diocese and for adult education in faith. The possibilities here are endless. The diocesan website (<http://www.limerickdiocese.org>) has been set up in recent years and is now a useful resource which can, I hope, be creatively developed in the future. The extraordinary success of some ‘prayer sites’ on the Internet, especially Sacred Space (<http://www.jesuit.ie/prayer/>), run by the Irish Jesuits, gives some indication of the possibilities that are opening up. The opportunities for education and dialogue through the interactive potential of the Internet have scarcely begun to be tapped.

The continuing formation of priests is more than ever a necessity in a changing world. The kind of leadership required by the new challenges will highlight the need for opportunities for priests to refresh and renew their ministry. This too has implications for our resources, since, as in any sphere life, renewal and in-service training is expensive.

The diocese also tries on a small scale to offer support to lay people who are studying theology at graduate or post-graduate level.

These needs are indirectly related to the question of funding the work on the Cathedral. The huge expenditure necessitated by that work means that we will have to realise some diocesan assets in order to offset the borrowing that will be required. This will function as a ‘safety net’, to be offset against the enormity of the sum we will have to borrow and to ensure we are in a position to meet our commitments.

It would, however, be foolish in the extreme to dissipate those assets – which are limited – on the restoration of the Cathedral. That would amount to getting rid of what our predecessors left us for a rainy day just when the rainy day is coming!

I hope that, when the work on the Cathedral has been completed and paid for, our reflections will have reached the point where we are ready to ask ourselves how some or all of these assets

might be invested in order to make ongoing provision for the resources that we will need if we are to hear and live and speak the Word of God in our world.

Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh who lights our path into the future. He tells us what we need above all is to know him and his presence with us. In answer to the question, 'how can we know the way' Jesus tells Thomas that what is required is not a detailed map of the road ahead; what we need is to know him, because he is the way.

Christ be near at either hand,
Christ behind, before me stand,
Christ with me where'er I go,
Christ around, above, below.

Christ be in my heart and mind,
Christ within my soul enshrined,
Christ control my wayward heart;
Christ abide and ne'er depart.

Christ my life and only way,
Christ my lantern night and day;
Christ be my unchanging friend,
Guide and shepherd to the end

PART TWO

Preparing for the future

Blessed are you, Father, who in your infinite love,
gave us your only begotten Son.
By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate
in the spotless womb of the Virgin Mary
and was born in Bethlehem.
He became our companion on life's path
and gave new meaning to our history,
the journey we make together in toil and suffering
in faithfulness and love,
towards the new heaven and the new earth,
where you, once death is vanquished will be all in all.
From John Paul II's prayer for the Jubilee Year

Jesus, Good Shepherd,
You have come to search out and to save what was lost,
You established the priesthood in your church
to continue the preaching of the Word,
the celebration of the Eucharist,
sacramental forgiveness and anointing,
the pastoral service of your people until the end of time.
We beg you to give us shepherds after your own heart.
May those you have chosen follow your call
with generosity and with love for you
and for the flock for whom you gave your life.

The second question is a very concrete and inescapable one. The shape of the Church in Limerick and in Ireland generally will have changed dramatically before the century is very much older. When the Cathedral is restored, it will still have the same dimensions and shape that its builders gave it. When the diocese is renewed to meet the future, it will look very different.

The most obvious change is well under way. The steep decline in the number of priests will mean that parishes will have fewer priests and some parishes, within the easily foreseeable future, will have no resident priest.

The sharp fall in the number of religious has already seen sisters and brothers withdrawing from the schools, colleges and hospitals in which they made such an extraordinary contribution to the mission of the Church and in the service of the people of Ireland. As their presence in education and health care becomes less visible, it will become more obvious to everyone how much we have benefited from the dedication of religious.

We should not be fatalistic about the fall in vocations. ***The encouragement of vocations has to be a priority for every member of the Church.*** Jesus still calls; we have the responsibility of ensuring that his voice can be heard. One of the primary issues arising under the heading of 'how can we prepare for the future?' is to ask ourselves how we can respond to the task, which is the responsibility of every Christian community, to provide for worship, preaching and priestly ministry into the future.

