



diocese
of limerick
our catholic community

LIVING OUR FAITH IN A TIME OF COVID-19 TEN TIPS

INTRODUCTION

We will never forget 2020! A Spring lockdown, churches closed, Easter by webcam; children whose collective memory will be defined by this virus; Confirmation and First Communion ceremonies postponed, Leaving Cert students facing bewildering changes; people losing their jobs or fearing loss of work and our older generation very restricted in their activities. Funerals that had to be celebrated without the customary supports and gatherings of people. Over the summer we followed government roadmaps and longed to return to normality, or at least to something that resembled a familiar way of life.

Now we are realising what “living with COVID-19” really means: we are daily confronted with uncertainties, regular changes and new codes of behaviour. COVID-19 has dramatically altered everyone’s daily life and powerfully exposed the vulnerability that all humans share. But longing to return to what was is never a constructive mindset - it only fuels our impulse to continually postpone.

For Christians, postponing our mission is never a legitimate option; faith cannot be quarantined. It has to be lived in the circumstances of the time, so in this time of COVID-19, I would like to offer ten simple tips as an encouragement to keep watering the seed of faith within us.

With our movements curtailed, we have a chance to take a more contemplative approach to life. We can check on our spiritual health, we can cultivate the interior space from which we draw when we bring our faith to action and work for the Kingdom of God. Pope Francis describes this process as “letting oneself be shaped by the love of Jesus, having his same sentiments (see Phil 2: 5), asking oneself continuously: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?”

Asking these questions, embracing this mind-set opens our eyes to the world around us, with all its need, and draws us to putting our faith into action – to putting our faith into action by helping where we can. It prompts us to be the “missionary disciples” that Pope Francis so often encourages us to be.

It needs to be said again that faith urges us to act responsibly in abiding by public health advice and regulations – keeping social distance, washing of hands, wearing a face mask, limiting our physical social interactions.

So, here are ten pointers I want to suggest for living our faith in a time of COVID-19.

+ Brendan Leahy

+ Brendan Leahy
Bishop of Limerick

TIP ONE BELIEVE IN GOD'S LOVE

First things first! Remember God. Uncertainties, changes and restrictions easily lead to anxiety, fear and tension. It is good to recall St Peter's advice to the First Christians: "Cast all your anxiety onto God, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Belief in God's love is central to our Christian faith. We are not alone. We are not orphans. We remember Christ's parting words of encouragement to his disciples: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Christ who gave his life for us is with us to free us, support us, and be by our side every day. Recently a priest who was approaching death reminded me that what matters most is to believe in love. It's one thing to say it, it's another to live it day by day. We need to realise the sky above us is not closed. God is like the sun shining even when there are clouds. The horizon of our lives is open to God who is Love and God is always working for us, with us and among us.

TIP TWO LIVE THE PRESENT MOMENT

The many references to mindfulness in popular culture during this period of stress and strain are signs of a desire to focus on the present. This resonates well with the good practice within the Christian tradition of living the present moment well. We normally spend so much time revisiting the past or planning the dreams of the future, but easily ignore to focus on the present.

St Thérèse of Lisieux used to say, "You know that to love you, Lord, I only have today." The "sacrament of the present moment", as it is sometimes called, brings with it a chance to believe in divine providence by living each day, each moment, as a gift with its grace and strength of being able to see, hear and touch God's closeness to us.

So many spiritual teachers emphasise the present moment. Why not develop the practice of saying silently, "for you, Jesus" before each action during the day?



TIP THREE LOVE BY SERVING

These times of Covid restrictions and lockdown have brought us to appreciate much more the ways people offer services that we really need but that we can often take for granted – from truck deliveries to shop assistants. We salute with gratitude all in healthcare, education and all the essential services as well as priests and parishioners who have given of themselves so generously in recent months. We can think, for instance, of the daily dinner deliveries by volunteers in local communities. So many people in their family life, world of work or engagement in voluntary bodies and initiatives have contributed much to society with their example of service.

