

The Future of our Parishes, Communities of Belonging and Evangelisation.



PASTORAL LETTER

Most Rev. Tom Deenihan

Bishop of Meath

The Parish to which one belongs indicates a community, a sense of belonging and a sense of pride. While a parish is a church structure, it is also more than that. The parish is a place of evangelisation, a place where the sacraments are celebrated and a place where we celebrate our faith but it is also a place with which we associate and identify ourselves.

It is also true that whereas in the past a parish was defined in geographical terms, there are now challenges to a parish's identity arising from rural depopulation in some parts of the Diocese and phenomenal growth in others. In addition, many choose to attend a particular parish for reasons of the time of celebration or for liturgical preferences such as a particular choir. It can be hard to define precisely what a parish is and, at times, what parish one belongs to.

As Pope Francis reminded us, the parish is 'the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God's word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration...a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink...and a centre of constant missionary outreach'.¹ It is in our local parish that we were baptised and first worshipped Jesus and which enabled us 'to be children of God, that is, to share in Jesus' relationship to the Father in the Spirit'.²

Pope Saint John Paul II also addressed the meaning of parish: 'the parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather, "the family of God, a fellowship afire with a unifying spirit"; "a familial and welcoming home", the "community of the faithful"'.³

This is the task of a parish today: to be a community, to rediscover its identity as a community of faith, hope and love. One is not a Christian all by oneself. To be a Christian means to believe and to live one's faith together with others'.⁴ When we talk of parish, like Pope Leo, we talk of 'a community of friends of Jesus'.⁵

¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, §28

² *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission, the Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (2024), §21

³ *Christifideles Laici*, §26; cf. *Lumen Gentium* §28, *Catechesi Tradendae* §67, and the Code of Canon Law c. 515 §1

⁴ Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 12:12-27

⁵ Pope Leo XIV. Homily 9 May 2025.

Current challenges for our parishes

More recently, the 2020 Instruction *The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church* urged us to begin a fresh discernment. It calls us to 'read the signs of the times' and to foster 'a renewed vitality' that leads to the 'rediscovery of the vocation of the baptised as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a missionary of the Gospel'. Many of the concerns and views expressed in the recent synodal discussions across the Diocese of Meath underscored the importance of Parish as an expression of the faith community. People wished to see a greater sense of community in their parish, many wished for greater involvement in their parish and most expressed concern for the future of their parish in terms of faith practice and the availability of clergy in the Diocese. Handing on the faith to the next generation was also a major concern.

These concerns are shared by all of us and have also been discussed over the past few years by the priests of the Diocese. With a view to strengthening parish identity, I mandated Parish Pastoral Councils⁶

for all parishes in the Diocese three years ago and Fr. Derek Darby, as Episcopal Vicar for Pastoral Development, has been working with all parish councils in terms of providing in-service and training. Ms. Elaine Campbell, Director for Faith Development, has begun to work with these councils to promote faith development initiatives. I have also met with representatives of those councils twice over the past two years to discuss their concerns about the future of parishes in the diocese. The only focus of these parish councils is the work of evangelisation and supporting the pastoral mission of the Church in their own parish. Such



work builds and supports the local faith community that parish is.

There is no doubt that the number of priests in the diocese is decreasing and that the age profile of those who are working is increasing. There are signs of hope too. That is important. There will be one ordination to priesthood in the Diocese later this year; there are three candidates for priesthood in the Diocese of Meath in seminary formation; and two more are exploring the possibility of a vocation to priesthood in a Propaedeutic Year in Rome. But the survival of a parish does not and cannot depend solely on the local priest. That is why a functioning and trained Parish Pastoral Council is important.

It is also important to stress that there are no plans to close churches, merge parishes or centralise parish assets. The function of this letter and the initiatives that I have already mentioned is to ensure that our parishes continue to offer pastoral care even when there is no resident priest and become places of evangelisation where faith is shared, supported, informed and celebrated.

6 Code of Canon Law, Can. 536 § 1-2

Pastoral Areas

The Diocese of Meath is comprised of sixty-nine parishes. These parishes have now been grouped into fourteen Pastoral Areas after consultation with both clergy and the members of parish councils. The immediate aim of having each parish linked to a Pastoral Area is to ensure the other priests in the Pastoral area will be available to serve in a parish where there is no longer a resident priest. But that cannot be the only aim or purpose of the Pastoral Area.

Pastoral Areas must take on a new role and must be places of cooperation, initiative and energy. We are not alone in this discernment. Speaking recently to clergy and parish representatives of the Diocese of Rome, Pope Leo said of Pastoral Areas:

... they are designed to better connect neighbouring parishes in a given territory with the centre of the diocese. The risk is that these realities lose their function as instruments of communion and are reduced to a few meetings, where a few topics are discussed together and then everyone returns to thinking and living pastoral care in



isolation, within their own parish boundary or according to their own mindsets. Today, as we know, in a world that has become more complex and in a city that moves at high speed and where people live in constant mobility, we need to think and plan together, going beyond pre-established boundaries and experimenting with joint pastoral initiatives. Therefore, I encourage you to make these organisations true spaces of community life where communion can be exercised, places of discussion where community discernment and baptismal and pastoral co-responsibility can be implemented.⁷

The Pastoral Areas of our Diocese must now experiment with joint pastoral initiatives in a spirit of cooperation and initiative. While there is understandable pride in one's parish, no parish can survive in isolation. A culture of parishes working together must develop. I have asked parish councils to investigate what tasks they can share with other councils in their Pastoral Area. Obvious examples include cooperation in various faith

development courses. Rather than an individual parish training a number of its parishioners to offer a course in isolation, it makes much more sense for people to come together from the different parishes to receive training in the various courses and then to offer such courses to all in the Pastoral Area.