We should also recognise the enormous importance of the role which religious brothers and sisters play through prayer and pastoral activity in spite of falling numbers. We should rejoice too in the courage and creativity with which they have sought out new fields of apostolic service.

Religious life will continue to have an essential part to play, but it will be quite unlike what we have seen in the past⁸.

As the number of priests declines we should be asking ourselves how that reduced number should be deployed. However hard we work and pray for vocations, we cannot ignore the fact that, even if there should be a dramatic upturn in the near future, it would take many years for the effect to be seen. The position we will face ten years from now is already quite clear. That faces us with a number of decisions, some of which will be painful.

- Each parish wishes to retain at least one resident priest. At the same time, however, parishes vary from less than a thousand parishioners to almost ten thousand. It is clear that we need to ask ourselves questions about how a reduced number of priests should be deployed.
- How can we ensure that, when parishes find that they have fewer priests than they have been used to, or perhaps no resident priest, that they have prepared themselves realistically and confidently for the new situation?
- Would it not be unwise and unrealistic to make it an absolute priority to maintain at least one priest in each parish, without considering the size of the parish, irrespective of the state of health of the priest, taking no account of special pastoral demands such as hospitals and schools and nursing homes?
- In the case of special demands, for instance chaplaincies to schools and prisons and hospitals, or work with youth or with pastoral renewal and education programmes in the diocese, are some of these so important that we should try to ensure that there are priests available for them even at the expense of parish ministry?
- If we decline below the level even of one priest per parish, what then?

From the point of view of the diocese there is a question about deploying a more limited number of priests. From the point of view of the priest the question is about deploying his own limited resources in the face of rising demands.

- There is the challenge of finding time for prayer and reflection and renewal; there is the need to prioritise and select among all the calls upon him.
- There is a need to ensure that priests can get away from the parish for holidays and for a day off.
- There is the need to ensure that those who offer pastoral care are not left without the support and understanding of those they serve and of one another.

I believe that there is often not sufficient awareness of the stresses under which priests increasingly labour because of rising age, declining numbers and a culture less supportive of their ministry. Priests are often taken aback to be told "This is your busy time" at periods of the year when there are a number of big celebrations but the burdens of parish life are actually lighter than at other times. One can still sometimes hear people wonder what priests do during the week. Such remarks can, quite unintentionally, be very morale-draining for someone who is feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. One of the benefits of greater involvement of lay people in the life of their parishes will, I hope, be a greater understanding of the load that priests carry. We cannot be content to look towards a scenario in which aging priests are asked to accept ever greater and more impossible burdens. However we prepare for the future, the answer will not lie in increasing the workload of priests.

We must ask ourselves what the shape of the diocese should be if we are to have a living, faith-filled community in the future. What kind of clustering and cooperation and rationalisation do we need to undertake? We also need to ask ourselves whether others can do many of the things that were done by priests in the past and whether new needs may require new provisions. This presents a clear challenge to the Parish Pastoral Council in the future.

It is for this reason that we decided some time ago that, where a parish loses a priest, his house if it is no longer required should be seen as a resource to provide for the future. The house might be rented to provide a steady income, or, if it has to be sold, the proceeds should be invested to enable the parish to cater for the administrative and pastoral needs that will have to be met with one less priest. In many cases meeting these needs will involve paying someone to carry out particular tasks. The loss of a priest is not a financial windfall but a serious call to plan realistically and make wise provisions for a future with a reduced number of priests.

It would be easy for a parish, or for the diocese, to leave questions about falling numbers of priests until circumstances force us into answering them. That would be a recipe for arriving irresponsibly unprepared into a future that we can easily foresee.

