

TO REKINDLE THE AMAZEMENT LENT 2004



Twenty-five years ago¹, in his first encyclical, Pope John Paul struck what has been a keynote of his pontificate – the extraordinary dignity of human life in Jesus Christ. When we understand ourselves in the light of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus, he said, not only will we adore God, we will also have a deep wonder at ourselves. That is the heart of the Good News:

In reality, the name for that deep amazement at human worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say, the Good News. It is also called Christianity².

“The Church’s fundamental function in every age”, the Pope goes on, is to direct people’s gaze towards this Good News of what humanity has become in Christ. God has made all things new and has given us an unimaginable dignity. We are part of a new creation, whose glory no eye has seen, ear heard nor human heart conceived (1 Cor 2:9).

In his latest encyclical he again speaks of ‘amazement’ – the amazement and gratitude that “should always fill the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist”³. The encyclical is written in order to “rekindle this Eucharistic amazement”⁴.

In the Mass we do more than remember with faith the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday; we are in real contact with those events, which are continuing to unfold in human history until Jesus comes again to bring us to himself (Jn 14:3). The Eucharist should give rise to the Christian amazement at human dignity which is the Good News.

Awareness of the greatness of the divine plan touches our deepest selves and the whole of our lives – “the sphere of human hearts, consciences and events”⁵. It follows that an essential key to our faithful following of Christ and our faithful passing on of his Good News is that our celebration of the Eucharist should really touch us deep in our hearts and should affect every aspect of our lives:

¹ First Sunday of Lent, 4 March 1979.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis* (RH), 10.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (EE), 5.

⁴ EE 6.

⁵ RH 10.

The Church draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist; by him she is fed and by him she is enlightened⁶.

Every commitment to holiness, every activity aimed at carrying out the Church's mission, every work of pastoral planning, must draw the strength it needs from the Eucharistic mystery and in turn be directed to that mystery as its culmination⁷.

An essential step in our efforts to carry out the Church's mission and to plan for the future must therefore be to 'rekindle our Eucharistic amazement' so that we can draw the strength we need from the mystery and direct our efforts towards it.

HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY?

The Mass is the source and the culmination of our lives as Christians. It is not surprising, therefore, that the efforts we have been making in the diocese to reflect on Christian life in the twenty-first century have echoed the essential elements in the celebration of the Eucharist. And it is not surprising that the challenges we have recognised as we asked, '*How can we know the way?*' (Jn 14:5), have implications for how we participate in the Mass.

We have been trying to learn how *to hear and speak the word of God in today's world.*

Through *lectio divina* or through the 'seven-step method' many of us have appreciated the importance of preparing ourselves to hear the word, of listening with attention and openness, of trying to understand how God speaks to us, and what God is asking of us as individuals and as a community.

In every Mass the Liturgy of the Word, poses the same challenge. If we are really to allow Christ to speak to us in the scriptures, we need to prepare ourselves, we need to listen and we need to reflect. The late Eamonn Andrews was once asked on his way into the church if he would read a lesson. He refused, saying that he would need several days notice if he were to perform so important and so responsible a task properly. That seriousness of approach says something not only to those who read but also to those who listen to the word: we need to have opened our minds and hearts; we should, if possible, have reflected on the readings ourselves beforehand. This is the word of the infinite God speaking to us; it calls for our fullest attention:

It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever-valid tradition of *lectio divina*, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives⁸.

The word of God is not like a piece of information such as we might read in a book or a newspaper, to be filed away as an interesting fact; it is not a trite and obvious observation about the weather by which we make polite but trivial conversation. The Word of God is the One through whom all things were made, the Son through whom God finally speaks to us (Heb 1:2). The Word was made flesh in Jesus Christ and "it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church"⁹.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do (Heb 4: 12,13).

⁶ EE 6

⁷ EE 60.

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI), 39.

⁹ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 7.

The word of God challenges us and changes us and speaks to the most profound core of our being. Listening in a casual, unprepared way risks missing the depth, failing to hear the challenge, being closed to the change that God wants of us.