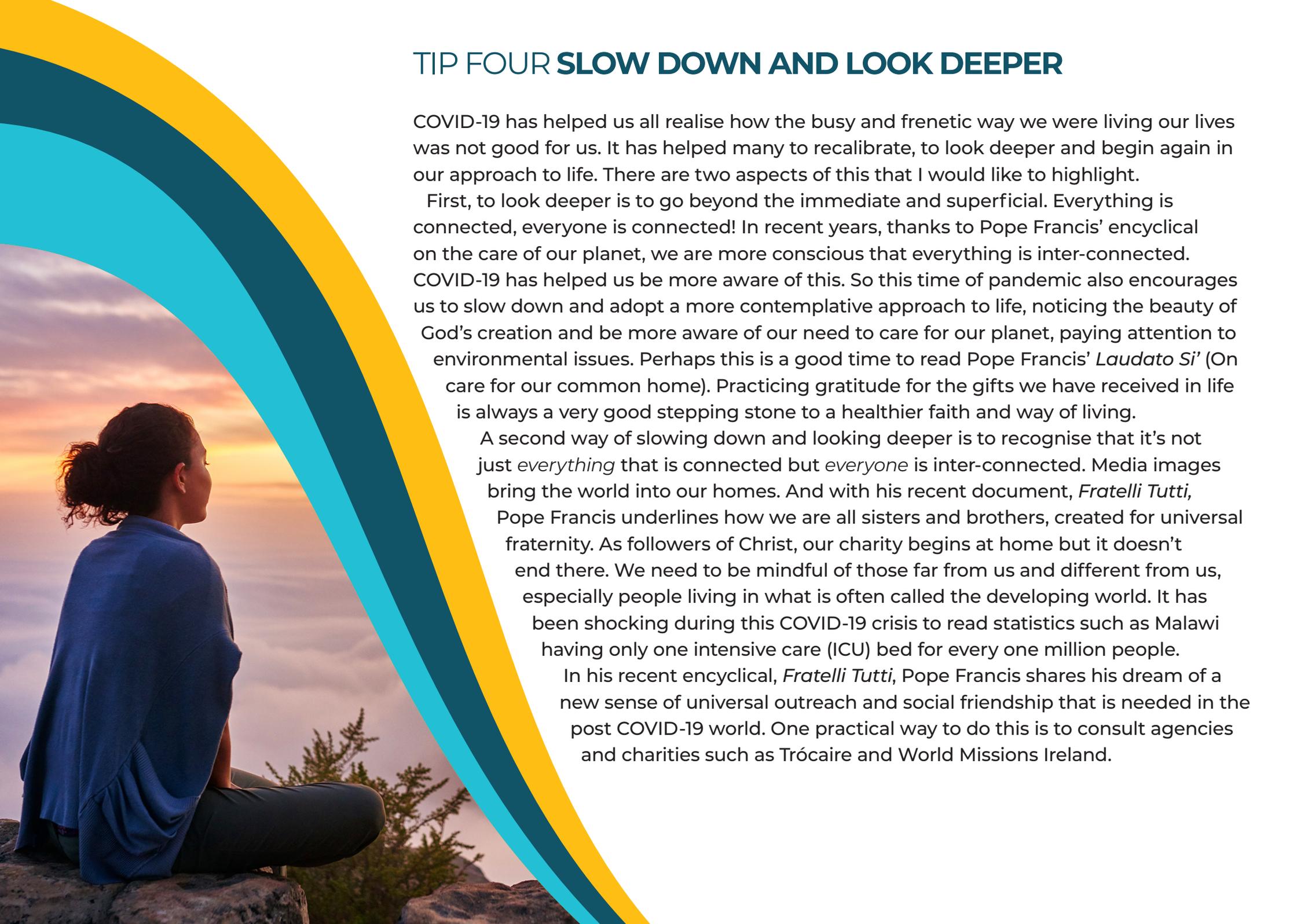
The call to serve reaches all of us. A pandemic could be a time when we are tempted to become introspective, focussing overly on ourselves, but Christian faith prompts us rather to keep reaching out. We are called to love and serve our neighbour, to alleviate suffering and restore healing to a wounded world. This means being the first to love, not waiting to be loved. The needs of the world don't stop because of a pandemic, if anything they are amplified. So many have been affected physically, psychologically and economically, particularly those on the margins: migrants, refugees, prisoners, the bereaved. New avenues of solidarity are emerging, with new opportunities for volunteerism, as demands on charities like St Vincent de Paul, Simon, the Samaritans surge.