Parishes can also come together in organising transport for events such as the Diocesan Pilgrimage to Knock and for celebrations in the Cathedral such as the Forty Hours Adoration and the Mass of the Chrism. While many parishes cannot develop church choirs, there might be an opportunity to establish a choir in a Pastoral Area that could enhance the liturgy in the parishes of the area. Training and on-going formation for Readers and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion can also be delivered very effectively at Pastoral Area level. In time, a Pastoral Area could move towards a shared Sunday newsletter. These simple initiatives and, with others, can build community and create a necessary spirit of cooperation.

7 Pope Leo XVI, Address at the Liturgy of the Word at the Beginning of the New Pastoral Year in the Diocese of Rome, September 19th, 2025.



Ensuring the provision of Sunday Mass

'The parish community deepens its sense of its own identity as the Body of Christ when it celebrates the Sunday Eucharist, and as it draws from it the strength to live as disciples of the Risen Lord in a particular time and place'.⁸ Ensuring that each parish community can gather for Sunday Mass is a vital task for each Pastoral Area.

Significantly, in the context of priests supplying for absent colleagues or for when a parish has no resident priest, parish councils need to begin looking at the Mass schedule in a Pastoral Area to see what can realistically be offered. When four priests are serving five parishes, not every parish can have a 6pm Vigil Mass! This is the time to be having these discussions locally. It is important that these changes are discussed and that consultation takes place. But these decisions, while they can be supported at a diocesan level, are best decided locally depending on local custom, resources and circumstances. Issues such as the numbers of the faithful in attendance at particular times and the proximity of other churches with similar Mass times are pertinent to the discussion too.

To enable these discussions between parish councils to take place, I am asking that three times during the year, three representatives of each parish council within a Pastoral Area would meet and discuss the issue of inter-parish cooperation. I am also appointing a priest from within each Pastoral Area to act as a facilitator for this cooperation.



I mentioned earlier that the number of priests working in the diocese is decreasing and their age is increasing. There are universal regulations⁹ concerning the number of Masses a priest can celebrate. A priest may normally not celebrate more than one Vigil Mass and two Masses on a Sunday. There will be exceptions, as when another priest might be unavoidably absent or sick, but to ensure supply and to respect the workload of priests, these universal norms must also be borne in mind by parish councils when looking at the Mass times in a Pastoral Area. It is simply a fact that as priests, like everyone else, grow older, their energy decreases. We must be mindful of what our priests, many of whom are past retirement age, can realistically do.

8 *Baptised and Sent: Preparatory Document for the Pre-Synodal Assembly of the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland being held in the Kilkenny Convention Centre on Saturday, 18th October 2025, §84.*

9 Code of Canon Law, c. 905 §1-2



Our hopes for vibrant parishes

We are all anxious that the local parish will continue, be vibrant and be a place of welcome and evangelisation. For this reason, Pope Francis reassured us that ‘the parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community’.¹⁰ I firmly believe that vibrant and committed parish councils that are focused on evangelisation and, at the same time, parishes working together in Pastoral Areas to support each other will provide the best chance of having vibrant parishes in the future.

Looking to the future, Pope Saint John Paul said that each generation is a new generation to be evangelised for Christ¹¹ I hope and pray that our parishes, with proper support, will fulfill that need going forward.

I also ask that each parish council entrusts its work to the Holy Spirit at each meeting so that its focus remains on the gospel and the work of evangelisation. This is an important point. The parish council must be focussed on the spread of the gospel in the parish. In that regard, I would ask that both prayer for and the encouragement of vocations to priesthood and the religious life would also feature at such council meetings.

Many members of the parish councils recently received training in the method of the Conversation in the Spirit delivered by the Diocesan Synodal Team, and I suggest that important decisions requiring discernment of God’s will for the future of the parish and for the work of evangelisation could be made with this method. This reflects the words of Pope Francis when he urged all members of the Church ‘to be bold and creative in rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation’.¹²

Finally, I offer a word of thanks to those who have generously accepted the invitation to serve their parish as members of their Parish Pastoral Council. I also offer a word of thanks to the priests of the Diocese who continue to selflessly serve the communities where they are assigned. Saint Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians,

speaks of the Church as a body with many parts. That sense of unity, diversity and interdependence is crucial for our Church, our Diocese and our parishes as we seek to evangelise the next generation for Christ.

May the Christ, the Good Shepherd, accompany us and inspire us as we continue that task.

✠ **Tom Deenihan.**
Bishop of Meath.

November 2025.

10 *Evangelii Gaudium*, §28

11 *Christifideles Laici*, §34

12 *Evangelii Gaudium*, §33