In any case, many of the things we need to do would be right and necessary even if vocations were still at the level of the 1950s. The silver lining may be that the urgency of our present situation will finally make inescapably clear the importance of involving everybody in the life of the parish, of highlighting the responsibility of every Christian for the future of the Church, of accepting the need for cooperation and pooling of resources between parishes, thus ensuring that our parishes remain places of prayer and community.

It is not a matter of drawing the wagons in a circle and waiting to be overrun. It is not a matter of managing a terminal decline. The Word of God becomes incarnate in every age and every situation, challenging us to reflect on local social issues in the light of the Gospel because this is the only time and place in which we live. The Gospel is to be spoken where we actually are, not where we imagine we are, or where we wish we were. It is a question of preparing ourselves to speak what we know is the all-powerful Word, the Word who is the ultimate meaning and goal of human life, the Word who offers hope to our world. We know that our situation, with its faults and weaknesses, its strengths and potential, is where Jesus wishes to become flesh in the lives of his brothers and sisters.

It is a question of believing that the living stones of the Church contain all the variety of gifts needed to fulfil the mission we have received from Christ (1 Cor 12). Preparing for the future will mean recognising, encouraging and using those gifts. The gifts of each individual are important for the health of the whole body of Christ: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you' " (1 Cor 12:21).

The situation should not be approached with a sense of desperation. We have many advantages compared to the generations that went before us. The most distant part of the diocese can be reached more quickly today than a neighbouring might have been a century ago. There are new means of communication within the diocese and with every part of the world. We have new ways of involving people and new kinds of expertise available. Parishes, even in different parts of the diocese, can cooperate among themselves in ways that would not have been possible in the past. We need to ask ourselves what new opportunities are available to us and how we can most creatively use them.

- What possibilities are opened up by new communications technology?
- What do we have to offer to or receive from or share with other parishes?
- Is there expertise in our parish or cluster which would help us in making God's word known and lived?

The Word can speak to the twenty-first century as to every moment of history; God's Word, by whom all things were made, is capable of transforming this world; the Word, "which divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow, and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12) addresses the deepest needs and longings of every human heart. This does not reduce the demand on us to prepare our communities and ourselves as wisely and as thoroughly as we can. On the contrary, it intensifies that demand, because it highlights our responsibility as bearers of the message for which the world hungers.

God our Father, we travel the road of life,
into an always uncertain future.
Sometimes it is a road of shattered hopes;
sometimes we see your gifts bearing unexpected fruit.
Whether we travel in joy or in sorrow, your Son walks with us.
It is in the real world, with all its pain and disappointment
with all its beauty and its hopes,
not in imaginations and illusions
that Jesus comes to meet us and to draw us to himself.
Help us to travel with hope and courage
to meet him who is the way
so that we may share his Good News
with all his brothers and sisters.

PART THREE

Reaching out...

Father in heaven,
we praise and thank you for the missionary spirit
you poured out in abundance on the people of Ireland.

Revive that dynamic generous spirit in us so that:
your name be known and praised in every culture;
your kingdom of truth and life, justice and peace,
love and forgiveness be established in every land;
your people everywhere be given their daily bread
and your beautiful, life-giving creation be respected.

May all of us work together
to build your new Civilization of Love.
We make this our fervent prayer in union with Mary –
Mother of the Church and its first missionary –
Through Christ our Lord and Saviour.

From the Mission Alive Prayer

The significance of the Cathedral, or of any church, is not confined to the building, nor even to what takes place within it. To every Mass we bring the living sacrifice of our whole lives; at the end of every Mass we are sent out to love and serve the Lord. The liturgy both gathers up and gives new strength to the whole of Christian life.

When St Francis had rebuilt some ruined churches, he realised that this was only the start of his mission. In the same way, we, the living stones of God's Church have to reach out to the wider world. "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary"⁹; "The need for all the faithful to share in this responsibility is not merely a matter of making the apostolate more effective; it is a right and duty based on their baptismal dignity..."¹⁰.

