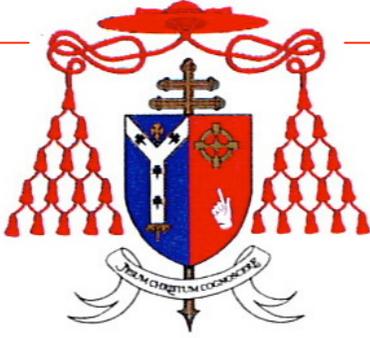


ARCHDIOCESE OF ARMAGH



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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

I wish today to bring to your attention some developments we will be working on over the next three years in our diocese, to speak of the reasons for them and to ask for your prayers and support.

Over the next three years we will embark on a process of clustering parishes, reviewing parish resources and developing new structures and ministries. This will be done in three stages. The first stage is from November this year until June next year. Stage two is from September 2009 – June 2010 and the third stage begins in September 2010. The steps are a natural development from the reflection, assessment, exploration and consultation involving the bishops, the co-ordinating group of the pastoral plan, the priests and pastoral councils of the diocese.

STAGE ONE

The first step, which we take between November 2008 and June 2009, is to bring each of the parishes into a cluster of parishes for *the purpose of sharing resources*. This does *not* mean merging or amalgamating parishes. While each parish will retain its own identity clustering is the acknowledgement that there are some things we can do better together with our neighbour than on our own. Some parishes are already doing things together so during this year we will deepen this practice. We need to ask which parishes will cluster with which and how many parishes should be in each cluster? In deciding the answer to these questions we will consult with a representative group in each parish, including the priests and pastoral councils, members of boards of governors (school management boards), football clubs and people involved in parish ministry. You can share your views

with them. Then when a draft map of the clusters has been created, there will be an open meeting in each parish next Lent where you can offer your thoughts and reactions to the proposed map.

STAGE TWO

In the second stage we will have to take the difficult step of looking at what changes we need to make as a result of the declining number of priests in our diocese. This will be difficult and there will be changes: changes in Mass times perhaps, and possible changes in the number of priests in some places. This is why the clustering of parishes is the first step. It will be the parishes in their clusters working together that will take the second step of addressing such matters as:

- how many priests are to serve in each parish in the cluster;
- what resources are to be allocated to the employment of lay leaders in the cluster;
- the number of Masses to be celebrated at the weekend and on weekdays in each Church in the cluster.

Each parish will discuss these matters along with the other parishes in the cluster and will keep their parishioners informed along the way. It will be my task to approve the recommendations arising from those discussions with a view to them coming into effect in September 2010.

STAGE THREE

Then in the third stage we will begin to develop and create new parish structures and ministries. These will enable the parishes in each cluster and throughout the diocese to grow as communities of worship, witness, outreach and faith, engaging all parishioners in the task of continuing Christ's mission in the community, society and the world. Some of these ministries might include the employment of lay people to administrative or pastoral roles within a cluster. Some of the structures might include the establishment of a pastoral co-ordination council for the cluster. Time will tell. We rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us.

THE RATIONALE

Why are we taking these steps at this time? We are taking them because times and circumstances are changing and in such a context change is essential in order to ensure growth. We change and adapt so that we can serve Christ more faithfully in the future. While our time has been described as a time of crisis; a crisis of priestly vocation, it can also be described as a time of opportunity, the opportunity to engage all of the baptised members of the church more deeply in the mission of Christ and the Church. These two are two sides of the one coin. We must adapt to the declining number of priests in the diocese and we must respond to the possibility of positively engaging every member of the parish community in the mission of the parish.

That there has been a decline in the number of priests in the Western world, in Ireland and in our diocese in the last twenty years is without question. In 1964 we had 186 diocesan priests in the diocese. Today we have 138 (26 of whom are fully retired). If we project forward by ten or fifteen years we can expect that number to decrease further. Thus the work of the second step of looking at how we resource parishes and how many priests will serve in each parish is a necessary step. We have to face it and we will face it.

But the other side of the coin is equally important. We have a real opportunity at hand as we move into this twenty-first century to bring to fruition the seed planted by the bishops of the Church when they met together at the Second Vatican Council in Rome in the 1960's. In the early Church, as St Paul reminds us, there were a variety of gifts and a variety of services. Many of the baptised members of the community lived out their baptism in service of the community and society. Then over the centuries this insight was lost. It was gradually replaced with the sense that only those who were ordained had the gifts necessary to minister to the community. The meeting of the bishops in the 1960's will be remembered most of all, I believe, for their recovery of the insight that is by our baptism that we are called to use our gifts in ministry to each other, the parish community and the whole of society. Together we share the task of carrying on Christ's mission to the world.

This is the great opportunity afforded us in our time: engaging all the baptised in the mission of Christ and the parish community. The second Vatican Council called us to this in the 1960's. We have made some advances. Perhaps the decline in the number of priests will give us the enthusiasm to make great advances.

THE ROLE OF PRIESTS

As we take these steps the priests of the diocese will have an immensely important part to play and I want to acknowledge their fidelity, dedication and generosity. Working with them over the last thirteen years has been edifying and inspiring. They work tirelessly in so many ways and I thank them for that. Their ministry is indispensable.

CONCLUSION

As we celebrate in these days the feasts of all Saints, All Souls, St Malachy and All the Saints of Ireland we are conscious that our ancestors in faith went through periods of tremendous change. St Malachy guided us through a period of great church reform. St Oliver Plunkett guided us through a period of persecution. Many of our ancestors either died in the famine or were forced to emigrate and parish life changed significantly as a result. What sustained them in difficult times was their faith, their trust in the enduring presence of the Spirit of the Lord and their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. Our times are not so difficult but those same qualities of faith, trust and willingness to adapt will enable us to make the adjustments we need to make so that future generations can stand in the great tradition of faith handed down to us.

As we begin this process on the eve of the great reformer St. Malachy we invoke his prayer and blessing on all our endeavours.

Yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Seán Gard. Brady". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Archbishop of Armagh