

# PARISH LIFE: Facing a Challenging Future

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The first thing the Code of Canon Law says about the parish is that it is a definite community of the Christian faithful<sup>1</sup>. It goes on to say that this community is stably established and that its pastoral care is entrusted by the bishop to a parish priest. The future, not to speak of the present, challenges our picture of the parish in all of these aspects.

In our situation in Ireland today, the parish may not feel particularly stable. Declining priestly vocations will necessitate increasingly painful changes in the number of Masses; priests will no longer be readily available even for things that have been taken for granted – like funerals, anniversary Masses and parish functions; the prospect of cancelling Sunday Masses at short notice because no priest can be found to cover for a man who has taken ill is not far off. Many parishes can foresee the day when they will not have a parish priest resident among them. Many parishes see what used to be a vibrant community being emptied of its facilities and its social life – schools, post offices and so on as well as religious services. Many people wonder whether the idea of a parish is viable at all in the urbanised, secularised, pressurised lifestyle of our time where people may have little attachment to the place in which they live. I want to reflect on the challenge which the future poses to the modern parish in becoming be a community which is geared to respond to the world of today.

## The Parish is a Community

The Canon Law's description of the parish as a community is not what one might have expected in a legal document. The primary focus is not on the territory or the buildings or the duties and rights of the parish priest but on all the people who make up the community.

But that has become problematic. Many of the factors that characterised the community in the past have been transformed and weakened. In the smaller, more rural, communities which were the norm in the past, people knew their neighbours and were involved with one another's lives. Perhaps they knew too much about one another's lives.

It was not necessary to bring to their attention the fact that a new baby was being baptised or that the young people of the parish were receiving First Communion or Confirmation. Nowadays many people in a big parish are hardly aware that such events are taking place – events that are meant to be highlights in the life of the community. We have "*Do this in Memory*" both so that the first communicants may realise that the whole parish community is concerned to share their First Eucharist with them and so that the community may realise that this is their role. We are developing Confirmation preparation programmes to meet the same need. The revival of the RCIA is now beginning to be a feature of life in the parish and diocese; this highlights the fact that Christian initiation is about a whole community receiving a new member into communion.

The sense of belonging to the parish community has diminished. In the past it could be taken for granted; now it is not so visible; it is something that has to be worked at. Even in rural parishes, large numbers of the parishioners may be commuting to work in the surrounding towns; many of them may have come to the area because housing is cheaper than it would be in the city or suburbs. They may not feel a strong sense of belonging.

These changes are fundamentally sociological and not specific to the Church. We live in a new kind of world where belonging and active participation, at least in the sense in which they were understood in the past, are a problem for almost all institutions and organisations. At the same time, paradoxically, there appears to be a growing problem of loneliness in society, even, perhaps especially, in crowded cities. The Church is not alone in suffering from this mixture of detachment from structures or institutions on the one hand and an unsatisfied need for belonging on the other.

Today the challenge is for a parish to find ways or fostering its own identity in a new context. Of course it was always the case that the identity of a parish was everyone's responsibility and was not

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<sup>1</sup> CCC 515§1: A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably established within a particular church, whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor.

created simply by the parish priest. It arose out of the efforts of the whole community to provide itself with churches and schools and the involvement of parishioners in all sorts of activities from the Altar Society to the Scouts to the people who organised the annual Fete or the Card Club or amateur dramatics and, of course, the GAA and other sporting activities.

But all of that took place in a community conscious of itself as a community. Today the challenge takes on a new urgency. This is a world in which people often do not really belong to any particular place, but work in one location, live in another and feel that the place where they are really at home is somewhere else.

We should not idealise the sense of community that existed in the past. It was real, but it had its flaws. It existed alongside an understanding of faith that was often rather individual. People attended Mass together, often praying devoutly but individually, seeing the Mass as something the priest was doing while they said their prayers. There was often no clear sense that they were part of a prayer being offered to the Father by the community united in the Holy Spirit, joined with Christ in his Paschal Mystery, with all the Church on earth and with all the angels and saints.

