

PUT OUT INTO THE DEEP WATER



The Sea of Galilee

DONAL MURRAY
BISHOP OF LIMERICK
LENT 2001

We have every reason to thank God as we look back on our celebration of the Jubilee Year. Many of the events have left me with happy and grateful memories. I had the privilege of accompanying our diocesan pilgrimage to Rome in April and our Jubilee pilgrimage to Lourdes in June. I met the pilgrims travelling from Clonfert to Mount Brandon as they visited holy places in the diocese during May. In August, with a lively group from Limerick, I joined in the unforgettable World Youth Day pilgrimage, which the Pope recalls as 'emotional and hope-filled' and as 'joyous, sincere and reassuring'¹. The political situation in the Middle East unfortunately prevented our planned visit to the Holy Land.

We had a great diocesan celebration in the Gaelic Grounds on May 22nd, and several other gatherings, for liturgical renewal, for choirs, for young people, for religious, for priests.

The *One Diocese: Many Stories* conference in November highlighted, and gave us an opportunity of appreciating, concrete examples of the creativity of parishes and groups around the diocese. All of us who were present found the recounting of so many local initiatives in relation to liturgy, prayer, service of one another and renewing parish life, a hugely encouraging experience. It showed a real, practical commitment at work for the revitalisation of our Christian communities in the year of the Great Jubilee.

I was able to be part of some of the numerous occasions when people gathered at holy wells and shrines and monastic sites to remember our heritage with gratitude and to look to the future with hope and resolution. Effort, enthusiasm and cooperation marked all these events, which have, I believe, been very fruitful for the Christian life of the diocese.

A MORE DEMANDING CHALLENGE

In his letter to mark the close of the Jubilee Year, Pope John Paul points out that we now face a new challenge, not the precise demands, often on a tight schedule, of preparing for Jubilee events and activities, "but the larger and more demanding challenge of normal pastoral activity". Local churches (dioceses and parishes) need, he says, to identify the details of their pastoral plan, " – goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the 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 culture"².

He wants us, in other words, to ask ourselves what needs to be done if we are to play our part in allowing the heritage we recognised and celebrated last year to live vibrantly in the new century.

The words of Jesus to Peter at the lake of Gennesaret form the recurring motif of the Holy Father's letter: "Put out into the deep water (Lk 5:4)". As we try to plan for the future, we can see many difficulties: falling vocations and Mass attendance and the challenge of living and sharing the Gospel in a dramatically changing world. We also find new opportunities in a world where the universality of the Church is clearer than ever, a world in which the search for Christian Unity is an inescapable priority, a world where there are unheard of resources for building community and promoting justice at home and abroad, a world which may hope to see the fruit of the Christian heroism of the twentieth century – which probably saw more martyrs than any previous age. In the light of these powerful factors, both negative and positive, we can hardly fail to recognise that uncharted and very deep waters lie ahead.

The words of Jesus do not simply tell us that the water is deep; they invite us to launch out into the new century full of hope and without fear. When experienced fishermen who had caught nothing all night, listened to Jesus they caught more fish than they could handle. It was a remarkable example of trust that hardheaded fisherman, after a frustrating night, took the advice of Jesus who was, after all, not a fisherman but a carpenter!

It was not a question of teaching them how to fish. He was teaching Peter and the others that, even when their own efforts seemed useless, even when the prospects seemed unpromising, amazing things would be accomplished through trusting in him.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2001*, 22.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, (At the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000), 29.

“Do not be afraid” he said after the miraculous haul of fishes. He told Peter that he would be sent out again, not to gather fish but to gather people (Lk 5:10). The event was meant to encourage Peter to undertake this new task with the same trust with which he had put out into the deep waters.

Now Pope John Paul addresses the same words to us, asking us to set out with confident assurance. We are not to be afraid. We are to launch ourselves into the unknown future as Peter did: “If you say so, I will let down the nets” (Lk 5:5).

The task is huge. We are to bring the Gospel into a new century to face challenges we have not begun to imagine, to respond to opportunities we have not anticipated, with the great variety of gifts (I Cor 12: 4-11) which we do not fully realise we have.