All of this means that we need to look for ways to enrich our listening to the Word, especially during the celebration of the Eucharist. It is a fundamental task for each Christian, to try to listen more attentively and more openly to the word of God.

I also hope that together we can look for ways to help us in our listening, through scripture groups and adult education – we are fortunate to have in the diocese the great resource of the Dominican Biblical Centre – through newsletters, new means of communication and so on. Could we identify ways of helping people to prepare themselves to hear the readings, so that they do not arrive ‘cold’?

At the level of personal appropriation, the hearing of the word of God proclaimed must be well prepared in the souls of the faithful by an apt knowledge of Scripture and, where pastorally possible, by *special initiatives designed to deepen understanding of the biblical readings*, especially those used on Sundays and holy days. If Christian individuals and families are not regularly drawing new life from the reading of the sacred text in a spirit of prayer and docility to the Church’s interpretation, then it is difficult for the liturgical proclamation of the word of God alone to produce the fruit we might expect¹⁰.

It is only if we allow the word to speak to our hearts and to every aspect of our lives that we will be able to share it with others. The great task of the Church will be to speak to the new world of the twenty-first century in a language that is contemporary, challenging and Christian.

This is a world which will increasingly present us with new challenges, new issues and new opportunities. It will not be enough to repeat the Good News in the words and the style of a previous century. It will need to be spoken by people who have taken up the challenge of understanding what the Gospel says to their lives and of living that message in this new world in which the Gospel has never been lived before. It is we who must speak the word of God in a way that touches the questions – and the hearts – of our contemporaries.

We have been trying to learn how *to prepare ourselves as individuals and as a community for the years ahead.*

We find ourselves facing a future which will demand a great deal of us. It is clear,

- that, parishes will have to work together in new ways,
- that, however hard we pray and work for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life there will, for the foreseeable future, be far fewer priests and religious than in the past,
- that seeking to make the word of God heard in the culture of the twenty-first century will require a great mobilisation of our ideas and resources and efforts.

We also find ourselves facing a future which presents many new opportunities for the spread of the Gospel:

- Greater mobility and new means of communication,
- A growing awareness of the role of every member of the Church in bringing the Good News to his or her own areas of life,
- A hunger for something deeper, sometimes expressed in strange, even destructive ways, but which is ultimately a search for Christ, who responds, beyond all expectation, to the deepest longings of the human heart,

¹⁰ DD 40.

- Opportunities for people to learn about their faith in ways that were not possible in the past.

i) We wish to see Jesus

In reflecting about the way ahead, we need constantly to remember that the way is not primarily the plans and the structures that we develop. Jesus is the way (Jn 14:6). The question 'How can we know the way?' means, first and foremost, 'how can we know Jesus?' Our fundamental need is that expressed by the Greek pilgrims to Philip: "We wish to see Jesus" (Jn 12:20). Being on the right road means being united with Jesus, the Way. What comes first in any preparation or planning for the future is our union with him through prayer: "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?"¹¹

It follows that the Eucharist has to be at the core of our preparation for the future. "The principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus"¹². In the Eucharist we are united with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, the sacrifice which shows the value that God sets on human dignity in Christ¹³.

We may sometimes think of Sunday Mass as a time when we put the busyness of life aside and experience a certain peace, mixed perhaps with some distraction and boredom. The truth is that this is not a stepping aside from our life's journey; it is our meeting with Christ, who is the Way.

In moments of reflection we sometimes sense the question, 'What is it all for – our activities and responsibilities, the rushing around, the worries, the chores, the ambitions, the disappointments, the noises and the images that fill our day?' The Mass is the moment of truth when we are most closely in touch with the meaning of life. Without Jesus, life's journey would not make sense. It is a journey with him to his Father's side. Patrick Kavanagh goes to the heart of it:

Don't fear, don't fear, I said to my soul,
The Bedlam of Time is an empty bucket rattled,
'Tis you who will say in the end who best battles,
Only they who fly home to God have flown at all¹⁴.