"Human beings... can fully discover their true selves only in sincere self-giving"¹¹. That principle, stated by the Second Vatican Council, and constantly repeated by Pope John Paul, applies to every individual and every human grouping. It is particularly true of the baptised person and of every element in the Church.

Any faith community that saw no need to look outside itself and to share the gift it has received could hardly be described as a living reality. *The Christian person* does not live for him or herself alone; *the family* is meant to have an influence for good in the community; *the parish* has a role in the life of the diocese; *the diocese* is supposed to be a living, fruitful part of the family of the universal church.

•... to the whole Church

Each person is meant to grow continually in awareness of their place in the parish, every parish to become more aware of its place in the diocese. We should all be more conscious of our place in the wider family of the Church in every continent at every moment of history. The struggles and the hopes of Christians in other places and at other times are part of our struggles and hopes.

The first step in becoming aware of *one's place in the parish* is to recognise the importance of what is already there. Sometimes people who love their family with a deep and practical love, people who try to be honest and fair in their work, people who are kind and understanding towards their neighbours, people who pray frequently, nevertheless see themselves as not being 'involved' in the life of the parish. These efforts and attitudes are in fact an essential part of the life of the

parish. This is what the parish community gathers up and celebrates on a Sunday; this is the life which draws its strength from the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

We need to move from a view which sees the Church as doing things, perhaps very admirable things, for society to a view which sees the Church as something *I* am, something *I* do. We need to see the liturgy and especially the Eucharist not just as something the priest offers, but as *our offering of ourselves*, of all our activity, of our entire lives and beings, to God.

The second step is to recognise *the many groups and activities* where people, inspired by the Gospel, work and pray together for the good of others. These would include groups like a parish pastoral council or core group, a conference of St Vincent de Paul, a Legion of Mary Praesidium, a bereavement group, a liturgy committee, a youth group, a prayer group. A gathering of such groups or an exhibition of their work can often be a source of great encouragement, since, in all likelihood, nobody in the parish is aware of the entire spectrum of the richness of its life.

The third step is to look at a *vision of what the parish could and should be* and to see how we might move towards that vision:

(The parish) must rediscover its vocation which is to be a fraternal and welcoming family home, where those who have been baptised and confirmed become aware of forming the people of God. In that home, the bread of good doctrine and the Eucharistic bread are broken for them in abundance, in the setting of one single act of worship; from that home they are sent out day by day to their apostolic mission in all the centres of activity in the life of the world¹²

Where would one begin to list the areas in which that vision might challenge us as individuals and as a parish? How welcoming a home are we for those who are sick, for young people, for those who have marriage problems, for travellers, for young parents, for single people, for the bereaved, for those who feel excluded, for refugees and asylum seekers. Could we have outreech teams (for example Baptismal Teams, Local Area Groups etc.) in our local community to help these and every parishioner feel that they are part of a community that values their gifts and sends them out day by day to bring Christ to the world?

We need to become more aware of the *place of the parish within the diocese*. The hermetically sealed parish is a contradiction in terms. How could we hope to reach out to the whole world if we had scarcely any dealings with the parishes next door? It is evident that greater cooperation and 'clustering' is a necessity. Some very welcome progress has been made, but cooperation is something that one must keep working at, otherwise it will inevitably run out of steam.

The worldwide Church in union with the Holy Father is our family. Its vision and heritage are larger than the perspectives of our time and place and culture. It is not something to be moulded to our limited needs; it is a gift to be appreciated and valued; it is the bearer of a message which we are meant to bring courageously, but always faithfully, into each new situation. The unchanging message is to be 'translated with patience and wisdom and without betrayal'. The enormous variety of cultures and times in which the message has already taken flesh encourages us in the task of bringing it alive in our own lives and situation.

One often hears reference to something called 'the institutional church'. Whatever or whoever this entity is supposed to be, it never seems to be something for which the speaker accepts any responsibility. It is always spoken about 'from the outside'. The Church is a mystery, a sacrament, "that is a sign and instrument of communion with God and the unity of the entire human race"¹³. If one sees it simply, or even primarily, as an institution, one loses sight of the fundamental reality and the reason for which it exists.