SEARCHING FOR CHRIST

Our first reaction may well be to focus on the endless range of the things that need to be done and to feel overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge. That, the Pope says, “would not be the right impulse to follow”³. For him the priority is clear:

I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to *holiness*... In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity. To ask catechumens: “Do you wish to receive Baptism?” means at the same time to ask them: “Do you wish to become holy?”⁴

The Church’s constant task of renewing our faithfulness to Christ is not the same as the effort that takes place in many other organisations to increase efficiency and productivity and to improve image and brand-recognition. What the Church has to proclaim to its members and the world is not the efficiency of its structures, nor the impressiveness of its statistics, nor how brilliantly it implements its plans, nor the wealth of talent it possesses. All these things may be desirable, but they have only one purpose. They are meant to be at the service of something far more fundamental.

When Pope John Paul welcomed hundreds of thousands of young people in St Peter’s Square at the beginning of the World Youth Pilgrimage, he put a challenging question to them:

“What have you come in search of? Or rather, who have you come here to find? There can be only one answer to that: you have come in search of Jesus Christ.”

The whole Church – and every element in the Church, each member, each parish, each organisation, each diocese – exists first and foremost for that reason: so that people who are searching for Jesus Christ may find him. That is the test of every renewal programme, every initiative, every aspect of the life of Christian individuals and groups: Does it make Christ more visible? Does it help people to come closer to him? Does it enable his Good News to be more effectively communicated to the world?

However obvious that test may seem, it repays a little reflection because it is not how we are accustomed to think. In the life of any modern society we are surrounded by issues and crises; we hear of new programmes and plans; questions about structures of accountability and channels of communication are constantly in the air; we are concerned about productivity and efficiency. We feel a great need to be ‘doing something’ to address the many problems and to avail of the many possibilities we see around us. All of those efforts are important. We do not, however, pay enough attention to the more fundamental question not just about what we should be doing but about who we are and what our values are.

³ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.

⁴ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 30,31.

That is even more fundamental when we are reflecting on our mission as followers of Christ. Trying 'to be' is more fundamental than trying 'to do'⁵. The fundamental truth is that we are always surrounded by the wonder of God's presence, whose glory fills the whole earth (Is 6:3); Jesus, as he promised, is with us till the end of time (Mt 28:20); the Holy Spirit is praying within us with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8:26). If we really understood that truth we would see the need to overturn the conventional wisdom that is so focussed on success and efficiency. Our activities, however important, should be the fruit of who we are, people who have been counted worthy, as the Second Eucharistic Prayer puts it, to stand in God's presence. The first and most important advice would be: "Don't just do something, stand there!"

TRUSTING AND HOPING

The Gospel incident on the Lake of Gennesaret is not a lesson for fishermen about how to catch fish; it is a lesson for all of us about trusting in Jesus. What the apostles were shown was that trusting in Jesus, far from diminishing the effectiveness of their work, enriched it in a way that their own efforts could never have done.

The huge catch of fish occurred only as a result of Peter's willingness to trust. The fruitfulness of our efforts for renewal can only be built on the same foundation.

It is vital to learn that lesson. Every moment of the process of trying to develop and renew the life of parishes and of the diocese should be carried on with an awareness of where our real strength and the source of all our gifts and creativity lie. If we do that, we can be confident that, like the apostles, we will find our efforts unexpectedly fruitful.

The invitation to trust and the call to be fearless and full of hope go together. At first sight the deep waters may be frightening, but the person who invites us to put out into the deep is Jesus and "even the winds and the sea obey him" (Mt 8:27).

It is, therefore, no mere decoration nor is it a waste of time to ensure that every meeting, every effort to listen to ideas, every piece of planning and organisation, every evaluation of what has been done and still needs to be done, takes place in the context of prayer.