In his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis speaks much of service and solidarity. He writes,

'solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means "caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people". In offering such service, individuals learn to "set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, "suffers" that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people' (n. 115).

We serve by loving and that requires we co-operate with others in service. We can't do it all on our own. Pope Francis invites us to consider how we can serve others along with our sisters and brothers of our own church as well as those of other churches and indeed of other religions who also place themselves at the service of universal fraternity:

"Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together" (n. 8).



TIP FOUR **SLOW DOWN AND LOOK DEEPER**

COVID-19 has helped us all realise how the busy and frenetic way we were living our lives was not good for us. It has helped many to recalibrate, to look deeper and begin again in our approach to life. There are two aspects of this that I would like to highlight.

First, to look deeper is to go beyond the immediate and superficial. Everything is connected, everyone is connected! In recent years, thanks to Pope Francis' encyclical on the care of our planet, we are more conscious that everything is inter-connected. COVID-19 has helped us be more aware of this. So this time of pandemic also encourages us to slow down and adopt a more contemplative approach to life, noticing the beauty of God's creation and be more aware of our need to care for our planet, paying attention to environmental issues. Perhaps this is a good time to read Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (On care for our common home). Practicing gratitude for the gifts we have received in life is always a very good stepping stone to a healthier faith and way of living.

A second way of slowing down and looking deeper is to recognise that it's not just *everything* that is connected but *everyone* is inter-connected. Media images bring the world into our homes. And with his recent document, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis underlines how we are all sisters and brothers, created for universal fraternity. As followers of Christ, our charity begins at home but it doesn't end there. We need to be mindful of those far from us and different from us, especially people living in what is often called the developing world. It has been shocking during this COVID-19 crisis to read statistics such as Malawi having only one intensive care (ICU) bed for every one million people.

In his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis shares his dream of a new sense of universal outreach and social friendship that is needed in the post COVID-19 world. One practical way to do this is to consult agencies and charities such as Trócaire and World Missions Ireland.

TIP FIVE **BUILD UP YOUR FAMILY AS A “DOMESTIC CHURCH”**

Everyone belongs to a family. COVID-19 has impacted on family life in all kinds of ways. While for some, it has brought tensions and challenges, for many it has also shown the importance of spending more quality time together. We have heard of whole families coming together, in a way they haven't for years, to participate in Mass being transmitted on television or online in one way or another. Some families set up small sacred spaces in their homes. Each of us is called to build up our family as a “domestic church”, a home church, a family church. And that doesn't just mean prayers and rituals. It is about life in all its aspects. Families have learned to be creative in caring for one another from cooking to entertainment, from finance to education, from sport to communication. All of this is an experience of Church in a full sense, the “spiritual worship” of which St Paul speaks in Romans 12. While there's no such thing as a perfect family, through the love that family members have for one another, always starting again each time we fail, we contribute to letting Jesus' presence be felt among us and this is the Church radiating Christ in our world. For helpful resources see the Limerick Diocesan website under “home support and resources”.





