



# Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin

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## **Facing Changes & Challenges Together – taking the next step ...**

I was very happy with the huge response in so many ways to our gathering in Mount St. Anne's last June, as we reflected together on the need for a radical reappraisal of diocesan structures that becomes more apparent with every passing week. Five months on I want to return to the four tentative steps I proposed that evening last June:

- 1. That from the summer of 2019 - that is two years-time - every priest who has reached the age of 75 can stand down from all parish administration work. He obviously is most welcome to continue celebrating Masses, to work as chaplain in schools and hospitals, pastorally ministering in the parish but not carrying the burden of administration – it's simply not fair. The reason I'm suggesting a two-year lead into this recommendation is that it will allow lay people to be trained up in all aspects of parish administration.*
- 2. That leads me neatly to my second recommendation that every parish have a team of lay people working towards the shared goal of collaborative leadership by the autumn of 2018. There are Parish Pastoral Councils in many parishes, but not in every parish, and even in those where they exist, they differ hugely from parish to parish. It would be a big mistake simply to pigeon hole lay people into an existing clerical model of leadership, to the neglect of new possibilities in the areas of teaching, catechesis, contemplation and evangelisation.*
- 3. The opportunity to take a sabbatical is an important aspect of a priest's ministry and should be viewed as a normal feature of diocesan life. I am afraid that the tight situation regarding cover for sabbatical leave has had the consequent effect that priests might not be applying for a sabbatical. I want to state clearly that I welcome, in fact encourage applications, once the sabbatical is well planned and seen as necessary ongoing formation.*
- 4. It is not my intention to close any Churches, but may in some areas of the diocese there have to be a reappraisal of Mass times in conjunction with neighbouring parishes or cluster groups. The areas of the least population are the areas of the greater number of churches.*

At the meeting, there was a strong endorsement of the decision to bring into our Diocese some priests from other countries. Last July I had the opportunity to visit the Diocese of Iasi in Romania to explore the possibility of priests coming to minister for a period of time in our Diocese. In late August Fr. Eugen Dragos arrived and is now settling very well into the life of the Diocese. Later this month a delegation from Iasi, led by their Auxiliary Bishop Aurel Perca will spend a few days in Kildare & Leighlin. In that delegation will be Fr. Marcelin Rediu who is the second priest coming on loan from Iasi to Kildare & Leighlin. We extend a warm welcome to both, conscious that it is a very new experience for them and indeed a new venture for us.

I have also had contact in recent months with a priest from Sri Lanka, Fr. Bernard Reyhart. He is currently stationed in Rome and he is very anxious to have pastoral experience in an Irish context. The few extra priests are by no means going to change the face of the diocese, but they offer that little extra capacity, allowing a priest who gets sick to have cover, allowing a priest to take a sabbatical or study period, allowing a priest who is under personal pressure to take a period of leave.

As regards the first proposal that all priests have the opportunity to stand down from administrative work at 75, I want to once again acknowledge the great contribution men who are currently over 75 are making to ministry and life in the diocese. However, I also have to be realistic. I think of the statistic I shared in my Pastoral Letter last May: "there are 90 priests ministering in our diocese, 27 of them are over 75, 12 of them are over 80". By June 1<sup>st</sup> 2019, 29 of those who are currently in active ministry will be 75 or over; 14 of them will be Parish Priests or Administrators of Parishes. I will be writing to those fourteen in the coming week. My intention in writing to each of the men concerned, is by no means to force anyone's hand, but to plan earnestly and strategically for the future.

A phrase used by many at last June's meeting was seeing the parish as "a community of service". The presence of many lay people there allowed all of us to really appreciate the shared journey we are on together, a journey we share with great lay involvement, with the presence of the Permanent Diaconate, four young men currently in priestly formation and with the resourceful presence of Faith Development Services, to mention but a few. The hope is to have in place a team of lay people in every parish working towards the shared goal of co-responsible leadership by this time next year. This team would obviously be renewable. It would not want to be seen as a role for life; details to be worked out at a later date. In all of this I am reminded of the Bishop of Évreux in France who told the Limerick priests on their visit to his diocese some time ago: "it is not the church that is dying, it is a model of church that is dying". The need is urgent to revisit an outdated and perhaps tired model of being parish, we need to reimagine how a parish might look in 2020.

In order to focus this re-imagining I reiterate my suggestion in the Pastoral letter last May and repeated in June that each deanery host gatherings of laity and priests. The conversations must begin now. Perhaps a couple of questions or pointers might help to focus the discussion at these gatherings:

- How can we broaden the umbrella of inclusion or belonging in our parish?
- Can we draw up a list of all the roles the priest currently does in the parish with a view to an identification of the many activities that engage the priest's time and energy but maybe are not strictly his role? Are there duties or roles that could be reallocated; are there ones that can be easily delegated? Are there duties or roles that are currently missing to make our parish vibrant?
- What particular training is needed in the short term and in the longer term to have this group of lay people in place to be co-responsible for the parish, responsible to a local Vicar or his delegate, for the effective running of the entire plant? How can the Diocese meet this need?

I see this letter as a reminder of the steps I proposed last June and a reaffirmation of the work that needs to happen now, before Christmas, at parish and deanery level.

In this Month of All Souls, we recall with love those who are gone to eternity, those who built up our parishes, who made huge sacrifices for our local community. I fondly remember my own predecessors who faced changes and challenges equally enormous in the past and led the diocese through those times with great courage and conviction.

May the Lord bless all of us as we continue this journey together,



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✠Denis Nulty  
Bishop of Kildare & Leighlin  
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