He is the meaning of our journey because our arrival at the goal, while it asks for our best efforts, is, in the end, his gift to us. The destination of our journey is to be welcomed by him into our Father's house which is "not made with hands, that is, not of this creation" (Heb 9:11):

There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that "without Christ we can do nothing" (cf. Jn 15:5)¹⁵.

ii) One body

One of the major challenges facing us is to find ways of working together more effectively both within the parish and across parish boundaries.

¹¹ NMI 38.

¹² Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 1391.

¹³ Cf. RH 20.

¹⁴ KAVANAGH P., *Beyond the Headlines*, in Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, Goldsmith Press 1984, p. 130.

¹⁵ NMI 38.

When we celebrate the Eucharist, we are led into a deeper, greater, universal unity. We gather around the Body of Christ and we receive the Body of Christ: “And what do those who receive it become? The Body of Christ – not many bodies but one body”¹⁶.

We pray that we may be filled with the Holy Spirit and become one body, one spirit in Christ¹⁷. It is a prayer not just for this congregation to live as a community of faith and life, but a prayer which sees ourselves as part of the great family of God’s People across all boundaries of space and time. In every Mass we pray for our Pope and for the bishop of the diocese and for all bishops and for the Church throughout the world; we express our unity with Mary, the apostles all the saints who have done God’s will throughout the ages¹⁸.

The celebration of the Eucharist cannot take place without the ministry of a priest, ordained by a bishop who is part of the episcopal succession going back to the apostles. What we do in the Mass is not just a celebration of the gifts and achievements of this particular congregation. It is something that the congregation could never do out of its own resources. It is a gift going back to the night when Jesus said to his apostles, “Do this in remembrance of me”(Lk 22:19).

The sense of being part of a Christian community, and of being linked to the wider church and its history, of being united to Christ and to all the angels and saints, was something that we may have taken for granted in the past. We need to feel the wonder and amazement of that belonging with a new freshness.

Today we are in a world where all sorts of religious and non-religious influences, many different cultures and traditions, are part of the air we breathe. This is not something that we should resent or fear. The Good News is meant for all, and we have the privilege and the duty of helping others to recognise the truth of Christ and of recognising the Spirit of Christ at work in them. Every Christian is sent to bring the Good News ‘to all nations’ (Lk 24:47). We live in a world in which it is clearer than ever that all Christian living is, by definition, meant to have a missionary dimension.

The new situation, however, means that we can no longer (indeed we never could) look on our participation in the Christian community of the parish, the diocese and the wider Church, as something that takes place more or less automatically. Nor can we assume that Christian witness and influence on our society ‘just happens’, or that it can be taken care of by others.

In the Eucharist we celebrate and deepen our sense of sharing with one another in the life of God and in the mission of Christ. The Mass, particularly on Sunday, is the great corrective to the temptation to see ourselves as isolated individuals whose faith is a matter that concerns only ourselves. This sense of belonging and sharing does not ‘just happen’. It requires that we bring to our Sunday Mass proper preparation, serious attention and full participation of mind and heart, and a readiness to allow what we have celebrated to bear fruit in our lives as individuals and as a community.

In his writings on the Eucharist, Pope John Paul indicates on a number of occasions that there are aspects that need greater attention. This is one of them: “On the pastoral level the community aspect of the Sunday celebration should be particularly stressed”¹⁹.

An essential part of our preparation for the future is to look at our Sunday Masses – the number, time and manner of celebration to ensure that we are putting our whole hearts and our fullest efforts into celebrating and fostering our awareness that we are the community of Christ’s brothers and sisters, who are to continue his mission in the world. In particular, we must ask

¹⁶ St John Chrysostom, quoted in EE 23.

¹⁷ Eucharistic Prayer III.

¹⁸ Eucharistic Prayer II.

¹⁹ DD 35.

ourselves if the arrangements we make for Sunday Masses enables us particularly to stress the community aspect of the celebration.