So the first challenge of the future is for the parish to become what it fundamentally is: a community which knows its own identity. Pope John Paul put the challenge like this:

“(The parish) must rediscover its vocation, which is to be a fraternal and welcoming family home, where those who have been baptized and confirmed become aware of forming the People of God. In that home, the bread of good doctrine and the Eucharistic Bread are broken for them in abundance, in the setting of the one act of worship; from that home they are sent out day by day to their apostolic mission in all the centres of activity of the life of the world”<sup>2</sup>.

That text is thirty years old. The document was published in October 1979, just after the Pope returned to Rome from his pastoral visit to Ireland and the United States. Like the address he gave in Limerick, it is as true today as when it was first spoken.

#### [Rediscovering the Vocation](#)

The challenge that faces parish life today can be summed up in that one phrase, “to become aware of forming the People of God”. The parish is not just an association which we join for a particular limited purpose; it is a family home and, like any family, it is a setting in which we learn who we are and a setting to which we belong with our whole lives. Like any family it is made up of people who, apart from the husband and wife, have not chosen one another. It is not an exclusive group of likeable always compatible people. In the Sunday Eucharist we share our faith with that family and recognise one another in the Body of Christ.

One of the most important lessons in growing up in a family is learning that the family does not exist simply for my own benefit. We have to learn that the care and support we receive should be reciprocated. Perhaps a baby thinks to him or herself: ‘This is very satisfactory; if I cry loudly enough they all come running!’ As we grow and mature we learn to hear the often silent cries of other people in the family and to ask more what we can do for them than what they can do for us.

I remember reading an article by an African bishop many years ago. He expressed deep gratitude and admiration for all that the missionaries had done in his country. But he pointed out that the zeal and effectiveness of missionaries could all too easily create the impression that the Church is an outside agency that does things for us – wonderful things, constructive things. It provides education, health care, religious services and so on. But then he said that the Church would never really take root in Africa until it became clear to his people that the Church is not just what other people do; it is what they themselves are called to do for one another and for the world.

And so the parish is a community which sends out its members day by day. Both sides of this statement are important. The members are sent out beyond the community, but it is the *community* which sends out its members with the good news to be proclaimed the world.

In Ireland we are experiencing something akin to what the African Bishop pointed to. If people are to become aware of forming the People of God they have to stop thinking of the Church as an institution outside themselves from which they receive services and guidance. It means seeing the Church as a community in which each person has an essential role. That is easily said, but making it real involves a change of mindset.

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<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 67.

The magnificent work of religious congregations in Ireland through the years in health care, in education, in pastoral work now poses a critical challenge to the rest of the Church. Are we ready to recognise that these admirable works are not and never were just the responsibility of the religious alone? They are the responsibility of the whole Christian community. In particular, we need urgently to recognise that the work of Catholic education at every level is a matter for all of us<sup>3</sup>.

The message to which Christians bear witness is not just about God's love for me as an isolated individual. God has willed to make human beings holy and to save them "not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness"<sup>4</sup>. Only a community aware of itself as forming the People of God can bear effective witness to this truth.

What we have to offer the world is a way of life, the way of life of God's People. We are pointing not to ourselves but to a community gathered around Christ, a community which is Christ's Body. And we recognise that this community gathered to celebrate the Eucharist is the fullest expression of who we are and is the source of our strength and our mission. The Eucharist is the summit and source of the life of the whole Church and of each parish. That is why, in this Year of Vocations, we need to put all our prayer and effort into encouraging vocations to the priesthood without which the availability of priests will continue to diminish dramatically.

The decline in vocations raises very serious questions about the future shape of the parish and of the diocese. If, God forbid, the present decline were to continue, twenty years would see an astonishing change. In other words, if we do not turn a corner within the next dozen years we will be moving steadily towards the kind of situation in which our priests are working in Peru – just two priests in a parish with about half the population of the diocese of Limerick. The change will happen a lot more quickly if we fail to understand the pressures that are on priests and the unreasonable expectations that are placed on them, often by good people who don't realise how great the pressures are.

The responsibility that falls on the Church, on every parish and on every member of it is to be "a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race"<sup>5</sup>. A positive fruit of the decline in vocations is that it has become clearer and clearer –the reality is utterly inescapable – that if Christian faith is to survive in Ireland we all have to be involved in sharing the Good News with others and with a new generation.

