

This reflection is offered by the priests of the Family of Parishes as a possible basis for discussion, reflection and prayer as we plan together with the people of the parishes for the future life of this faith community in the six parishes of Ardfield/Rathbarry, Barryroe, Clonakilty, Kilmeen and Castleventry, Rosscarbery and Timoleague.

Light in a new path for parishes

“The submission from our diocese to the Synod in Rome included a call for a local Church where people are invited to engage and participate in parish and Church life. People asked for more lay involvement in leadership and decision-making. There was also a call to re-invigorate and provide training and support for parish councils /assemblies. People desire a Church that reaches out and connects with those who have left or who no longer engage with us.”
- Bishop Fintan Gavin’s pastoral letter (2022).

The only thing that’s always constant about change is that we can’t stop it. But how each person deals with change varies a lot.

The fact that we live in times when the amount of change around us is greater and faster than has ever been seen in our times is also putting some people under pressure.

Young people are excited by what they experience as a time of opportunities and freedoms. Their parents’ generation is caught between supporting and loving their spirit of enterprise and the parents’ sadness that they are shedding many of the traditions they value, including

belonging to a local parish.

Another generation continues to adapt when they can while also holding onto values and relationships which have stood the test of time for them.

The challenges and opportunities being experienced by the whole Catholic Church community are also unprecedented in our times. Yes, there have always been elements of change in the Church down through the years: the Catholic Church in Ireland survived the various invasions from abroad; survived the reformation and changed; it suffered in the Penal

Times but grew again. The changes of the 1960s and Vatican II were absorbed – in part at least.

But the recent and coming changes are very different. The historical changes in the Church have been global and national. They were not radical enough to make much difference to the lives of parishioners in their local churches and chapels. People adjusted their expectations and moved on. That was then.

Recent decades have seen the disappearance of religious sisters and brothers from Ireland's cultural landscape. Church buildings which were erected with meagre resources in the

period after Catholic Emancipation and after the Great Hunger seldom have a fifty-percent occupancy on Sundays now – even when the Mass times are reduced.

At least two generations are largely absent from Sunday Mass but are demanding increasingly elaborate attention from Church and parish at 'once-off' celebrations like First Holy Communion and Confirmation.

The decrease in the number of men coming forward to train to be priests for our diocese started in the late 1970s. However, because we had so many priests then, the effect of the falling numbers was not seen in most parishes until the new millennium. By this time, ordinations were few and the average age of the priests was increasing. Most rural parishes no longer had more than one priest – but every parish had at least one priest.

Almost one quarter of the way into this decade, parish life in our diocese is experiencing uncertainty. Many of what people understood historically as foundation

stones of parish life are no longer the norm. Twelve of the 68 parishes in the diocese do not have a serving priest who is resident in the parish. Many of the churches no longer have Mass every Sunday. Religious involvement in schools is almost at an end. Diocesan and parish funds are stretched to fund essential expenditures.

By 2025, there will be 57 diocesan priests who are under 75 years and serving in the diocese. Just seven of these will be 50 years or younger.

By 2030, we will have, at most, 41 priests who will be 75 years or younger.

These numbers are currently supplemented by priests of religious orders and missionary societies who serve in the diocese, along with priests on loan from abroad. However, most of the religious orders and missionary priests will be retiring in the coming years also.

Pope Francis (in establishing a synodal process for the whole church) and Bishop

What we cannot change locally:

- *The next few years will see **the number of priests in the Family of Parishes reduced.***
- *The next priestly ordination in our diocese is at least **six years away.***
- *Mass on a weekday is not a substitute for **the Sunday Eucharist.***

Fintan (in his 2022 pastoral letter) are calling on all priests, religious and people in parishes and faith communities to respond to these challenges with faith, with hope and with a unity and a shared purpose.

We are called to rebuild a church which only eyes of hope can see.

In this Family of Parishes, the priests are committed to doing this: to entering into a respectful dialogue with the people of the six parishes so that our way forward is based on our prayer, reflection and learning together.

We invite the people of the six parishes we serve to join with us in discerning the way forward through prayer, discussion and an openness to the path the Holy Spirit will invite us to walk together.

- *Fr Ted Collins*
- *Fr Tom Hayes*
- *Fr John Kingston*
- *Fr John McCarthy*
- *Fr David O'Connell*
- *Fr Fergus Tuohy*

October 2023

What's working well?

- Each church community and each parish has a dedicated group of people who feel attached to their own local church. The churches are well cared for and are admired by visitors.
- The development of and commitment by parishioners to Parish Funeral Ministry Teams who have reinstated the role of parishioners in supporting the bereaved and leading prayers.
- Each church has people who provide sacristy services for Mass and other liturgies.
- Some parishes have an outreach to families presenting children for baptism.
- An Alpha programme reaches all six parishes.
- Each church community has Ministers of the Word and Ministers of the Eucharist.
- Almost all national school boards under the patronage of the bishop are now chaired by dedicated and competent lay people who generously give of their time voluntarily.
- Each parish has a Parish Finance Committee which co-works with the priests in the stewardship of funds, buildings and other assets – and reports to the diocese annually.
- Each church has collectors and people who count the collections and record them.
- Some churches have choirs and musicians who are dedicated to enhancing the liturgy.
- Some churches have rotas of altar servers who are well-trained and supervised.
- The recently opened Parishes Office based in Clonakilty is a contact point for many services.
- The website for the family of parishes (onefaith.ie) is well designed but needs promotion across the parishes.

Things we need to change and do

- *Each parish needs a group of committed parishioners to be leaders locally to put new life into the parish's mission (pastoral council) and be a voice for the community in parishes without a resident priest.*
- *Build a trusting partnership between parishioners, priests and deacons in the family of parishes.*
- *Focus more on the long-term mission and life of the faith community and not exclusively about the future of one church building.*
- *Bring together a leadership group which is representative of the leadership of each parish to discern and discuss matters best dealt with at Family of Parishes level.*
- *Invite and listen to young families and new residents in our communities.*
- *The current timetable of 16 Masses celebrated in 13 places every weekend by six priests is not sustainable.*
- *A separate summer timetable is necessary for when at least one priest is absent each week.*
- *Plan our liturgies better with renewed openness to active participation by people of all ages with liturgical music and singing, altar servers, processions, prayer readers.*
- *We cannot afford to maintain all the churches in good order. We need to have the difficult conversations.*
- *Use weekly parish envelopes for each parish and this, in turn, will enable the parish to apply for refunds of tax each year.*
- *Develop a newsletter which is published in all six parishes with content from each and also publish it online.*

Stay in touch!

Website of the
Diocese of Cork and Ross
www.corkandross.org

Our family of parishes:
www.onefaith.ie



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