As we look to the future of our communities the effect of the decline in priestly vocations is becoming inescapably clear. If the decline continues, we can easily foresee a situation where places and churches in which Mass has been celebrated for centuries may no longer have a regular Sunday Mass. The celebration of the Eucharist should be an occasion for earnest prayer that God will bless our community with vocations for the future:

It is in the Eucharist that prayer for vocations is most closely united to the prayer of Christ the Eternal High Priest. At the same time the diligence of priests in carrying out their Eucharistic ministry, together with the conscious, active and fruitful participation of the faithful in the Eucharist, provides young men with a powerful example and incentive for responding generously to God's call²⁰.

Looking to the future means looking into the unknown. It is true that we cannot know what disasters may lie ahead for our country or for the world. We have no guarantees that the Catholic faith in Ireland will not decline to virtual extinction as it did in other regions of the world, like North Africa, where it was once vibrant.

But in the Eucharist we look to a future which is glorious, which is certain and which has already begun. The community of which we are part gathers in the presence of our crucified and risen Lord, it includes the apostles and martyrs and all the saints, it includes all those who have gone before us into the light, happiness and peace of God's presence.

That is another aspect which Pope John Paul says 'merits greater attention': in the Mass we are united with the great multitude of heaven; the liturgy 'pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey'²¹. As we try to build a community that lives and shares the Good News, we are not fighting a losing battle, we are making ourselves ready to be received into the glory that has already begun and that we 'truly glimpse' in the Eucharist. If the building of the new creation were our work, it would be a hopeless task. Because it is God's work, it cannot be defeated. And so the Eucharist 'spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us'²².

We have been trying to learn how *to reach out beyond our communities to the wider world.*

A third part of the Eucharist which needs 'to be better valued and appreciated' is the Prayer after Communion and the Concluding Rite which should send us out from the Mass with a deeper sense of the responsibility given to us by Christ:

For the faithful who have understood the meaning of what they have done, the Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door. Like the first witnesses of the Resurrection, Christians who gather each Sunday to experience and proclaim the presence of the Risen Lord are called to evangelise and bear witness in their daily lives²³.

By being united with Christ, the members of Christ's Church become a 'sacrament', in other words an effective sign and instrument of the presence and action of Jesus, the light of the world and the salt of the earth²⁴.

²⁰ EE 31.

²¹ EE 19.

²² EE 20.

²³ DD 45.

²⁴ Cf EE 22.

The list of ways in which we need to reach out is endless and no one individual or parish can do everything. That is why all the various gifts of all of God's People are required. No one can do everything but everybody can and should be doing something.

In the Eucharist we find the strength and the motivation to reach out in a whole range of ways:

Many problems darken the horizon of our time. We need but think of the urgent need to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on solid premises of justice and solidarity, and to defend human life from conception to its natural end. And what should we say of the thousand inconsistencies of a 'globalised' world where the weakest, the most powerless and the poorest appear to have so little hope! It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth! For this reason too, the Lord wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love²⁵.

And how can we remain indifferent to the prospect of an *ecological crisis* which is making vast areas of our planet uninhabitable and hostile to humanity? Or by the *problems of peace*, so often threatened by the spectre of catastrophic wars? Or by *contempt for the fundamental human rights* of so many people, especially children? Countless are the emergencies to which every Christian heart must be sensitive²⁶.

At the Eucharist we experience both the pain of separation from, and the most profound prayer for full unity with, other Christians:

... It is not yet possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic Liturgy. And yet we do have a burning desire to join in celebrating the one Eucharist of the Lord, and this desire itself is already a common prayer of praise, a single supplication. Together we speak to the Father and increasingly we do so 'with one heart'²⁷.

This burning desire, and our concern for all who are our brothers and sisters in Christ through baptism, should frequently be the subject of a Prayer of the Faithful -- not just during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

In the Eucharist we celebrate the sacred banquet at which all members of the Church should feel welcome.

If there are those who feel excluded because of poverty, we know that we have an obligation to ensure that "in every Christian community the poor feel at home. Would not this approach be the greatest and most effective presentation of the good news of the Kingdom?"²⁸

If there are those who feel unwelcome or excluded because they are strangers in our community, we know that our lives should reflect a realisation that the Eucharist is a prayer that God will gather "people of every race, language, and way of life to share in the one eternal banquet"²⁹.

