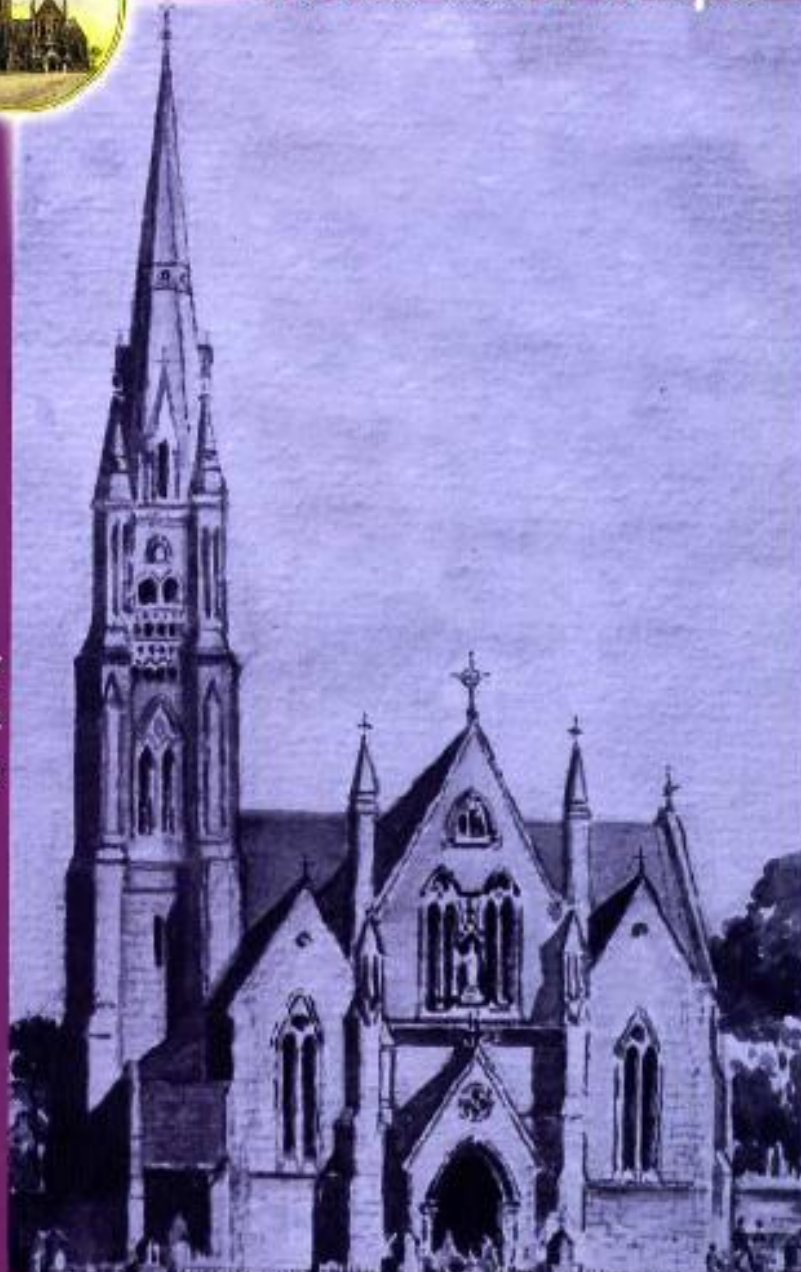




## We Are God's Temple

Donal Murray  
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# WE ARE GOD'S TEMPLE

(I Cor 3:16)

## *Rebuild my house*

In 1181 or 1182, a baby was born in a town about 150 kilometres north of Rome. He was christened John, after St John the Baptist. But his father, who was away on business in France at the time of the birth, decided that the child should be called Francesco, 'the Frenchman'.

Francesco grew up as a generous, warm hearted, but wild and unpredictable young man. In the first years of the thirteenth century, when he was in his early twenties, he had a vision. As he was praying before a picture of the crucified Christ in the ruined church of San Damiano, the picture spoke to him: "Francesco, rebuild my house."



He decided, rather too literally, to 'beg, borrow or steal' in his quest to repair the building. His father was not pleased to discover that some of his most valuable goods had been taken and disposed of by his unconventional son and demanded an immediate return of the money.

