

To live as God's People

Reflections on the Visit of Pope John Paul to Limerick

When he came to Ireland in 1979, Pope John Paul had not completed the first year of his ministry as Pope. This autumn we recall the twenty-fifth anniversary of that memorable visit and we pray that we may have the joy of greeting him once more in our country.

The first visit of a Pope to Ireland would have been an extraordinary occasion in any case. But, in spite of all the preparations and the weeks of anticipation, nobody realised how overwhelming the event would prove to be. The Pope's evident conviction, his warm, energetic presence and the strength of his desire to communicate with us had an impact beyond anything we had expected.

VALUING OUR HERITAGE

The Mass in Limerick on 1st October 1979 was described as Mass for the People of God. **The Pope's** opening words were a courteous demonstration of his respect for our culture and traditions: "*A phobail dhilis na Mumhan, go mbeannaí Dia dhíbh.*" His homily was about valuing our heritage, not only our Irish heritage but also our heritage of faith. He challenged us to realise that, however sturdy and enduring our Christian tradition may have shown itself to be in the past, it has to be chosen and lived again by each succeeding generation. He spoke about how to live as God's People in a changing world. As he had put it the previous day in Knock:

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 Founder¹.

He wanted to leave us in no doubt that his challenge made demands on each one of us. He had already spoken to bishops in Dublin and to seminarians, priests and religious in Maynooth. Now, in Limerick, he wanted to speak about "**that special dignity and mission entrusted to the lay people in the Church**". He told us that there is no such thing as an ordinary lay person and reflected that, "**Sometimes, lay men and women do not seem to appreciate to the full the dignity and vocation that is theirs as lay people.**"²

A CHANGED WORLD

Life today is full of activity, images, sounds and information. A great deal of what pours in on us seems to bear little relationship with our efforts to follow Christ. We often feel swamped, with no time to relax, to reflect or to ask the deeper questions, wilting "under the weight of so much knowledge"³. We do, of course, find things to pray about in all that flood of information – disasters, tragedies, threats to peace, personal and family concerns. We can see that all of us, old and young, need God's help if we are to be faithful in following Christ in spite of the stresses

¹ Homily at Knock, 30 September 1979.

² Many of the themes that have marked his teaching as Pope were already foreshadowed in Limerick. "The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church in the World" (*Christifideles Laici*), published in 1988, formed the basis for much of our reflection in preparation for the celebration of the Great Jubilee.

³ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, 5.

and pressures that increasingly surround us. But the challenge that Pope John Paul put before us in Limerick asked more of us than that.

The busy, changing world around us is not just a distraction from the things of God, a threat to our sense of values or a demanding context in which to try to preserve our faith. It is the place where we are meant to fulfil the mission we have been given: **“as God’s holy people you are called to fulfil your role in the evangelisation of the world”**. The specific vocation and mission of lay people is **“to express the Gospel in their lives and thereby to insert the Gospel as a leaven into the reality of the world in which they live and work.”**

In some ways our task is more challenging than that which faced many of the generations that preceded us. For them the place of the Gospel in Irish life seemed assured, almost self-evident. **“Ireland in the past displayed a remarkable interpenetration of her whole culture, speech and way of life by the things of God and the life of grace.”** Even the most ordinary of greetings was a prayer: ‘God and Mary be with you’. The life of the parish and the life of the whole community overlapped at almost every point. Reminders of faith were all around.

That **‘remarkable interpenetration’** reflected an awareness of the simple but profound truth: God and the grace of God are present everywhere in creation. At Confirmation, I often remind the girls and boys that the gift of ‘wonder and awe in God’s presence’ can be used anywhere, anytime. We are always in God’s presence.

IS GOD MISSING BUT NOT MISSED?

Nowadays we face situations and possibilities that would have been unimaginable even a few decades ago. No previous generation of Christians has lived in a world of information technology and globalisation, genetic testing and cloning, threats to the environment of the planet, areas of chronic underdevelopment and areas of unprecedented wealth and luxury immediately present to one another through modern communications. This is a world in which the Gospel has never been before.

We live a great part of our lives in contexts where God seems to be, as someone expressed it, ‘missing but not missed’. That is not because God is absent but because we are not sufficiently aware of being in the presence of “one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8: 6). We, the people of this generation, must recognise our Creator and Redeemer in this new context. Nobody else can do so for us. We must recognise the Holy Spirit who is “present and at work”, and who “causes all creation, all history, to flow together to its ultimate end, in the infinite ocean of God”⁴. We must find for ourselves what it means to live as God’s people in our time.

God is present in every corner and aspect of life. We live and work aware of many influential factors in our world – **“politics, the media, science, technology, culture, education, industry and work”**? Only true disciples of Christ, involved in such matters, can recognise and express in practical detail what his call means for these spheres of life. Only they can guide the forces that shape our world so that **“the world will be transformed from within by Christ’s redeeming power”**.