If there are those who feel excluded because they are in a second union after the break-up of a marriage and cannot, therefore, receive Holy Communion, priests and the whole community are earnestly called upon by Pope John Paul,

to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptised persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life. They should be encouraged to listen to the word of God, to attend the Sacrifice of the Mass, to persevere in prayer, to contribute to works of

²⁵ EE 20.

²⁶ NMI 51.

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 45.

²⁸ NMI 50.

²⁹ Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II.

charity and to community efforts in favour of justice, to bring up their children in the Christian faith, to cultivate the spirit and the practice of penance and thus implore, day by day, God's grace"³⁰.

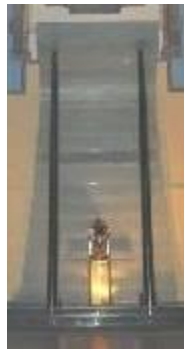
If there are those who have drifted away from Sunday Mass, or who rarely attend, we need to ask ourselves honestly how well we celebrate the mystery of the Eucharist, how welcoming our congregation is, how our community would appear to someone who has not been there for some time, or who is coming for the first time?

If there are those who know that it would not be honest for them to receive the Eucharist because their way of life, in the area of justice, or respect for human rights, or other moral obligation, is seriously sinful and in fundamental conflict with the message of the Gospel, they should be able to recognise in the Church a community "which by charity, by example and by prayer labours for their conversion"³¹.

In particular we should try to look at our Sunday celebrations through the eyes of young people. What part do they have in the celebration, for instance in reading or singing? How far do the Prayers of the Faithful express their concerns and hopes in language they can relate to? Do they see a celebration which is really at the heart of the lives of those taking part, for which people have tried to prepare themselves, in which various members of the parish take part as readers, singers, musicians, collectors, readers of prayers, and, where appropriate, special ministers of the Eucharist, and in which the whole congregation is actively participating? Do they see a community which knows that it is in contact with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

All of these, and many others, are areas into which our participation in the Eucharist calls us to be bringers of the Good News.

REVERENCE AND AMAZEMENT



The glory of the Eucharist is that it is nothing less than the presence of the turning point of history. The sacrifice of the Cross is not repeated or multiplied or added to, but the once for all (Heb 10:10) sacrifice of Christ is made present to us:

The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing... Truly this is the *mysterium fidei* [the mystery of faith], which is accomplished in the Eucharist: the world which came forth from the hands of God the Creator now returns to him redeemed by Christ³².

On the altar is no longer bread and wine; the Body and Blood of Jesus, crucified and risen is truly present. This supreme mystery has to be approached with the deepest reverence. Down through the centuries, in church buildings, in art, in music, Christian people expressed their awe and amazement at the inexpressibly wonderful gift of the Eucharist.

³⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 84.

³¹ VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 11.

³² EE 8.

In undertaking the conservation work on St John's Cathedral we found ourselves needing to replace the carving which had formed the backdrop of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and now stands as the new Aumbry containing the holy oils.

The design of the new Chapel conveys the idea of a tent. In the Book of Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant was placed in a tabernacle and covered by a tent, "then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex 40:34). That presence of God with us is echoed when St John tells us that the Word was made flesh and, in a literal translation, that he dwelt in his tent with us (Jn 1:14).

It would be appropriate that the Blessed Sacrament Chapel should be seen as a memorial to the priests who ministered in this diocese down the years, celebrating Mass and giving the Body of Christ in Holy Communion. It should be seen also as a place of prayer for the priests who minister in the diocese today.

Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament can be a powerful way of deepening our Eucharistic amazement and of learning to be people of prayer who grow in understanding of the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Prayer before the Lord in the tabernacle can also give us inspiration and strength to live that life of prayer both in the liturgy and in our own personal experience. That is "the secret of a truly vital Christianity, which has no reason to fear the future, because it returns continually to the sources and finds in them new life"³³.

