DIOCESAN SYNOD PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2023

This year 2023, I celebrated ten years as your bishop. ‘Time flies”, they say when you enjoy

yourself! I was deeply moved by the beautiful service in Kilmore Cathedral, in June to mark the occasion and the wonderful meal in my honour which we shared in this very room.

I am grateful for all the good wishes and support that I received and continue to enjoy as your bishop. As I look out on you, like a captain from the bridge of a great ship, what do I see?

First, I see that we have come through some heavy seas. The Covid-19 pandemic was the greatest global catastrophe in living memory. It brought volatility, uncertainty and anxiety across the world. On the ground in Ireland, it brought isolation, suffering and bereavement to my families and lives. That is what we have sailed and come through by the grace of God.

We are recovering our stability and our course of direction, but it has been difficult and challenges remain in the wake of Covid-19.

Anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest that the pandemic has adversely affected church attendance. Some people have not returned to the habit of regular Sunday worship since 2020. Data from our own diocese would indicate a 10% drop in Sunday attendance since 2019.Who has stopped attending church? Soundings from clergy and lay people across the diocese would seem to suggest, that those who have not returned have been the more fringe members, young families and older members with underlying health issues. They are probably gone for good and that is sad. They are missed.

On a national level, only one in ten people who identify as Church of Ireland attend church on a given Sunday.Covid-19 exacerbated the growth of nominalism in the church. By nominalism we mean, that people who self- identify with a church but who have little or no real engagement with church. The challenge to a church like ours and other churches in Ireland is how to view and react to nominalism. Is it a threat, or is it an opportunity?

Sadly, we lost three church communities in the wake of Covid: Aughavas, Killinagh and Streete, who decided to close their churches. They have like other parishes over the years

gone and we mark their passing. However, a new church community has arisen in the wake of the pandemic, Recentre, in Sligo, part of the Cathedral group, has emerged and is taking

steps to be a viable and sustainable community. It is a model, which we in the diocese and in the Church of Ireland need to embrace and encourage.

As I look out from the bridge, I see that we are passing through strong financial currents

which cause concern. After two decades of negligible inflation and low interest

rates, we now find ourselves in a sea of rocketing prices and high rates of borrowing.

Everything seems to have risen in price: fuel, energy bills, farming costs, shopping baskets,

mortgages and rents. Churches are not exempt from rising costs. Stipends set by central church, will have increased by 17% over a two- year period. It is hard to make ends meet.

But I am aware of the generosity of so many people who contribute to the life of the church. The old adage applies: “ if a thing is worthwhile it will be supported.” Even a cursory read of the finances in the annual Book of Reports will confirm this. As we plough through these choppy financial currents, we look to God, we tack our course, to bring stability to the ship

And we try to help those who are struggling. I want to commend the unseen work of the various child- care societies, formerly known as Protestant Orphan Societies, in our dioceses

and Protestant Aid, whose intervention is life changing in critical situations.

As I look out from the bridge, I am looking out on the sea of doom. The Doomsday Clock

Is ticking loud and clear and the chief reason for this is the Climate Crisis. The Swedish

environmentalist, Greta Thunberg, wrote in 2019, ‘ The world is going to end in 12 years if we don’t address climate change.’ That is 2031. Climate change is real. The world’s atmosphere and oceans are heating up and we cannot dismiss the potential risks that arise

from global warming. I remember the words of a Christian sage and environmentalist

John Stott, who alerted students like me of how fragile the earth’s ecosystems were. But he also reminded those who would listen, that the biblical witness is that the earth is the Lord’s, not ours, nor future generations. We are custodians of God’s good earth and as long as earth remains, he will sustain life. What reassurance. Christians should be at the forefront of caring for creation. It is an atitude, a disposition which leads to practical choices and actions in our everyday lives. Real and sustainable change happens from the ground up. We all need to be agents of change in this regard.

As I look around the bridge, I also see crew members who are hard at work. We have a great crew in this diocese, who serve with great capability in administration, finance and property

in safeguarding, in parishes and in diocesan committees. We have a great crew of clergy, who care for people and preach the word of life by their words and lifestyle. It is a privilege to lead such a crew, they are invaluable. This year, I want to highlight the work done by a section of our crew in schools. Schools are critical to the future of our nation. The work done there is foundational. Our principals, teachers, and support staff do this vital work, day by day against the odds and with scarce resources. We are indebted to them. They are ably supported by those who serve on Boards of Management. These people put in huge hours at work without little reward or gratitude. To those who have served on such boards and those who will offer to serve in the next four years, we thank you.

Since last year, we have lost key people in the diocese: George Taylor, Evelyn Stafford and Dorothy Gillespie. We mourn their loss and offer our prayers and support to their loved ones. Archdeacon Craig Mc Cauley, also left the diocese after nearly two decades of exemplary work. We miss him. We welcome two young clerics and their families to the diocese: Rev. Sam Peilow and Rev. Luke Pratt. We are greatly encouraged by those training for ordained ministry: Faith Sithole from Virginia and Joshua Pringle from Bailieborough.

Likewise, we deeply appreciate the team of retired clergy, Diocesan Lay Readers and Parish Readers, who lead worship Sunday by Sunday. We also have around twenty readers currently in training under the tutelage of Rev. Nick Jones. We look forward to commissioning them for service in 2024.

Our engagement with children and young people is critical Both children and young people were big losers in Covid. Our work among them was brought to a virtual standstill. But there are signs of recovery, green shoots are appearing across the diocese in Sunday Schools,

Kids clubs, after-school groups GFS, GB BB, youth groups, confirmation groups. One of the most dramatic things to have happened is the reach of Youth Alpha in secondary schools

In Longford and Sligo. We are actively seeking a schools’ worker in Longford and a school chaplain in Cavan. These are really, positive developments.

The sea the church sails on is a global sea. We are connected to people and lands far from our shore. This year, as I mentioned earlier, we received a clerical family from Chile in South America, through our links with the Anglican Church in Chile via SAMS. Two of our clergy: Archdeacon Patrick Bamber and Rev. Steve Frost, lead mission teams this year to DRC and the Philippines respectively. We are a global church and Sunday by Sunday and in our schools growing numbers of people from across the world have found a home with us.

We rejoice in this, and it is lovely to see people from different places take roles in the life of the church. Sadly, some people have come among us because of war and turmoil in their home places. We think especially of Ukraine and now the people of the Holy land who have been engulfed by war. The UN reports that over 40 conflicts are raging across the world,

many of which we have forgotten. As Christians, we feel totally powerless in the face of such

violence and destruction. We are enjoined to pray for and to support in practical ways

those whose lives and lands have been devastated by conflict and natural disasters. We commend the work of agencies including Tear Fund and Bishops’ Appeal and others who work tirelessly to bring relief to hard places.

Finally, as I look out from the bridge, I see that the tide is going out for Christianity in Ireland. The church is like a stranded boat on the beach. It is not going anywhere soon. What can be done? There are some things we can attend to. We need to look after the crew who are ashore awaiting the turning tide. We need to repair the boat, to make it seaworthy. Nets need to be repaired, for the church after all is a fishing boat; not a pleasure craft.

Words of Jesus are a reminder, “ I will make you fishers of people.” The beach also needs

attention. It is littered with debris that needs to be cleared. And there are strangers on the shore who need to be welcomed. Above all we need to watch and pray, over the horizon

far out in the ocean of God’s love is the returning tide. The tide will come back in again

as it has done throughout history. And we need to believe that and be ready for it.

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