Francesco soon learned two things:

- He was to repair the church through his own efforts. There would be no short cuts. He collected the stones and put them in place with his own hands.
- His mission would not simply be about restoring broken down walls. When that was done, he still faced his real life-long task of building up Christ's Body, the Church. He said to the community he gathered around him: "He has sent you into the whole world to bear witness to his word, through your own words and through your deeds, and to make known to everyone that there is nobody else who is almighty like him" [1].

Eight centuries later, the world knows that young man as St Francis of Assisi.

In the 1850s the people of St John's parish in Limerick set out to repair their old parish church. They were obeying the same instruction that Francis had received: "Rebuild my house". In doing so they were part of a long tradition. A Church of St John the Baptist has stood in Garryowen (which probably means 'St John's Garden') since at least the time of St Francis.



Bishop John Ryan  
who began the  
building of the  
Cathedral

Such was the generosity of people in every part of the diocese, and further afield, that the project grew from a proposal to replace the altar in the old parish church of St John, to a decision to replace the church and finally into a plan to build a Cathedral for the diocese. As the work proceeded, the building was ornamented far beyond what had been provided for in the original design. When they came to complete the spire, about twenty-five years after the main construction work had been done, they built it more than 50% taller than had been originally envisaged.

Today, we hear the same instruction: "Rebuild my house", as we face the challenge of repairing our Cathedral.

Like any building, the Cathedral has required refurbishment from time to time. Major restorations took place in 1894, 1920, 1952 and 1979. Many people may remember the last two occasions when work was done. We are greatly in the debt of those who contributed generously

on those occasions. Now it is our task to care for the heritage left to us by the generations who have gone before us.

The work that is now being undertaken is essential in order to prevent the ingress of water through the roof, where the copper has failed in several places, and through the stonework, which urgently needs to be repaired. The tower with its elegant spire, the tallest in the country, and the most prominent landmark of the city, have suffered through weathering and lightning strikes and are seriously in need of repair. The large cross has already been removed from the spire for reasons of safety. Unless the entry of water into the building is quickly stopped, the damage that has already been done to the structure will increase sharply.

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The task of paying for this work will be a huge undertaking for the diocese. We have done the most thorough surveys to determine exactly what needs to be done and how best to do it; we are implementing stringent measures of cost control. Nevertheless, the project will cost in the nearly eight and a half million euro (€8.4m). In the coming months we will be planning how we can try to gather this uncomfortably large amount of money.

The size of the challenge, daunting though it is, is as nothing to the achievement of the people of the diocese in the second half of the nineteenth century when, soon after the famine, they built the magnificent Cathedral which we have inherited from them.

They built not just for themselves but for the generations to come, that is for us and for those who will come after us. They knew that, in building a cathedral, they were building a centre for the life of the Church in the diocese of Limerick. Important moments in the life of the diocese take place in the cathedral – the blessing on Holy Thursday of the holy oils for baptisms, confirmations, ordinations and the anointing of the sick, wherever they are celebrated throughout the year, ordinations to the priesthood, and other major diocesan celebrations. Six bishops are buried in the cathedral and six diocesan synods have been held there. The cathedral does not belong to St John's Parish alone, nor to the city of Limerick alone, but to the whole diocese.

Like every church, St John's is the house of God (*Teampall Dé*) and the house of God's people (*Teach an Phobail*). Church buildings point to something deeper. They symbolise and are home to God's presence and God's family. "Like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2: 5, cf. 1 Cor 3: 9-17).

### *A Time to Build Up*

The need to devote our energies to the restoration of the cathedral should not distract us from, indeed I hope that it may help us to focus on, the larger context. We are building for those who will come after us. That means not just repairing stonework but sharing our heritage of faith so that the living stones may be built in a new generation. Just like a physical building, the community of faith needs to be constantly renewed. Pope John Paul put that need very clearly during his visit to Ireland:

Every generation, with its own mentality and characteristics, is like a new continent to be won for Christ. The Church must constantly look for new ways that will enable her to

understand more profoundly and to carry out with renewed vigour the mission received from her Founder [3].