Reverent and dignified celebration of the liturgy is of particular importance in a world which often seems unready to hear the wonder and mystery of the Good News, but which is also vaguely aware that human beings cannot live by bread alone and is thirsting, often without being fully aware of it, for something that goes deeper than what is passing and immediate.

In the Second Special Synod of the Bishops of Europe, which I had the privilege of attending in 1999, this need was frequently expressed. Indeed the Pope put it like this:

The task that awaits the Church in Europe is both demanding and exciting. It consists in rediscovering the sense of 'mystery'; in renewing liturgical celebrations so that they can be more eloquent signs of the presence of Christ the Lord; in ensuring greater silence in prayer and contemplation; in returning to the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Penance, as wellsprings of freedom and new hope³⁴.

The fundamental purpose of the liturgy is the worship of God³⁵. It can also uplift us, instruct us, console and strengthen us, but only if it is first of all what it is meant to be – *worship, prayer, adoration*.

KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING

At the ordination of a priest, the bishop gives the newly ordained the paten with the host and the chalice filled with wine and says:

Accept from the holy people of God the gifts to be offered to him.
Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate:
model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross.

The instruction, 'Know what you are doing' applies not only to the priest but to each member of the congregation. The Eucharist, the bread of angels, "cannot be approached except with the

³³ NMI 32.

³⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, 69.

³⁵ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (Liturgy Constitution), 33.

humility of the centurion in the Gospel: ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof’ (Mt 8:8, Lk 7:6)³⁶.

The most important question for all of us, priests and people, is how well we participate in the celebration of the Eucharist in which the death and resurrection of Christ is made present to us. The role of the priest is not just to carry out the ceremonies correctly but to “ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it”³⁷.

“A sacramental celebration is woven from signs and symbols”³⁸. One important way of deepening our participation is to take the signs and symbols seriously. If we do not really understand and enter into the signs, we may obscure from ourselves what they signify.

I have tried in this letter to point to the fundamental sacramental moments in the liturgy of word and sacrifice. We should not neglect the many other signs and symbols and gestures which are woven into the liturgy in order to enable us to understand more fully the great central sacramental sign of the Eucharist itself. They can help to focus our minds and hearts so that we can know what we are doing. The force of habit can all too easily lead to familiar actions and symbols becoming so routine that we do not allow them to speak to us of the mystery towards which they point. The following are some examples of moments and gestures we might reflect on.

As we enter the church, and at the beginning of every liturgical action and every prayer, we make **the sign of the cross**. We are recognising that we share the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is offered to us through the cross of Christ. At the door of the church we make the sign of the cross with holy water, remembering that we enter this new life through the waters of Baptism. Here we sum up what it means to be a Christian and the meaning and shape of our worship of God. Do we look like people doing something full of meaning? If not, might we be missing the meaning ourselves?

We **genuflect** before the Blessed Sacrament. We are in the presence of Jesus, the Son of God, who will judge the living and the dead: “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10,11). Our genuflection should be a visible sign of our ‘Eucharistic amazement’. It is a gesture which expresses in actions what the ancient ‘Jesus prayer’ says in words: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me’.

Silence in a noisy world can make us feel uncomfortable. But it can be an eloquent sign that, in the presence of the infinite God, we are listeners, hearers of the word. The Scriptures tell us to sing praise to God – as we do in the liturgy. But they also tell us: “Be silent all flesh, before the Lord” (Zech 2:13); “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). “In a society that lives at an increasingly frenetic pace, often deafened by noise and confused by the ephemeral, it is vital to rediscover the value of silence”³⁹. The moments of silence in the liturgy, particularly after Communion, are not just an empty gap, they invite us into the meaning of what we have just done; they enable us to meet ourselves and allow God to speak⁴⁰.

Human hands make eloquent gestures whose meaning should not be neglected. The hands of the priest are extended in prayer; they are spread over the gifts in a sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit; they take the bread and cup as Jesus did at the Last Supper; they raise his Body and Blood at the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer; they bless the congregation; all of us use our

³⁶ EE 38.