Of course, this was always the case. Through years of persecution and hardship it was the faith of parents and teachers and other lay faithful that kept the flame of faith alive. But we need a reminder of that in the circumstances of our time. Too often the reaction to reports of falling Mass attendance, or to declining vocations, or to a certain invisibility of belief in social and political life, or to a drift away from the Church by young people is to say "the bishops must be worried" or "what are the priests doing about it?" The challenge is not just to the clergy, it is to every member of the Church. Until we all recognise that, we will be missing the real nature of the parish and of the Church; and we will be failing to recognise and respond to the challenge we face.

There are many categories of people who have drifted away or who feel alienated. Pope John Paul said what was needed over thirty years ago: ""(The parish) must rediscover its vocation, which is to be a fraternal and welcoming family home." It must become a setting where people can see that they have a place and a role, where their gifts are needed.

Do we for instance think not just of how 'we' can persuade 'them' to come back to Mass' and not enough in terms of how 'they' could become part of the 'us' which cannot function fully without the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given them. How many people who rarely go to Mass would respond to an invitation to come some Sunday, perhaps for a special parish occasion and might find their way back to regular practice. I wonder how many have ever received such an invitation.

At Confirmation I tell young people that their gifts are for the whole community and that we are delighted to know that they will be playing their part. We tell them that we will support and encourage them in every way. But is it true? Will they find a welcoming family home ready to appreciate their gifts, to listen to their ideas, to encourage their contribution of their vitality to the life of their parish?

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<sup>3</sup> IRISH CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE, *Vision 08*, Pentecost 2008

<sup>4</sup> VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

In the past, we assumed that young people would find their place in the community without any particular effort. It would follow naturally as they became adult participants in the overlapping activities that made up the local community. Now sporting bodies and other voluntary groups make serious efforts, often with only limited success, to attract a new generation and help them to realise that they are needed, and that no organisation can survive without an intake of fresh blood from time to time. But what exactly do we do as a community of faith to help them realise that they are needed and that, without their generation, the Church as we have known it in Ireland will not survive?

I wonder too how many new arrivals in Ireland feel that their local community is not only accepting of their presence but positively and actively welcoming. Could it be that a young person from Eastern or Central Europe could attend a Sunday Mass in one of our churches without hearing a welcoming word from anyone, still less being invited, at least occasionally, to share a cup of tea with some of the other parishioners? Do we really appreciate how people from other lands can bring a new richness, new approaches and new vitality to the life of our community?

### [To All the Life of the World](#)

But why do we need new members and new vitality? One important answer is that the parish does not exist simply for its own sake or for the sake of its individual members, or even for the sake of those within it who are sick or in need or adrift. It has a bigger mission than that. It is not a refuge where we hide from the world and its problems. It is not the wagons drawn in a circle to keep the world at bay. It is a base from which we go out to change not only the parish but the world, to play our part in the Holy Spirit's renewal of the face of the earth (Ps 104:30): "from that home they are sent out day by day to their apostolic mission in all the centres of activity of the life of the world". We are to be a sign and instrument for the world – a world that seems less ready to hear the wonder of the gospel than the one in which many of us grew up.

Probably for the first time in history, religion is in many ways at the margins of Irish society. The challenge of addressing a secularised world is a daunting task. It means trying to find ways of bringing the Gospel to a culture no longer penetrated by the transcendent, a culture in which the things of God seem to have little place, a culture which often seems to feel no hunger for what has been called 'the God who is not missed', a culture, as Pope John Paul put it on another occasion, which is marked by the silence or absence of God<sup>6</sup>.

One clear sign of that secularisation is the notion, which affects believers too, that religion has its place. It has relevance not only in the church, or when we encounter difficulties, when we pray. In other areas we live with little conscious reference to God. God, as Pope John Paul once put it, does not appear above the horizon of our lives<sup>7</sup>. But we must be clear. A god who is not the God of all creation and of every second and every inch and every aspect of creation would not be God at all.

Obviously, how that faith in God's presence is to be expressed and what it means in many of these areas is something on which we have to reflect. The first thing to be said, however, is that the challenge needs to be correctly read and realistically responded to. During his visit to Ireland Pope John Paul also said that:

Every generation, with its own mentality and characteristics, is like a new continent to be won for Christ. The Church must constantly look for new ways that will enable her to understand more profoundly and to carry out with renewed vigour the mission received from her Founder<sup>8</sup>.