There is no doubt that this new century will be a startlingly new continent. We are missionaries, trying to carry our faith into a world which we do not know, a world where the Gospel has never been before. Already we can anticipate that the twenty-first century will be filled with great contrasts and uncertainties – unheard of advances in technology but unimagined new kinds of terrorism, the ability to do all sorts of wonderful things but the uneasy fear that we are destroying our own environment, affluence and comfort unheard of by past generations but leaving large sections of the human family untouched, a society swamped by information but less clear than ever about the values and principles and goals that should guide it, advances in medical and scientific research that will offer extraordinary new possibilities for good and for evil.

This is the context in which it is our task to be the living stones through which God will dwell in us and in our world. During the century and a half of the life of St John's Cathedral there have been four previous occasions when major repair was needed. In the life of God's people there are similar moments of great challenge when choices are made which determine the future for several generations ahead.

This is a moment when the two challenges come together. We are faced with the task of ensuring the future of the Cathedral. Even more importantly, we are faced with the task of passing a vibrant faith to the generations that follow us. The Patron Saint of our Cathedral was the first to undertake the task of turning people's minds to Jesus. He pointed to the Messiah saying: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). That is our task today.

None of the previous generations of Christians in Limerick would ever have looked on the challenge of passing on the message of Jesus as a lost cause; none of them saw their many difficulties as signs of inevitable decline. They saw their moment in history, and we should see ours, as 'a time to build up' (Eccles 3:3).



Pope John Paul arrives at the altar in Greenpark, accompanied by Bishop Newman, October 1<sup>st</sup> 1979.

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Pope John Paul prophetically spoke that challenge here in Limerick:

*Lay people today are called to a strong Christian commitment, to permeate society with the leaven of the Gospel, for Ireland is at a point of decision in her history... Ireland must choose. You the present generation of Irish people must decide; your choice must be clear and your decision firm [4].*

For nearly a quarter of a century he tirelessly repeated that call to ensure that the Gospel permeates society. At the end of the Jubilee Year, he said to the Church in every diocese of the world that it is up to each of us to plan for the future:

It is *in the local churches* that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified – 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 [5].

Over the next few years responding to that call will lead us to focus on at least three fundamental questions. They are questions for everyone who is baptised and who, therefore, has a share in the mission of Jesus Christ, chosen in order “to declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

- We need to reflect about how we can hear 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.

I hope that in the coming years we can, as parishes and as a diocese, look together at these questions and formulate our pastoral priorities and plans for at least a decade ahead.

I am issuing with this pastoral letter some reflections , which will, I hope, be of help to clusters, parishes, schools, groups and individuals in reflecting on the challenges we face in rebuilding God’s house for the twenty-first century. Here I will simply outline some of the issues in the briefest possible way.

### *Hearing the word of God*

When we ask how we can listen to and speak the word of God for a new century, we need to look in many different directions.

It will mean looking

- at our own prayer, our own readiness to let the wonder of the Good News change our lives.
- at our liturgy and our living of the Gospel in our families, our neighbourhoods, our work.
- at how we can show a new generation that they are essential living stones in the Church.
- at how we communicate the Good News among ourselves using the new possibilities of the information age.
- at how we respond to what the Pope has called ‘the culture of death’ and issues ranging from genocide to abortion to slavery to euthanasia.
- at how we respond to new challenges such as the prospect of cloning and experimentation on embryos.
- at what our Christian vision of the dignity of the person shows us about issues of politics, economics and international relations.

Clearly no one can respond to all these issues. But through the great variety of experience and expertise of Christian people, we can begin to address these issues. Only in that way will the Gospel be alive and active in the Ireland of the twenty-first century. We caught a glimpse of what can be achieved in a great variety of ways in the *One Diocese, Many Stories* gathering at the end of the Jubilee Year.

### *Preparing for the future*

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 steep fall in vocations to the priesthood and religious life makes that inevitable.

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. We should also recognise the courage and creativity with which religious congregations 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 past [6].

Even if there should be a dramatic upturn, the position we will face ten years from now is already quite clear. As the number of priests declines we need to be asking ourselves how that reduced number should be deployed.