³⁷ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 11.

³⁸ CCC 1145.

³⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Spiritus et Sponsa*, on the 40th Anniversary of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 13.

⁴⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Oriente Lumen*, 16.

hands to express the sharing of Christ's peace among us; they may form a throne to receive Christ the King in Holy Communion⁴¹.

NUMBER AND TIMES OF MASSES

I am writing this letter in response to a request from the Dundrum Assembly that I should communicate to the people of the diocese "outlining the situation regarding priest numbers and also the ideal of limiting the number of Masses to be said by each priest"⁴². I have also had the benefit of the work of the group on the Deployment of Priests which has been looking at this issue. That group will also make recommendations about how we can most effectively provide for a future where not every parish will have its resident priest.

The practical issues with regard to the number and times of Masses are not just a consequence of the declining number of priests – though that makes changes inevitable. More importantly, we must address this question in order to ensure that the number and times of Masses are such as to foster the most reverent and most worthy celebration:

As regards the time and number of Masses to be celebrated in parishes, the good of the parish community should be kept in mind and the number of Masses should not be so multiplied as to weaken the effectiveness of the pastoral effort: for example, if through the great number of Masses in a church that can hold a great number of people, only small groups of the faithful were to come to each of the Masses in a church that can hold a great number of people⁴³.

In other words, while making every effort to accommodate people, one must always remember that the Sunday Mass is intended to be a gathering of the community. The ideal would be for the whole community to gather in a single celebration, but, in any event, there ought not to be several Masses each of which has only a small congregation in a church designed to hold many people. In such a situation, the sense of being a gathered community is lost.

Another example would be if, for the same reason, the priests were so overburdened by their work as to make it difficult for them to fulfil their ministry adequately⁴⁴.

These principles were laid down in 1967, when the vocations crisis was nothing like as serious as it is today. Their principle concern is for the best possible celebration of the worship of God in the community of God's People. As the number of priests declines, however, and their average age increases, the shortage of priests becomes an increasingly significant factor.

To celebrate the Eucharist in the way that the liturgy requires, with full attention, with one's whole heart and soul, with serious preparation of the whole liturgy and particularly of the homily, is a demanding ministry. The priest should make a prayerful preparation and thanksgiving for each Mass. That is the law of the Church:

A priest is not to omit dutifully to prepare himself by prayer before the celebration of the Eucharist, nor afterwards to omit to make thanksgiving to God⁴⁵.

This can hardly be reconciled, for instance, with saying two Masses beginning one hour apart, perhaps in churches several miles distant from one another. Where is there space for thanksgiving after the first Mass and for prayer before the second?

⁴¹ CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Mystagogical Lecture V*, 21./

⁴² Limerick Diocesan Assembly 2002, Statement of Intention, 7.

⁴³ *Eucharisticum Mysterium* (EM), 26

⁴⁴ EM 26.

⁴⁵ CODE OF CANON LAW, Can. 909.

Because of the respect due to the Eucharist and because of the danger of creating situations which would diminish proper reverence and attentiveness, the Church has limited the number of Masses that a priest may say in a single day.

The basic principle is that, except in certain circumstances, a priest should celebrate Mass only once a day⁴⁶. However, if there are not enough priests, the bishop “may allow priests, for a good reason, to celebrate twice in one day or even, if pastoral need requires it, three times on Sundays or holy days of obligation”⁴⁷. The Code of Canon Law makes no provision for priests to exceed these limits, that is to celebrate more than two Masses on a weekday or more than three on a Sunday. *A priest who has said two Masses on a weekday or three on a Sunday is not permitted to celebrate an additional Mass.*

Bearing these things in mind, I am making the following provisions for this diocese:

The time and number of Masses in each parish should be discussed in the parish, in the light of this pastoral letter, and decided after discussion in the cluster groups. A decision should be reached before the end of May, bearing in mind the following principles:

Each parish must so arrange its Masses that it has some possibility of being able to offer help to a neighbouring parish whose priest is on holidays, or ill, or who has to be away for any reason.