If we, who are believers, are not trying to recognise and reflect on how God’s presence and God’s promise are present in every part of our lives, why should we be surprised that the world is becoming secularised? If we do not see the significance of God’s presence, why should we expect those who do not share our faith to do so?

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 64.

(These) **“are precisely the areas where lay people are especially competent to exercise their mission.”** That mission is to reflect and pray about how the Gospel speaks to each moment and situation – and to express that truth in our lives.

If we find that our work, our leisure activities or our social responsibilities do not echo with the voice of God, it is not because God does not speak but because we do not hear. Unless we hear God’s word, we cannot respond to it and we cannot speak it to others.

THE FEAST OF ST THÉRÈSE

The Pope came to Limerick on the feast of St Thérèse of Lisieux. For her, every moment, every relationship, every incident was a meeting with God. She resisted with all her strength the temptation to show irritation at small but annoying intrusions or mannerisms; she was particularly careful to be kind and welcoming to those she found least congenial. No effort was too great; no moment was too insignificant. In each situation, no matter how ‘ordinary’ or ‘routine’, she knew she was called to show the same selfless love that characterised the lives of martyrs and great missionaries; in each situation she knew she was face to face with the same God to whom they gave their lives. If we saw all the various aspects and activities of our lives as she did, we would more clearly understand the mission and vocation that is ours.

Understanding and living that mission involves prayer and silence which open us to the wisdom and strength of God: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (Is 30:15). In his encyclical on the Gospel of Life, Pope John Paul spoke of the need for a contemplative outlook that can, as he put it, recognise the deeper meaning of life, its gratuitousness, its beauty and its call to freedom and responsibility. Those who have such an outlook do not seize reality as if it were their own possession but “accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image”⁵. In every person we meet, every decision we make, every context we enter, every opportunity that comes our way, God is present.

SUMMIT AND SOURCE

The Eucharist is the summit and the source of the Christian life⁶. In the Eucharist we offer *everything* in our lives to God the Father, through, with and in his Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. From the Eucharist everything draws its inspiration, strength, mission and vocation.

We bring all the great variety of our existence and offer it to God, recognising as best we can where we have failed to show generous, self-giving love, where we have been unjust or self-righteous or have lacked honesty or integrity or love in our relationships, where we have failed to hear and be changed by the challenging voice of God. We ask for the grace to respond more fully to God’s love in the future, to see more clearly how he invites and calls us, to give ourselves to his Father and to each other in union with the love “without limit”⁷ which Jesus showed on Calvary and makes present in the Eucharist.

On the first day of his visit to Ireland the Pope had said:

Whether we serve in politics, in the economic, cultural, social or scientific fields – no matter what our occupation is – the Eucharist is a challenge to our daily lives... We cannot live on the glories of our past Christian history. Our union with Christ in the Eucharist must be expressed in the truth of our lives today – in our actions, in our behaviour, in our life-style and in our relationships with others⁸.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

⁶ Cf. VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 20.

⁸ Homily in the Phoenix Park, 29 September 1979.

A TIME OF TESTING

The urgency of the challenge was forcefully expressed in the Holy Father's insistent words in Limerick: **"Ireland must choose. You the present generation of Irish people must decide... Now is the time of testing for Ireland. This generation is once more a generation of decision"**.

The years since 1979 have brought many changes and many unanticipated developments, both good and bad. In some of those years we experienced the bleakness of unemployment and emigration and in others we saw the benefits and possibilities of the Celtic Tiger. We have seen Ireland playing a confident role in the world of international politics, of development and of culture; we have also seen scandals and betrayals which sapped our trust. We have seen cruel disappointments and hopeful moments on the road to peace in our island.

How are we to live as God's people in the new century and what unexpected changes will it bring? The anniversary of the Pope's visit and of his words in Limerick should prompt us to ask ourselves whether in those eventful intervening years we have really addressed his question, which is still the key to facing the future as followers of Christ:

The Irish people have to choose today their way forward. Will it be the transformation of all strata of humanity into a new creation, or the way that many nations have gone, giving excessive importance to economic growth and material possessions, while neglecting the things of the spirit?... The way of substituting a new ethic of temporal enjoyment for the law of God? The way of false freedom which is only slavery to decadence?...⁹

These issues are more pressing today than when they were first expressed. We may now perhaps see more clearly than we did then how apt his question was: **"What would it profit Ireland to go the easy way of the world and suffer the loss of her own soul?"**

What kind of choices have we made in the intervening quarter of a century? Have we allowed ourselves to be carried along by the surrounding currents and trends without making responsible choices? What kind of choices and decisions face us today? What kind of people, and what kind of society, do we want to be? Affluence makes many things possible, but which possibilities do we adopt and which priorities do we choose to follow? What is wealth for? How do we make our community more human, more in tune with the message of Jesus Christ? How do we make it a community in which everyone is respected and welcomed? How do we live as God's people in a new world?