- Is it wise to try to maintain at least one priest in every parish, irrespective of size, or should we be looking to some kind of cooperation and teamwork where a number of parishes would be clustered?
- In assigning priests should a parish appointment always be given priority over chaplaincy to schools, hospitals and so on?
- How do we ensure that, as their numbers fall and their average age rises, that priests are not expected to carry impossible burdens?

From the point of view of the priest there will be a need to ask how best to deploy his own resources and energies, which are not unlimited..

There will be the need

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

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.

Preparing for the future is not a matter of managing a terminal decline. The Word of God becomes incarnate in every age; God's house can be built in every situation. It is a question of preparing ourselves to speak what we know is the all-powerful Word which does not return empty but accomplishes God's purpose (Is 55:11).

### *Reaching out...*

Our Cathedral is dedicated to St John the Baptist whose role and privilege it was to point to Lamb of God. That is our role too.

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 baptism of Christ, St John's Cathedral

### ... to the whole Church

Pope John Paul constantly repeats a principle stated by the Second Vatican Council: "Human beings... can fully discover their true selves only in sincere self-giving" [7]. That is true of every individual and every human grouping. It particularly applies to the baptised person and to every parish, every cluster of parishes, every diocese, every province, every country, every continent. If we do not look outside ourselves we cannot hope to find ourselves.

We need, first of all, to see the Church as living stones, a living body, in which each part is essential to the well being of every other part.

We should resist the temptation to think and speak of the Church 'from the outside', as if we had no responsibility for its vitality and fruitfulness. It is a great mystery of God's loving presence, to which we are privileged to belong.

The whole 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, but 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.

- **... to the whole Christian family**

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

We share a great deal; we have travelled a great distance. This can often increase the pain and frustration of knowing that we are still divided.

At the same time we know that many of these areas where we differ, for instance with regard to the Eucharist, concern matters which are at the heart of the rich heritage we have received. It would be a 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:

- Do we pray for Christian unity? Do we pray for other Christian people and churches in personal prayer, in Prayers of the Faithful?
- 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?
- Have we taken seriously the call to work together with other Christians wherever possible? [8]

- How are we making ourselves ready for the challenge of relating for the first time to a significant number of brother and sister Christians from the Orthodox tradition?
- **... to the whole world**

We have a rich missionary history. We should be more aware of what missionaries from our parishes have done and are still doing. It would be very enriching for a parish or group to gather that history, or to maintain contact with 'their' missionary, or to twin with a parish in another part of the world.

Increasingly people who are followers of non-Christian religions will be living among us. 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.

We are also called to look beyond our own community because we live in a world of such great inequalities. We should be concerned about poverty and underdevelopment at home and abroad because 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".

### *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 once [9].



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

The list of issues referred to in this letter is daunting. Nobody could possibly respond adequately in all of these areas, but if each of us, trusting in God's love and trying to love God in return, tries 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 to play a part in God's work. 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 could greet his Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Mother Earth and even his Sister Death.

We can approach even the most daunting challenges with quiet confidence. The great temptation would be 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] [10].

+Donal Murray  
Lent 2002

## NOTES

1. Francis of Assisi, Letter to the General Chapter.
2. The first record of a Church of St John the Baptist at this spot occurs in the foundation document of the Cathedral Chapter, probably dated 1205, which is found in the *Black Book of Limerick* (cf Fleming, J., St John's Cathedral, Limerick, Four Courts Press, 1987, p.27). In the same year, 1205, St Francis had his vision in the Church of San Damiano.
3. John Paul II, Homily at Knock, 30 September 1979.
4. John Paul II, Homily at Limerick, 1 October 1979.
5. John Paul, At the Close of the Great Jubilee (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*), 29
6. Cf. Breen, M. (ed), A Fire in the Forest, Veritas 2001.
7. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) 24.
8. Cf. John Paul II, On Commitment to Ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint*) 40.
9. St Thérèse, Autobiography of a Saint, tr. Ronald Knox, Fontana 1960, p.185-6.
10. John Paul II, At the Close of the Great Jubilee, *Tertio Millennio Ineunte* 28.