

# **Bishop Michael Router's Homily for the Closing Ceremony of the Year of Reflection and Prayer.**

**St. Patrick's Cathedral Armagh**

**30<sup>th</sup> June 2021**

In tonight's first reading from the First Book of King's the prophet Elijah finds God not in the wind, or the earthquake, or the fire, but in the silence. Silence is a rare commodity in today's world, and it is possibly the reason we find it so hard to hear the voice of God speaking to us or to respond to him in quiet prayer. The Year of Reflection and Prayer that we began as a diocese at the end of January 2020 was an attempt to listen in the silence to what God was saying to us as individuals and as a faith community. It was not a time for big events, large gatherings, or attention-grabbing speeches, but a time to let God's Spirit rest in us and to prepare us for the road ahead.

In many ways it was a blessing that we launched the Year of Reflection and prayer when we did because, at that time, we didn't know what lay ahead for us. Nothing could have prepared us for all that we have experienced over the past 15 months. In reality quiet reflection and prayer were often the only permitted responses. The effective closure of most forms of social interaction, schools, workplaces, churches, entertainment, is something that people younger than 80 years of age had only seen before in disaster movies. Some people adapted well and seemed to enjoy the quieter time. Others were frustrated and bored as leaving out the bins or travelling to the supermarket became the highlight of the week. For most people, however, it was a time of

varying degrees of worry and anxiety and for some, unfortunately, a time of loss and desolation.

It is something of a cliché now, but we hear it said regularly, that the pandemic has changed society and has changed how we work and interact with each other. The Church too has been affected because as Christians we value highly communal gatherings to deepen our connection with others and to assist each other on our journey to God. Christianity is not a private pursuit. It is not something that we do in our spare time, or on our own, isolated from others. It is a way of life that finds its truest expression in the gathering of the faithful. Jesus has promised that where two or three are gathered in his name, he will be present among them. Any extended period where we cannot gather diminishes our ability to bring Christ into the world or to follow his instruction “to make disciples of all nations”.

The challenges and difficulties we faced long before the beginning of 2020 have accelerated during the pandemic. We cannot sit on our hands or scratch our heads mystified by all that is circling around us. We must respond urgently and find new ways to communicate and live out the teaching of Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The most effective way we can do that is if all of us, lay faithful, religious and clergy, work together to find a common path forward. If we can recognise and protect what is essential, life giving and inspiring in our faith and pass it on to those coming after us we will go a long way to fulfilling the mission Christ has given to us in this place and time. There are many ways to reach out and continue that mission perhaps, as we have learned, through the use of websites, webcams, and social media, but only if

they are used as a means of gathering the faithful together to pray, reflect and act.

Pope Francis, whom I believe, has the gift of reading the signs of the times with great ease and clarity has called the Church internationally to set out on what is called a Synodal Pathway. It is essentially restating the model of Church where all the baptised take responsibility for the welfare and care of the people of God. It is not a new method for reflecting on the Churches life, but it is being recast in a different way. There have been many Synods and Councils throughout history, but they have, most often, only involved bishops who represent and embody the local Church. For many Vatican II is the most familiar council because it realigned the Church to dialogue with the modern world and face the challenges it presented. The horrific devastation and cruelty of World War II, the technological advances in communications, transport and medicine caused people to challenge the assumptions of the past. Suddenly Christians was forced to defend their beliefs as never before. The changes that Vatican II introduced prevented the Church from becoming a remnant of the past retreating into itself and becoming more and more distanced from people.

Today, nearly 60 years later we face a whole new set of challenges and Pope Francis has identified the model of synodality as a means of responding to these issues through a slow, yet ultimately more effective process of listening consultation and conversation. This must involve everyone it cannot be confined to just a few no matter how significant or important their role is. We must include **‘All’**. That means **‘All’** of you. This is your opportunity to have

your say on the life of the Church and to use whatever means possible to reflect on and respond to the questions that will be put before you.

We may be officially closing a ‘Year of Reflection and Prayer’ in the diocese this evening but, of course, the reflection and prayer never ends and will be an essential element of each step along the way. The next step will be to begin that active period of listening and consultation over the next two years as we prepare for a Diocesan Synodal Assembly in Autumn 2024. The final year before the Assembly will be spent analysing what we have learned through the consultation and conversation and working with the delegates, the elected and selected **‘Some’** from the parishes and other church bodies who will attend the actual Assembly itself. There they will bring the fruits of the listening, consultation, and conversation to the **‘One’** the bishop and make recommendation for a future diocesan plan. And so, the principle of **‘All’**, **‘Some’**, and **‘One’** comes into effect and opens up responsibility for the ongoing mission of the Church to all the baptised.

To assist us in this task of organising the consultation and preparation for the Assembly we have gathered a core group from around the diocese. They are predominantly members of the lay faithful, who will work alongside elected members of the diocesan clergy and female and male religious. This group, who we will commission here in just a few minutes time, will work together to establish the Synodal process here in the local Church of Armagh, a process, that will hopefully address some of the challenges that lie ahead for all of us who take our faith seriously.

As a local Church we will also feed into the universal Churches synodal pathway leading to the Synod of bishops in Rome in 2023 and the island wide process that will culminate in a National Assembly or Assemblies in 2026. So, over the coming years there will be widespread consultation with everyone inside and outside the Church, those who are faithful and committed and those who have turned their backs and walked away. This model of operating as a Church is for the long term it won't simply be over or set aside when the actual physical Assemblies take place in Rome, in Ireland or Armagh in the next three to five years.

So, as we gather here in this St. Patrick's Cathedral, in this the ancient see of St. Patrick himself we rededicate the Church in the diocese of Armagh, and indeed the whole Irish Church, to the care and protection of our patron saint who set out on a missionary journey in a difficult and challenging time with little more than faith and hope in his heart. St. Patrick discovered, however, that faith and hope were all you needed. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Saint Patrick achieved a miracle in this land and planted a seed of renewal in the heart of all Irish men and women.

May the journey we undertake together into the future, uncertain and challenging as it may be, plant the seed of faith and renewal once again in our diocese and our country. The Church will never be the same as it was. Indeed, we are not trying to re-invent the Church of the past, but we are beginning a journey to somewhere new and, hopefully, to somewhere where people can rediscover the joy of being part of the Church, the family of God.