In and through the Church, Christ is present among us. In the Church we live as his brothers and sisters, daughters and sons of his Father, sharing the divine life poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Jesus and to one another. The union of humanity with God in unending love "is the purpose which governs everything" in the Church¹⁴.

What we have received from Christ comes to us through the life of the Church down the centuries – our own Mainchín, Íde, Nessian, Lelia and Senan, our Limerick martyrs, the Christians who have gone before us in Limerick and all over the world: "In this way, the Church in her doctrine, life and

worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes"¹⁵. We need to recapture a sense of the Church as a living body to which we belong. The gifts which the Holy Spirit gives to each of us are meant to enrich the life of the body. If we withhold those gifts, the life and mission of the Body of Christ is weakened.

Renew by the light of the Gospel the Church of Limerick.
Strengthen the bonds of unity between the faithful and their pastors,
that together with John Paul our pope, Donal our bishop,
and the whole college of bishops,
your people may stand forth
in a world torn by discord and strife
as a sign of oneness and peace.
Be mindful of our brothers and sisters
who have fallen asleep in the peace of Christ,
and all the dead whose faith only you can know.
Lead them to the fullness of the resurrection
and gladden them with the light of your face.
When our pilgrimage on earth is complete,
welcome us into your heavenly home,
where we shall dwell with you for ever.
There with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God,
with the apostles, the martyrs
Saints Munchin, Ita, Lelia, Nessian, Senan,
and the martyrs of Limerick, and all the saints,
we shall praise you and give you glory
through Jesus Christ your Son
(From the Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs and Occasions A)

●... to the whole Christian family

We should pray and hope and work so that the new century will see growth in the visible unity among Christians for which Christ prayed. Please God that growth might surprise us. To be committed to prayer and work for ecumenism is not an optional extra:

A Christian Community which believes in Christ, and desires with Gospel fervour, the salvation of mankind can hardly be closed to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who leads all Christians towards full and visible unity... It is a matter of the love which God has in Jesus Christ for all humanity; to stand in the way of this love is an offence against him and against his plan to gather all people in Christ"¹⁶.

The consciousness that we share so much, the realisation that we have travelled a considerable distance, can often increase the pain and frustration of knowing that we are still divided in various ways. Pope John Paul captures this frustration when he remarks: "I will never forget the statement I heard during an ecumenical gathering with representatives of the Protestant community in Cameroon: 'We know we are divided, but we do not know why' "¹⁷.

At the same time we know that many of these areas, for instance with regard to the Eucharist, concern matters which are at the heart of what has been handed on to us in the Catholic Church. It would be a very false ecumenism for people of any tradition to abandon the responsibility of carrying what they value as their own rich heritage into the future.

We might examine our conscience on this necessary commitment by asking ourselves a number of questions:

- How far does prayer for Church unity, and prayer for other Christians and their communities of faith and worship figure in our personal prayer and in the Prayers of the Faithful in our Sunday Masses, apart from the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity? Should we not be praying every week for our brothers and sisters in Christ?

- How much do we know about the traditions of other Christians in our own neighbourhood? Do we recognise that the grace of God at work among them can build up our own faith and lead both of us closer to Jesus Christ? It is very striking, as I have been privileged to do, to hear bishops and priests from Eastern Europe speak of how they and other prisoners experienced that mutual enrichment and mutual support in what they called 'the ecumenism of the gulags'.
- Have we taken seriously the call to work together with other Christians wherever possible? That call has been made very clearly by the Holy Father:

Relations between Christians... presuppose and from now on call for every possible form of practical cooperation at all levels: pastoral, cultural and social, as well as that of witnessing to the Gospel message... In the eyes of the world cooperation among Christians becomes a form of common Christian witness and means of evangelisation which benefits all involved¹⁸.