In other words, each new period in history brings new situations and challenges that have not yet been touched by the Gospel. That is particularly true of the century that will soon complete its first decade. Because of the pace of change that we are experiencing, our time presents many areas which have never previously been lived in or reflected on by Christians and which are, therefore, a sort of mission territory, not yet evangelised. In order to hear the Good News addressing this new world, there is a vital need for what Pope John Paul in *Evangelium Vitae* called "a contemplative outlook" which sees life as a gift and sees in all things the reflection of the Creator and in every person the Creator's living image<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Master in the Faith*, 4<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the Death of St John of the Cross (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, to Pontifical Council for Culture, 5 March 1988.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Homily in Knock, 30 September 1979.

<sup>9</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae* 83.

It is a world, globalised as never before; a world of information technology; a world whose environment is threatened by our lifestyle; a world of incredibly destructive weapons; a world where huge inequalities are obvious; a world of increasing multicultural and interreligious contact – and often unfortunately not just contact but conflict. These, and many other areas, require experience and expertise if one is deal realistically with them, to speak sensibly about them or even to formulate clearly the issues that need to be addressed and reflected upon.

It is a world as uncertain as any in history. It would be a brave person who could be sure whether we are heading to a world of unimagined affluence and technological advance or a world blighted by energy and resource shortages and disastrous climate change. It would be a brave person who would predict where the balance of power will lie in our world a couple of decades from now. It is a world whose characteristic musical theme might be whistling in the dark!

These issues are not just areas of our world; they are areas of our lives and of ourselves. Even we Christians lead large portions of our own lives in areas which have never been lived in or reflected on in the light of the Gospel. We live in the mission territory of a very new generation. There is no use leaving it to the next generation to make sense of this world; we have to begin the process of reflection; we have to raise the questions about how to live as a follower of Christ in this new world.

Concerned Christians who are well informed and deeply involved in areas like medicine and medical research, or politics or economics, or environmental issues, or the European Union, sometimes ask why priests and bishops do not speak about the issues that arise in these areas, without any apparent awareness that it is they themselves who are best placed to speak about these spheres!

Our world will become increasingly secularised, unless Christians who have the relevant expertise and experience bring their faith to bear on it. And, of course, everyone has experience and expertise that are relevant, because everyone has a unique individual perspective, history and network of relationships. Each person has his or her place in the new continent and his or her possibilities for evangelising it. If believers do not bring the Gospel into their own situations, nobody else can! The parish is the family home from which believers go into all of these areas where they are the ones who have to apply their faith to problems that the rest of us simply do not understand as they do.

A rounded pastoral approach to secularisation will mean recognising that people, whether lay or clerical, who believe that the challenge can be met exclusively, or even principally, by clergy, are badly misreading the situation. They are looking in a direction that cannot provide an adequate response. Of course the clergy have a crucial role to play, but the world cannot be evangelised unless all the variety of gifts that the Spirit gives to the Church are brought into action.

As we face the complex world of today, we can hardly expect to make any impact if we fail to value and to use the gifts of the community. If we think it is a task for someone else, for the bishop, the priest, the religious, we are ignoring what St Paul said about the body of Christ: "... there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' (1 Cor 12: 20,21).

It is a task for all the members of the Church. A priority for the life of the parish is to challenge, encourage and support parishioners in bringing their gifts to bear on the profound human questions that arise from living in our kind of world – on the questions about human dignity and on the possibilities and threats to the growth of the human family, on how it is possible to hope in the face of those threats and on the Christian response to the issues of the world in which we live. These questions have never arisen in the same way before. We have, of course, our tradition of faith, but we have no tradition of how it is to be lived in Ireland and in the wider world of the twenty-first century.

Pope John Paul once again presented to the Irish Bishops during our *ad limina* visit in 1999 the ideas he expressed in Limerick now almost thirty years ago:

The new evangelisation which can make the next century a springtime of the Gospel will depend very much on the lay faithful being fully aware of their baptismal vocation and of their responsibility for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Today it is often the laity who must be in the forefront in seeking to apply the Church's teaching to the ethical, moral and social questions which arise in their communities or at the national level. The specific mission

of lay men and women is the evangelisation of the family, of culture, and of social and political life<sup>10</sup>.