This means that

- ❖ A parish with more than one priest should be able to meet its commitments when one priest is away.
- ❖ No priest ought to be saying three Masses on a Sunday as his normal commitment.
- ❖ No priest ought to be saying two vigil Masses as his normal commitment.
- ❖ No priest ought to be saying two weekday Masses as his normal commitment. This would leave him unable to say an additional Mass for a special occasion such as a wedding or funeral – or to help a neighbouring parish whose priest is away.
- ❖ Every effort should be made to arrange Mass times in order to facilitate assistance from one parish to another within the cluster. In particular, vigil Mass times should be more widely spread.
- ❖ The starting time of Sunday Masses in any parish should be at least one and a half hours apart.
- ❖ Various factors such as the small size of a church, or the fact that there are large numbers attending, or that there are several churches in a parish, or that a regular supply priest is available etc., may seem to indicate exceptions to these criteria. Any such exceptions *must be agreed by cluster*. It is, after all, the cluster which will have to provide cover when a priest is away or ill.
- ❖ Houses of religious priests have a most important role. As in the past, but with diminishing numbers, they will find themselves called on to provide cover for diocesan priests who are sick or away on holidays. Religious congregations have a special place in the life of the diocese, and especially the city of Limerick. I know that they will wish to exercise solidarity in this matter by applying to their situation the principles of the document *Eucharisticum Mysterium* (already referred to):

⁴⁶ Can. 905 §1.

⁴⁷ Can. 905 §2.

On Sundays and feast days above all, the celebrations which take place in other churches or oratories should be arranged in connection with the celebrations in the parish church, so that they contribute to the general pastoral effort... As regards the time and number of Masses to be celebrated in parishes, the good of the parish community should be kept in mind and the number of Masses should not be so multiplied as to weaken the effectiveness of the pastoral effort...⁴⁸.

Some of the decisions we face as a result of declining numbers of priests are painful ones. In many cases, people have become attached to particular Masses at particular times and do not like the thought that things cannot continue as they were. Many may find proposed times less convenient than they are accustomed to.

It would be a terrible irony if that understandable and admirable love of the Mass were to lead to a situation where the multiplication of Masses and the overburdening of priests would weaken the effectiveness of the pastoral effort and harm the reverence and care with which we approach the most holy Eucharist.

THE WAY AHEAD

Perhaps our instinct is not to be too demanding, to keep going without asking too many questions, not to set the bar too high, lest people be discouraged. It is a mistaken instinct. The issues of our celebration of the Eucharist and of how we can recognise it as the summit and source of our lives, are absolutely central. We have a duty to ensure that this gift is fully appreciated and properly celebrated among us.

The Christianity 'which has no reason to fear the future'⁴⁹ is one which understands that our life and our prayer is a sharing in the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The source and summit of that Christian living is the liturgy. Every Christian is called to share in that awesome mystery. That is the heart of renewal in the Church and in our lives:

It would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life. Especially in the face of the many trials to which today's world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but 'Christians at risk'⁵⁰.

In the months and years ahead, I hope that in this diocese we can devote much of our efforts towards enriching our understanding and celebration of the liturgy. I hope that we will soon have liturgy groups in every parish, and that they may be able to play an important role in 'rekindling Eucharistic amazement'.

+Donal Murray
Lent 2004

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Father, may we celebrate the Eucharist with reverence and love,
for when we proclaim the death of the Lord
you continue the work of his redemption,
who is Lord for ever and ever. (Prayer over the Gifts, Second Sunday in Ordinary Time).

Sármholadh duit, a Dhia mhóir,
ar son an Aifrinn Naofa chóir
a dhág tú ag do dhaoine bocht'

⁴⁸ *Eucharisticum Mysterium* (EM), 26

⁴⁹ NMI 32.

⁵⁰ NMI 34.

lena gcoinneáil saor ó peacha is locht.

Ná tréig do chlann, ná diúltaigh sinn
ach inár gcontúirt cuidigh linn.
Go moltar choíche ar gach taobh
An tAthair, an Mac is an Spiorad Naomh.