TIP SIX **MARK SUNDAY IN A SPECIAL WAY**

Sunday has always been central in the life of Catholics. Gathering together for the Eucharist means so much to us. It goes to the heart of who we are as Church. As Cardinal Sarah has written recently:

“we need to meet our brothers and sisters who share the sonship of God, the fraternity of Christ, the vocation and the search for holiness and the salvation of their souls in the rich diversity of ages, personal histories, charisms and vocations”.

Even in the face of restrictions, when it is possible to have public celebrations of the Mass and the sacraments, they should be beautiful and not reduced to a minimum. Those who are not in the vulnerable category because of age or underlying condition, should always try to attend Mass on Sunday. It builds us up and and at the same time we add to and we build up the community.

It can be that we are unable to participate at Mass but we still should mark Sunday in some special way. We need to work at it. Thankfully we have access to liturgies online. Let’s do our best not to be too distracted when logging onto the parish webcam to get a Sunday Mass. It’s good to remember what we are doing - welcoming Jesus in spiritual communion. Other possibilities to mark Sunday include turning to the Sunday readings that we find online, and take a few moments to pray and sit with God’s word. Sunday is a special day also to think of doing some simple acts of love for those we know who are sick or alone. It might be an occasion to visit a cemetery to pray for our deceased loved ones.



TIP SEVEN **PAY ATTENTION TO SMALL DAILY PRACTICES**

Faith needs to be nourished in small everyday little ways. For instance, saying simple morning and evening prayers and encouraging our children to do so. There are plenty of prayer resources on line. See also our own Limerick Diocesan website. When we build sacred moments into our lives, they become routine and supportive: grace before meals, blessing ourselves with holy water at a font by the door, the Angelus, a decade of the rosary during a car journey, a quiet word in thanksgiving for a beautiful day. Everyone needs to find his or her own way but prayer is so important – it grounds us, connects us to God, who lives deep within us, and to others around us; prayer strengthens us in life. It is good to find pockets of silence and stillness in our lives. It is certainly a big help to get into the habit of regularly saying “thanks” to God for the small and big blessings in our lives.

In recent months I’ve heard of people looking up online how to pray the Rosary as they want to do so, for instance with loved ones who are dying, or in mortuaries alongside the deceased. We know that Our Lady often appeared in times of difficulty with Rosary beads in her hands. Perhaps in this time of pandemic, we can rediscover this prayer that has sustained Catholics down through the centuries. It is a prayer that helps us meditate on the events of Jesus’ life that are central to our faith.

There are also other short prayers that can be repeated often during the day such as “my Lord and my God, Lord help me”, and the famous Jesus prayer promoted by the Orthodox churches: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. There’s also the simple invocation of the Holy Spirit, “Come, Holy Spirit, enkindle in us the fire of your love”. You’ll find an excellent book of prayers put together by Fr Chris O’Donnell on our Limerick Diocesan website with many other ideas for short prayers throughout the day.

TIP EIGHT **TUNE INTO THE SEASON**

The Church's year is marked by seasons that bring focus to our faith life. It is good for us to be attuned to the liturgical seasons and feasts. October, for instance, is dedicated to Our Lady, so families often pray the Rosary together. It's also the month when we focus on mission. November is traditionally a time for remembering our departed loved ones, for special prayers and liturgies and for visiting cemeteries. Advent begins on the last Sunday of November and runs through December bringing an atmosphere of expectation and preparation for Christmas. Christmas is the great season of celebrating the birth of Jesus, a time of focus on the crib set up in churches and in our homes. How we celebrate Christmas this year might be very different but Christmas itself can never be cancelled. So we can ask ourselves: how can we capture these seasons and themes in our homes?

TIP NINE **DISCOVER THE WORD OF GOD**

Perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic might be a very good time to reopen a Bible, to read again 'the words of God, expressed in human words' and draw nourishment and strength. Why not take an hour or two to simply read one Gospel text from start to finish? Maybe you could find a passage you have always struggled with, then take time to consult an online commentary or reflection. Or simply sit with a parable or passage you like to see how it speaks to you differently in these different times.