That prayer needs to leave room for silent reflection. Some years ago, Pope John Paul wrote with admiration of the tradition of the Eastern Churches and their approach to God both as an inaccessible mystery and as 'living Persons tenderly present':

"(The Christians of the East) perceive that one draws close to this presence above all by letting oneself be taught an adoring silence, for *at the culmination of the knowledge and experience of God is his absolute transcendence*"⁶.

This growth in knowledge of God comes above all in prayerful reflection on the Scriptures and in the liturgy. All our efforts need to begin in adoring silence. The Church exists to show Christ to the world; we cannot do that unless we have seen him ourselves:

"Our witness would be hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first *contemplated his face* so as to ensure that "our gaze is more than ever *firmly set on the face of the Lord*"⁷." The first step in making the face of Christ shine in the world is to stand, or kneel, silently before the mystery.

ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD

Mary is first among those who hear the word of God and keep it. She alone of his disciples experienced the whole of his life, from the moment of the Annunciation. She lived in the closest intimacy with the mystery of her Son in their home in Nazareth; she stood by him as he died on the Cross⁸.

⁵ C.f. *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 15.

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Oriente Lumen* 16.

⁷ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* 16.

⁸ C.f. *Redemptoris Mater*, (Mary Mother of the Redeemer), 17 - 20.

The Pope and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speak of two dimensions to everything in the life of the Church. There is the dimension of Peter – the structures, the doctrines, the visible activities, and there is the dimension of Mary – holiness, listening to God's word, contemplating the truth of the Gospel, bringing Christ to the world⁹. The purpose of everything that belongs to the structures of the Church is to lead people to union with Christ, to holiness. That is why our efforts of renewal have “to be set in relation to holiness” or, to put it another way, in relation to the dimension of Mary.

From her Immaculate Conception, she has preceded us on the journey of holiness – faithful, by the gift of God's love from the very beginning. In her Assumption she has completed the journey, rejoicing in the fulfilment of that gift of love in heaven.

Her holiness was a putting out into the deep. “How can this be?” (Lk 1:34), she asked at the Annunciation, when she was faced with an extraordinary and mysterious invitation. But her consent was wholehearted, ‘Let it be with me according to your word’ (Lk 1:38). She heard the prophecy of Simeon that a sword would pierce her heart (Lk 2:35). When unexpected and puzzling things happened, as when Jesus stayed behind in the temple, she “treasured all these things in her heart” (Lk 2:51). At Cana, she gave her only recorded instruction, an instruction to trust her Son: ‘Do whatever he tells you’ (Jn 2:5)¹⁰. Her faithful vigil on Calvary is the expression of an unlimited trust, “perfectly united to Christ in his self-emptying”¹¹.

At Pentecost, the apostles put out into the deep to begin the new mission which Jesus had foretold; “From now on it is people you will be catching” (Lk 5:10). They had first gathered in the Upper Room, joined in prayer with Mary the mother of Jesus (Acts 1:14). That too is where our renewal must begin:

At the basis of what the Church has been from the beginning and of what she must continually become... we find the one “who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord (Lk 1:45). It is precisely Mary's faith which marks the beginning of the new and eternal Covenant... This heroic *faith* of hers “*precedes*” the apostolic *witness* of the Church, and ever remains hidden in the Church's heart... All those who... accept the apostolic witness of the Church... *in a sense share in Mary's faith*¹².

Looking to the challenge of bringing the Gospel vibrantly into the future, we are invited to put out into the deep water with Peter. That will involve looking courageously to new pastoral initiatives for a new situation. But even more important than *what* we do is that our putting out into the deep water should be done in confident and fearless hope, sharing in Mary's faith.

May our journey into the deep waters of the new millennium be guided by Mary, the Star of the Sea.

*A Réalt na Mara, 's a chara na ndeoraí,
A long gan briseadh, a choinneal 's a threoraí,
Beir ar mo láimh, A Mhathair an tsóláis,
Nó táimse ag titim le carraig an dóláis.*

+Donal Murray
Lent 2001

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) 27, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 773.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Homily at Knock, 30 September 1979.

¹¹ *Redemptoris Mater*, 18.

¹² *Redemptoris Mater*, 27.