

Pastoral Letter for the Feast of Corpus Christi

The Body of Christ

## **Our Church on the threshold of the 50<sup>th</sup> International Eucharistic Congress in Ireland**

This weekend we are preparing to host and celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> International Eucharistic Congress. The Congress theme 'The Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with One Another' speaks to us of what the Church is about. The Irish Church today is a wounded church and we are a church intensely aware of:

- The pain arising from child abuse and the failure of those in authority to react appropriately to their complaints;
- The distress arising from old age or illness;

- The worry caused by unemployment, the closure of businesses and other effects of the current recession;
- The impact of accidents and crime;
- The sad legacy of the Northern Ireland troubles;
- The pain arising from conflict experienced in families, whether between a wife and husband or between parents and children;
- The pain we sometimes cause to one another in the Church by our attitudes and behaviour.

The celebration of the Eucharistic Congress challenges us to keep in mind those who, for whatever reason, no longer feel able or simply no longer wish to gather at the table of God's Word and the table of the Eucharist. My hope is that they will find their place again at that table, which is their right as baptised members of the body of Christ. If a process of

dialogue and listening is necessary for reconciliation and healing, we are prepared to face that situation.

In addition to those who no longer gather for the celebration of the Mass, there is a generation of young parents and families for whom the celebration of Mass is simply not a regular part of their lives. For many families, the celebration of First Holy Communion is an isolated event, not an entry to a regular practice of receiving the Bread of Life. This statement is made without rancour or judgement. It seems to me however that this drift away from the Eucharist represents a malaise at the heart of the Irish Church. What we face is a crisis of faith, a crisis of prayer and a crisis in our communion with one another. Addressing these issues, which have been a major cause of distress to our priests and people, must be at the centre of our pastoral thinking and efforts in the years ahead.

The theme of the Eucharistic Congress: The Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with One Another – reminds us of the pain of disunity between the Churches, which still prevents us from sharing the Eucharist with them. As we rejoice in the many gifts of faith that we share with the other Churches, we commit ourselves to working and praying together so that the day of full unity and communion will be brought closer.

The Eucharistic Congress invites us to reflect again on what it means to be united to Christ and His body and, as Christians, to be in solidarity with the suffering of the world. It invites us to be a Eucharistic people, a people who not only celebrate the Eucharist but who live it in every aspect of our daily lives.

## **The diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes**

During the recent Dromore pilgrimage to Lourdes, I experienced the body of Christ in action: a group of pilgrims, sick and healthy, nurses, doctors, priests, lay volunteers and musicians. Each day we joined 'in prayer, along with Mary the mother of Jesus' (Acts 1:14); we were focused on the needs of those who were ill, the elderly and indeed sick children. Through our sharing in the Eucharist, through the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick, we experienced what it is to be a community, which is nourished and restored by the presence of Christ in the Sacraments. Lay people are to the fore in leading the pilgrimage, which is made possible by the generosity of many people who offer their personal and professional gifts, their valuable time, their financial resources and their faith. The diocese is indebted to all who over the years have built up and contributed to this experience of grace and healing.

## **The Body of Christ in Dromore**

Over the past year I have been reflecting with the priests of the diocese on what it means for us to be the 'Body of Christ' in Dromore. The falling numbers of priests and the number of priests who are in the older age group poses many challenges to us. In some parishes there is one priest where before there were three or more. In 2005 there were 41 priests in active ministry in this diocese; today there are 29. The pattern of availability of Mass in our parishes has already changed to take account of this. In the coming years these changes will continue and will affect every parish to some degree. I would ask for your understanding and cooperation.

For many years, particularly since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the tradition of cooperation between priests and people has deepened. The Lourdes pilgrimage that I mentioned above is one example. In the area of safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, laymen and women have come forward in great numbers across the diocese to take responsibility for the many practical demands of this ministry. Whilst ongoing vigilance is vital, we have much to pray and thank God for in our parish communities.

In recent years we have been working on the development of Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Councils to ensure that the voice, experience and faith of our parishioners contribute to the leadership of our parishes.

## **Diocesan Consultation, reform and renewal**

Following an intense period of discussion in 2011, the priests of the diocese met at Drumalis Retreat and Conference Centre, Larne, in late January. A number of priorities were identified: the first was helping our people to grow in faith and prayer. To facilitate this, a director of Adult Faith Formation will take responsibility from September for developing this ministry in our parishes in cooperation with the priests and people.

In response to the shortage of priests, the diocese will develop 'pastoral areas'. This means that groups of parishes will operate as a unit to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of our parishioners and to ensure that our parishes become ever more active communities of faith, worship and Christian living. I have written to our priests to ask that they seek your views about how best our parishes can cooperate with each other.

## **Courage for the future**

As we reflect on the centrality of the Eucharist and the challenges facing us in this diocese, let us hear again the words of the Gospel and the Good Shepherd inviting us to pray:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest' (Mt 9:36-8).

Though these are difficult and demanding times, we should not be fearful or discouraged. Jesus reminded his first disciples, 'do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me' (Jn. 14:1). I am confident that the Holy Spirit will give us – priests and people – the gifts of wisdom, right judgement and courage, as we try to serve God and the people of God in the diocese of Dromore at the present time.

**+John McAreavey**

Bishop of Dromore

7th June 2012