There is plenty of material online – exploring various texts, parables, passages, characters, etc., and guidance on different techniques for praying with scripture, such as *Lectio Divina*. You could always download a Bible app or a prayer app that might help. Many have made time during this pandemic to start a weekly discussion group, meeting online with a few friends to simply read and discuss a chosen passage. Wouldn't this Autumn be a good time to discuss one book of the Bible or some religious text in an online Book Club format? The second chapter of Pope Francis new encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, is dedicated to a wonderful reflection on the parable of the Good Samaritan – well worth meditating. The most important thing, of course, is to put the Word of God into practice in your everyday life. Why not just take one sentence of the Gospel and let it guide you during the day.



TIP TEN SET OUT ON PILGRIMAGE

Pilgrimages are cherished events in the faith lives of Catholics. People go to Knock and Lourdes, Rome and the Camino to Santiago di Compostela. The big pilgrimages are not possible because of COVID-19 though, online, groups offer a range of virtual pilgrimages to, for example, various Marian shrines.

Nearer home, families might consider small family pilgrimages to local churches or holy sites. There are so many special sites in our diocese – from the ancient Kilmallock Abbey to the Mass Rock in Killeedy, from St John's Cathedral to Holy Trinity Abbey, Adare. But every parish church is a sacred place. Perhaps parishes might create a COVID-19 pilgrimage shrine or sacred space in their local churches for people to visit. Most parish churches are and will remain open for private prayer, so it's always good to pay an occasional visit for a few quiet moments. Just remember, we can never find time, we always have to make it! The first steps in setting out on pilgrimage are in our heart. We go with a desire to pray for ourselves, for those dear to us, for the needs of society and our world.

Our schools remain open, so new initiatives can be piloted. Perhaps it might be possible, when public health guidelines on indoor and outdoor gatherings permit this, to arrange small pilgrimages to local churches or traditional sites for moments of prayer and reflection.

On our Limerick Diocesan website, you'll find excellent guidance on pilgrimage in a newsletter prepared for young people in the Muintearas Íosa group. It's good advice for all of us. See <https://www.limerickdiocese.org/resources/muintearas-iosa-sa-bhaile-7-pilgrimage-edition>. See also on the website a pilgrim resource pack for first year and Transition year students.

CONCLUSION

Christ's message is one of hope; we hope for God's promised kingdom in which all of creation will be gathered together in justice and peace. This hope transforms our lives and points us beyond the present world with all its challenges. His Gospel calls us to reengage, to inject hope into a pandemic-ravaged world, to be responsible for one another's wellbeing, and to place our hope and trust in God. We rely on the Holy Spirit so let's pray frequently: Come, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts, Come, Holy Spirit, grant us your peace.

I conclude my ten points with two short reflections that I hope you enjoy.

TO BE A PEOPLE OF HOPE

by Patrick Purnell SJ

From the very beginning of our existence,
from our first whimpering cries,
we struggle to make sense
of who we are and what we are
and of the strange new furniture of
our lives
of sounds and smells,
of warmth and cold
of light and shadow,
of hands and faces;
to put together the bits and pieces
of our experience
into some kind of order,
into some kind of pattern
so that we might live without fear
in the midst of the powers and the
forces
which threaten to overwhelm us.
We cry to one another,
'What have you discovered?
Do you know the way?'

And to those who have gone before,
'Let your light go on burning;
tell us your secrets.
Set out your experiences
in ways make our own,'
lest we live as foreigners in the land,
alien to one another's ways,
strangers to the spoken word;
for to be human
is to live in a world of meaning;
but to be without meaning
is to be a stranger to the human
condition.

PRAYER OF SAINT TERESA OF AVILA

Let nothing disturb you,
Let nothing frighten you,
All things are passing away:
God alone is changeless.
Patience obtains all things,
Who has God lacks nothing;
God alone suffices.