That is the challenge put by the Pope in Limerick and a challenge that still needs to be faced. It is put to us every time we participate in the celebration of Mass:

You cannot be a genuine Christian on Sunday unless you try to be true to Christ's spirit also in your work, your commercial dealings, at your trade union or your employers' or professional meetings. How can you be a true community in Christ at Mass unless you try to think of the welfare of the whole national community when decisions are being taken by your particular sector or group? How can you be ready to meet Christ in judgement unless you remember how the poor are affected by the behaviour of your group or by your personal lifestyle?

Answering these questions means committing ourselves to a search for God in prayer and to a growing appreciation of the continuing presence and action of Christ in the Eucharist and in his brothers and sisters. It requires clear-headed determination and resolve. It means being prepared to defend the dignity of every human being of every race and every social situation, at every moment of his or her life from its very beginning to its natural end. It will sometimes require that we take a stand on issues, whatever others may think or say. It may sometimes require us to say

⁹ Cf. also *Redemptor Hominis*, 16.

respectfully to others that their actions or proposals, which they may sincerely believe to be right, are in fact contrary to **the** truth of human dignity and to the message of Christ. It would, incidentally, be a strange kind of respect or friendship that could not be honest with another person.

These courageous stances and these resolves must not be mere words; they have to spring from our own deep love and respect for our fellow human beings; they have to be lived in our own lives. Pope Paul VI had pointed out that people are more willing to listen to witnesses than to teachers and if they do listen to teachers it is because these teachers are, first of all, witnesses¹⁰. The first form of witness is the person's own life, the life of the Christian family and of the Christian community¹¹.

THE WHOLE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

Faced with the scale of the challenge it is obvious that no one person can achieve the goal of bringing the light of the Gospel to the enormous complexity of modern life. But we are not alone in the task. The other aspect of the Pope's homily in Limerick was about the community or the family dimension of the Church and of society.

It is not any isolated individual but the entire community of believers, with the great variety of gifts given to each one by the Spirit, (I Cor 12) that can "**insert the Gospel as a leaven into the reality of the world in which they live and work**". The influence of the holiness and genuine witness of believers is often unspectacular, but it is very powerful. The Holy Father's final words as he left Ireland pointed to St Thérèse as "proof of the extraordinary effectiveness of generous Christian love"¹².

When, after the Synod of Bishops in 1987, he reflected in more detail on the vocation and mission of the lay faithful he spoke of this quiet but mighty influence:

The eyes of faith behold a wonderful scene: that of a countless number of lay people, both women and men, busy at work in their daily life and activity, oftentimes far from view and quite unacclaimed by the world, unknown to the world's great personages but nonetheless looked upon in love by the Father, untiring labourers who work in the Lord's vineyard. Confident and steadfast through the power of God's grace, these are the humble yet great builders of the Kingdom of God in history¹³.

The late Cardinal Ó Fiaich at the same Synod spoke of the often unrealised potential which this represents:

The laity in the Church are like a sleeping giant. Over seven hundred million strong, they can do immense work for the Kingdom of God. But they must first be fully awakened¹⁴.

THE QUALITY OF OUR BELONGING

In the second part of his homily, the Holy Father turned to the phenomenon of urbanisation and to the pressures on family life. These themes might appear to have no obvious connection with the earlier part of his discourse. In a characteristically perceptive reflection, however, Bishop Jeremiah Newman, who was chief celebrant at the Mass on that day, showed how intimately the themes of the homily were intertwined¹⁵.

¹⁰ Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

¹¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 42.

¹² Address on his departure from Shannon, 1 October 1979.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles Laici*, 17.

¹⁴ Ó FIAICH, Tomás, Intervention at the Synod of Bishops, Rome 1987.

¹⁵ NEWMAN, J., 'Commentary on the Pope's Homily', in FLEMING, J (ed), *The Pope in Limerick*, Diocesan Offices, Limerick, pp. 55ff.

The kind of community we belong to, and the quality of our belonging, are fundamental issues for the future of society. The loss of contact with the land and the difficulties for family life are important elements in the difficulty of achieving a sense of belonging. One of the reasons why the Pope's visit had such a strong impact lay in his appeal:

Keep in contact with your roots in the soil of Ireland, with your families and with your culture. Keep true to the faith, to the prayers and values you learned here; and pass that heritage to your children, for it is rich and good.

The visit itself was a powerful appeal to be true to ourselves and to our roots. During those few days we experienced a sense of unity and belonging and common purpose; we understood the importance of our being part of one family, with common bonds and values and roots.