Failure to see that the task is for everyone will result in a decline of Christian faith and an opening of the way to ever growing secularism, or, more likely – because secularism is nothing like as satisfying a world view as it may seem at first sight – to other religious expressions, some of them quite superficial and superstitious.

### Education for Mission

This is the reason why the parish needs to become aware of itself – it is a community with a mission both to its own members and to the wider world. This is why it needs to gather and encourage and use all the gifts at its disposal. It also needs to mobilise itself in order to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow. Pope John Paul is very clear on the basic need to ensure that the parish should prepare its members for the task ahead by educating, catechising, them in the faith that they are to bring to bear on the whole of their lives:

“... every big parish or every group of parishes with small numbers has the serious duty to train people completely dedicated to providing catechetical leadership (priests, men and women religious, and lay people), to provide the equipment needed for catechesis under all aspects, to increase and adapt the places for catechesis to the extent that it is possible and useful to do so, and to be watchful about the quality of the religious formation of the various groups and their integration into the ecclesial community”<sup>11</sup>.

Next year will be the *thirtieth* anniversary of the document in which Pope John Paul wrote of this ‘serious duty’. Some good work has been done in responding to it, not least by this College through the NOSTRA programme, through the Diocesan Pastoral Centre and through the Dominican Biblical Centre. We have made some progress in grouping parishes to reflect and learn and act together. But I think we have to say, “much done, more to do”.

In particular we need to address “education for mission”. In other words, what we need above all is an education which prepares people to understand and to respond to the task of bringing their faith to bear on the whole of their lives. This has a number of dimensions but, very clearly, the first task in a world which is marked by the silence or absence of God is to learn the truth of the God who is everywhere and always at the heart of our lives.

Sometimes the challenge we face is posed in ways that distort what the Church is. So we hear challenges like, “If a business had lost 25% of its customers in fifteen years it would be heading for bankruptcy; a company whose returns were in such sharp decline would be rebranding itself as a matter of urgency; if an undertaking was unable to recruit new senior staff, it would be in crisis.”

Of course declining statistics do pose a challenge for us. Of course they prompt us to ask whether we could be doing things better. Of course we need to be asking ourselves whether we are speaking the message in a way that can actually touch the hunger in people’s hearts today. I do not want in any way to diminish the challenge of bringing the Gospel into the world of the twenty first century. But that challenge is not, in the first instance, about improving an institution; it is about enabling a community, and all of its members, to live more fully. That is why statistics may be misleading.

We have to resist the idea that the message of the Gospel can be adapted in response to the findings of market research. We have to be sceptical of the idea that the success of our preaching of the Gospel can be measured in terms of the number of people who attend Church regularly. Financial and statistical returns are not the final criterion for measuring the vitality of the Church.

No marketing manager would speak to his customers in the way Jesus did: when many of them turned back and would no longer follow him, he seemed to make things worse by saying to the remaining few, “Do you also wish to go away?” (Jn 6: 66f) This would be seen as very poor management technique and a disastrous approach to public relations; it ignores market research!

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<sup>10</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Address to the Irish Bishops, 26 June 1999.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechesi Tradendae*, 67.

Not the least of the problems about the image of the 'institutional church' is that unless one has a deeper vision, renewal can get lost. 'Renewing the institution' may well need to be done, but only in order to help advance the vocation and mission of Christians to grow in Christ. If that purpose is not kept in view then what is left is only fiddling with structures

At several points the document, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, puts it bluntly. What comes first is holiness:

First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness.

It is fatal to forget that 'without Christ we can do nothing' (cf. J. 15:5). It is prayer which roots us in this truth... When this principle is not respected, is it any wonder that pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration?

Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth<sup>12</sup>.

It is much easier and more attractive to move straight into action. The uncomfortable truth may be that the best advice is: "Don't just do something, stand there" or better still, "Don't just do something, kneel there". Nothing but frustration will come from trying to renew the parish without nourishing people's sense of being in communion with one another in the life of God, and their realisation that, in the end, this is God's work. "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain" (Ps 127:1).

So the primary goal of the parish is to help people to hear the Word of God speaking to them, to help them to pray: "When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well"<sup>13</sup>. This prayer and holiness is the foundation of our looking beyond ourselves and our own families and communities.