It is possible to foresee one important new opportunity for growth in the area of ecumenism. Until very recently, we had little contact with the rich Christian traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. This is now changing rapidly with the arrival of refugees from Eastern Europe. In all likelihood migration in both directions will be greatly increased by the eastward enlargement of the European Union. "Since... the ancient tradition of the Eastern Churches is an integral part of the heritage of Christ's Church, the first need for Catholics is to be familiar with that tradition so as to be nourished by it and to encourage the process of unity in the best way possible for each"¹⁹.

Father, all-powerful and ever-living God...
 Through Jesus Christ
 you bring us to the knowledge of your truth,
 that we may be united in one faith and one baptism
 to become his body.
 Through Christ you have given the Holy Spirit to all peoples.
 How wonderful are the works of the Spirit,
 revealed in so many gifts!
 Yet how marvellous is the unity
 the Spirit creates from their diversity,
 as he dwells in the hearts of your children,
 filling the whole Church with his presence
 and guiding it with his wisdom.

From the Preface for Christian Unity

Lord, pour out upon us the fullness of your mercy
 and by the power of your Spirit
 remove divisions among Christians.
 Let your Church rise more clearly
 as a sign for all the nations
 that the world may be filled with the light of your Spirit
 and believe in Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

•... to the whole world

We have in this diocese a rich missionary history. In some parishes the **Mission Alive** festival last autumn led to an exploration of the missionary past and present of the parish. This is a task that it would be well worth undertaking in every part of the diocese. Bishops, priests, religious and laypeople from Limerick have worked, and many are still working as missionaries, all over the world. We should know and be proud of what they have accomplished and ensure that it is remembered. If we sometimes feel discouraged by the challenge of communicating the faith in our 'new continent', it may be to think of the situations they faced and still face.

Missionaries rely heavily on and appreciate the prayers, the interest and the love of their families and friends at home. Might it not be a worthwhile undertaking for a group or for a whole parish to adopt a more active interest in 'their' missionary, perhaps to 'twin' with his or her mission? What we might learn and what we might share could be a great mutual enrichment.

Increasingly we will find people who are followers of non-Christian religions living among us, and Irish people, especially young people, will find themselves living in cultures formed by these religions. Jews, chosen by God to be his people, and Muslims who also believe in the God of Abraham hold a special place among these religions, and it may especially be the followers of Islam who become an increasingly significant element in our society. This will call for a willingness to dialogue, a respect for the beliefs of others, and a firm belief that Christ is the Word of God incarnate. "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions... yet she proclaims, and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life"²⁰.

We are also called to look beyond our own community because we live in a world of such great inequalities. Since the events of last September in New York and Washington, we feel that things are less secure than we had imagined. We feel vulnerable. It is interesting that, over twenty years ago, in the context of describing our vulnerability, Pope John Paul added:

All this is happening *against the background of the gigantic remorse* caused by the fact that, side by side with wealthy and surfeited people and societies, living in plenty and ruled by consumerism and pleasure, the same human family contains individuals and groups *that are suffering from hunger*. There are babies dying of hunger under their mothers' eyes²¹.

Poverty and desperation can provide a breeding ground, but not a justification, for terrorism. The 'war against terrorism' must be a war against deprivation and denials of human dignity in the world. But the fundamental reason why we should be concerned about poverty and underdevelopment is that those it affects are our brothers and sisters. They are the people in whose name Christ will say to us, "I was hungry and you gave me food" or "I was hungry and you did not give me food".

The support which has been given by Irish people down the years to *Trócaire* and to other development agencies has been very considerable. Among other things, the atrocities in America have drawn our attention to a country that has nothing. Afghanistan is not unique in that. The cry of the poor still insistently demands our response.

The work of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and of many individuals and groups who respond to the needs, material and spiritual of their brothers and sisters reminds us of the various kinds of poverty, material and spiritual, that exist closer to home.

Increasingly the challenge of reaching out to the world will be found close to home. Already we can see people from many different nations in our streets. Many of them have come fleeing from persecution. Already in the opening books of the Bible we are repeatedly told that we should love, welcome and behave justly towards the stranger (e.g. Ex 22:21, 23:9; Lev 19:10, 19:34, 23:22; Dt 10:18f, 24:17f). In the New Testament the same commandment is clearly part of the message of Christ:

"Racial prejudice, which denies the equal dignity of all the members of the human family and blasphemes the Creator, can only be eradicated by going to its roots, where it is formed: in the human heart... Harboured racist thoughts and entertaining racist attitudes is a sin against the specific message of Christ for whom one's 'neighbour' is not only a person from my tribe, my milieu, my religion or my nation: it is every person that I meet along the way"²².

In a shrinking world we are more and more aware of ourselves as one human race sharing one vulnerable planet. Our attitudes and behaviour affect the climate, the air, the seas and rivers, the plants and animals in many ways that may irreparably damage the earth which is our common home. 'The senseless destruction of the natural environment' is a product of the failure to see the earth as God's gift rather than as something to be used arbitrarily and without restraint.²³

We hope one day to be part of God's eternal kingdom where people of every race and nation will be gathered. We hope, in other words, that one day, the strangers who have come to our country will welcome us as their brothers and sisters in our Father's house.

All of this remains an essential part of the work of building the living stones of God's house. It would be a huge contradiction if we tried to build up the living stones, ornamented with the many gifts of the Holy Spirit, without remembering that the greatest gift is love (1 Cor 13:13).

Father, by the power of the Spirit,
strengthen the Church's commitment
to the new evangelisation
and guide our steps along the pathways of the world,
to proclaim Christ by our lives,
and to direct our earthly pilgrimage
towards the City of heavenly light.
May Christ's followers show forth their love
for the poor and the oppressed;
may they be one with those in need
and abound in works of mercy;
may they be compassionate towards all,
that they themselves may obtain indulgence
and forgiveness from you.
Praise and glory to you, Most Holy Trinity,
you alone are God most high.
From Pope John Paul's prayer for the Jubilee Year

CONCLUSION

Unless the Lord builds the house

St Thérèse of Lisieux felt discouraged by the impossibility of doing all the things that need to be done. She wanted to be a missionary in many different places at once, a doctor, a martyr, a teacher. Then she recognised the one thing that is at the core of all these vocations:

Love, in fact, is the vocation which includes all others; it's a universe of its own, comprising all time and space – it's eternal... To be nothing else than love deep down in the heart of Mother Church; that's to be everything at once²⁴.

Now she is recognised, among other things, as Patroness of the Missions along with St Francis Xavier, and a Doctor of the Church along with the greatest teachers in Christian history, like St Augustine, St Gregory the Great and St Thomas Aquinas. And she suffered like a martyr, through the pain of a terminal illness and through a deep darkness where her trust in God was tested to the limit.

The list of issues referred to in this letter is daunting. Nobody could possibly respond adequately in all of these areas, but if everybody, trusting in God's love and trying to love God in return, tried to do something about even one of them, we would have a more vigorous Church and a transformed world.

The task that lies before us is ultimately God's task. "Unless the Lord build the house, those who build it labour in vain" (Ps 127:1). The house we are asked to build is God's house. ***The truth is that it is God who is building it for us.*** We are called and encouraged, we are promised the fulfilment of our deepest longings, by the unconquerable love of God. We are at home in the mystery of that love which fills creation. Creation is our Father's house. That is why Francis, in *the Canticle of the Creatures*, could greet his Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Mother Earth and even his Sister Death.