But that leads us into the second aspect of education for mission. It is not individuals who emerge from their prayer and reflection to go out and change the world; it is a community, a part of the People of God, that is sent out. If they become more aware of 'who they are', they also become more aware that they are engaged together in the same mission. They will need to tease out together what that means – what the implications of being a follower of Christ are in their families, in their community, in their work, in their social and political responsibilities, in relation to the environment, in relation to the developing world.

In some of these areas there will not be a single, specific answer; there may be room for legitimate disagreement. The making of political and moral judgements is not the same kind of thing as making a judgement about mathematical truth or about the result of a scientific experiment:

Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter... Hence it is necessary for people to remember that no one is allowed in the aforementioned situations to appropriate the Church's authority for his opinion"<sup>14</sup>.

What is important, however, is that we come to those issues with an understanding that there is no such thing as a purely secular decision if by that we mean a decision that has no connection with our relationship with God.

It is clear that the Christian community to which we belong is a context in which we should be reflecting and praying together on the issues that will shape the future of our society. That reflection is necessary first of all so that the parish can have some sense of the task it faces, not just in keeping the plant and the Church services going. It is a matter not just of maintaining the things that the parish provides for its parishioners but rather of responding to the mission of the People of God in the new continent of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>12</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 30, 38, 43.

<sup>13</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

Building on the foundation of the prayer I spoke about earlier, we need to find ways of undertaking reflection on practical issues. We face an endless list of issues – such as how our parish can be a place where young parishioners feel welcomed, encouraged and respected, how we prepare the parish to be a living community of faith ten years from now, how we can grow in prayer and in knowledge of our faith; how can we welcome immigrants, how we can fulfil our responsibility for the environment, how we can show our care for our brothers and sisters – in other words the brothers and sisters of Christ – in the developing world and closer to home. Obviously not everybody can do everything. That kind of reflection would need to take place among small groups of people interested in particular topics. I don't envisage the parish priest, even if there is one resident in the community, sitting in on all of these reflections. "Today it is often the laity who must be in the forefront in seeking to apply the Church's teaching to the ethical, moral and social questions which arise in their communities or at the national level".

It may seem unrealistic, but we need to ask ourselves a question, if there are no spaces in our parish community where we can address together the issue of how to be a Christian in the various contexts in which we live and can try to respond to the challenges of the world around us, what kind of Christian community can we be? And how can we hope to meet the challenges of living and sharing the faith in the twenty first century? We are all busy and tired – and maybe that is a clear symptom of the problem. But following Christ is not something that is done for us; it is something we are called to do ourselves. We need to ask ourselves what it takes to be a follower of Christ today, with our whole heart and soul and might (Dt 6:5; Mt.22:37 and parallels).

The issues that we need to address together are not just about reaching out beyond ourselves; they also include matters within the parish. The obvious examples are youth ministry – that is ministry by youth as well as for youth – baptism preparation and so on. Part of the enrichment of parish life will be not only to undertake new challenges for the new century but also to value and to enhance all the many things that are already part of the life of the parish but are often not appreciated as such. I mentioned some of these earlier, the GAA and other sporting activities, associations and clubs. It is particularly important that we recognise that the life of families – their struggles and their joys, their anxieties and their celebrations – are a vital part of the life of every parish as are all the efforts of every parishioner to live their faith. God is present in every aspect of life.

In the past, when everybody knew everybody, all of these activities were seen as part of the richness of the life which the community celebrated in the Eucharist. As life changed and became compartmentalised were tempted to see the parish almost exclusively in terms of what happened in the church. The hurling or football team also had a parish base, but the connection between it and the church often remained fairly vague until prayers were needed coming up to a big match!

It is not too fanciful to say that this narrowing of what counts as parish is itself a kind of secularisation – a symptom of the idea that some parts of our lives are not part of our lives as followers of Christ. In many admirable ways Parish Pastoral Councils have begun to address these issues have begun to reverse that trend.

I hope and pray that this will continue to develop, not just within the parishes but in the relationship between parishes. Just as an isolated Christian is a strange anomaly, so would a parish which did not look beyond itself. The future of parish life and its efforts to live and witness to the Gospel in "new ways that will enable her to understand more profoundly and to carry out with renewed vigour the mission received from her Founder" is going to be more and more bound up with its relationship to the parishes around it and with the wider church of the diocese and beyond – but that is a reflection for another day.

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