We can therefore approach even the most daunting challenges with quiet confidence. The great temptation is to think that the results are the product of our plans and efforts. God asks for our

wholehearted commitment, offering our divinely given gifts in the service of the Gospel, but it is God's love that bears the fruit. That is why growth in holiness is the key to every pastoral initiative:

It is prayer which roots us in this truth. It constantly reminds us of the primacy of Christ and, in union with him, the primacy of the interior life and of holiness. When this principle is not respected, is it any wonder that pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration? We then share the experience of the disciples in the Gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish: 'We have toiled all night and caught nothing' (Lk 5:5). This is the moment of faith, of prayer, of conversation with God, in order to open our hearts to the tide of grace and allow the word of Christ to pass through us in all its power: *Duc in altum!* [Put out into the deep water]²⁵.

CANTICLE OF THE CREATURES

O most high, almighty, good Lord God,
to you belong praise, glory, honour, and all blessing!
By you alone, Most High, were all things made
and no man is worthy to speak Thy name.
Praised be my Lord with all his creatures,
especially Lord Brother Sun,
who brings us the day and brings us the light;
fair is he and shining with a very great splendour;
Most High, he signifies you to us!
Praised be my Lord for Sister Moon,
and for the stars,
which he has set in heaven clear
and precious and lovely.
Praised be my Lord for Brother Wind,
and for air and cloud,
calms and all weather,
by which you uphold life in your creatures.
Praised be my Lord for Sister Water,
who is very serviceable unto us,
and humble, and precious, and clean.
Praised be my Lord for Brother Fire,
through whom you give us light in the night;
and he is beautiful and joyous,
and very mighty, and strong.
Praised be my Lord for our Sister, Mother Earth,
who does sustain us and keep us,
and bring forth divers fruits,
and flowers of many colours, and grass.
Praised be my Lord for those who pardon one another
for His love's sake,
and who endure weakness and tribulation;
blessed are they who peaceably endure,
for by You, Most Highest, shall they be crowned.
Praised be my Lord for our sister the death of the body,
from whom no man living can escape.
Woe unto them who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are they who are found walking by thy most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.
Praise you and bless my Lord,
and give thanks unto Him and serve Him with great humility.

St Francis of Assisi

+Donal Murray
Bishop of Limerick
September 2002

NOTES

- ¹ John Paul II, At the Close of the Great Jubilee (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*), 29.
- ² John Paul II, Catechesis in our Time (*Catechesi Tradendae*), 53.
- ³ John Paul II, Catechesis in our Time, 40.
- ⁴ John Paul II, At the Close of the Great Jubilee, 30.
- ⁵ Montini J. B., The Priest, Helicon 1965, p. 117.
- ⁶ John Paul II, The Gospel of Life (*Evangelium Vitae*) 3.
- ⁷ Paul VI, Evangelisation in the Modern World, (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*) 70.
- ⁸ Cf. Breen, Michael (ed.), A Fire in the Forest, Veritas 2001.
- ⁹ Vatican II, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) 2.
- ¹⁰ John Paul II, On the Church's Missionary Mandate (*Redemptoris Missio*) 71.
- ¹¹ Vatican II, The Church in the Modern World, (*Gaudium et Spes*) 24.
- ¹² John Paul II, On Catechesis in our Time, (*Catechesi Tradendae*) 67).
- ¹³ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, (*Lumen Gentium*) 1.
- ¹⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church 773.
- ¹⁵ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) 8.
- ¹⁶ John Paul II, On Commitment to Ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint*) 99.
- ¹⁷ John Paul II, Crossing the Threshold of Hope, Jonathan Cape 1994, p. 148.
- ¹⁸ John Paul II, On Commitment to Ecumenism 40.
- ¹⁹ John Paul II, Light from the East (*Oriente Lumen*) 1.
- ²⁰ Vatican II, Declaration the Church and Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) 2.
- ²¹ John Paul II, On the Mercy of God (*Dives in Misericordia*) 11.
- ²² Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Vatican City 1988.
- ²³ Cf John Paul II, On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (*Centesimus Annus*) 37 and The Gospel of Life (*Evangelium Vitae*) 83.
- ²⁴ St Thérèse, Autobiography of a Saint, tr. Ronald Knox, Fontana 1960, p.185-6.
- ²⁵ John Paul II, At the Close of the Great Jubilee, 28.