A 'HOMELESS' SOCIETY

Bishop Newman's commentary identifies the fundamental problem of the modern world as the need for a 'home' in which people belong, with common values and principles, not alone in the family but in the Church and in national life. Without a shared sense of values and purpose a person feels adrift, alone, a dropout. We live in a world where life has become more unpredictable and unstable, where no person and no cause seems to be worthy of our trust and commitment, where the issues and data and stimuli that bombard us seem to have no coherent pattern, where the emphasis on the individual – which is in some ways a very important advance – may also have the effect of throwing a person entirely on his or her own resources, left to do his or her own thing. In that case, independence and autonomy are all too easily transformed into being helplessly tossed around by overwhelming currents.

The need to find a common home is the same as the need to choose common priorities and a common purpose and to feel that one belongs to a greater whole. It is the same as the need to share the mission of bringing the Gospel into every nook and cranny of life. The foundation for the common home is the same as the foundation for that mission. It is the love which gives rise to communion with all of our brothers and sisters in God's own life:

The challenge for the Church in Europe today consists... in helping contemporary man to experience the love of God the Father and of Christ in the Holy Spirit, through the *witness of charity which possesses an intrinsic power of evangelisation*... In a word, our *ecclesial communities* are called to be true *training-grounds for communion*¹⁶.

The Dominican theologian Father Jean Marie Tillard who wrote profoundly about the nature and meaning of the Church spoke about how the Gospel would be brought to the world of the third millennium. While not playing down the need for courageously speaking the promises and demands of God's word, he stressed what he called "a second vision of evangelisation". Not only must the community reach out, it must itself be vibrant with the life of the Gospel:

The community must be 'lovable'. In practice, this means that it must witness to the life-giving power of the Gospel by the quality of its evangelical life, by the truth of its liturgical prayer, by a climate of mutual support, by the seriousness with which it is involved in human problems. This is the meaning of those recurring phrases in the Johannine tradition: 'that they may be one', and 'love one another'. It is also the meaning of certain brief texts woven into the early chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles*¹⁷.

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, 84.

¹⁷ TILLARD, J. M. R., Who will Evangelize in the Year 2000? *Religious Life Review*, Sept/Oct 1991, p. 227. Among the texts woven into *Acts* are 4:32 –35:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as

We cannot have a common home unless we make choices and decisions about who we are and what we stand for. When the Pope was reflecting on the collapse of the Soviet bloc, he pointed to an emptiness, a spiritual void, at the heart of atheistic communist society. It is not possible to build a society simply on the basis of economics, or class. At the heart of every culture, he said, lies an attitude to the mystery of life, the mystery of God:

Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. When this question is eliminated, the culture and moral life of nations are corrupted.

RELIGION IS NOT A PRIVATE MATTER

In our own way we face a similar problem. We are faced not with state atheism but with the false and destructive notion that religion is a purely private matter. In fact our whole life is based on a vision of the dignity, meaning and destiny of human life. We are, of course multi-cultural and multi-faith in a way that was not the case in the past. But individuals and families and groups draw their fundamental motivation and commitment from their attitude to the mystery of human life and the mystery of God. The inspiration that makes people good citizens comes from deep convictions, usually religious convictions, about what life means and what its purpose is. How could one live life in an integrated way without any vision of what life is about?

Our Christian brothers and sisters of other churches and communions share that vision of hope, even if in relation to particular concrete issues and proposals they may sometimes come to different conclusions. We should try not to lose sight of the many things that unite all of us who are baptised in our efforts to follow Christ and we should try as far as possible to work together on issues such as “freedom, justice, peace and the future of the world”¹⁸.

Obviously in discussion with those of other faiths, or of none, it would be pointless to argue on the basis of the authority of the Bible. The democratic debate about what is best for society has to be conducted on the basis of human dignity and rights; it has to be argued in terms of the common good. That does not mean that in arriving at our position on social and political issues, we should ignore the faith that urges us on to the building of a more human world¹⁹, nor that we should seek to disguise the influence of our Christian faith on the positions we adopt. The Gospel teaches the full truth about humanity; it promises the fulfilment of human destiny beyond anything we could anticipate or imagine; it is capable of finding an echo deep in every human heart.

How can it be that societies **which** pride themselves on their pluralism and tolerance tend to drive deeply held beliefs out of public discourse into the private sphere? It sometimes seems that religious belief is tolerated provided it does not have any influence on the political stances that people adopt!

The fact that the sense of belonging seems greatly weakened both in the religious and the political sphere is not unrelated to the false division that is made between them. If we do not recognise that our attitude to political and social issues is the fruit of our deepest beliefs and convictions, we will begin to look on politics as a superficial game and on democracy as best served by an absence of convictions and as guided by no ultimate truths²⁰.

COMMUNITIES AND STRUCTURES

The difference between a community and a mere structure or institution, is that in a community, one can be fully oneself. Members of a community matter primarily for their own sakes rather

many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

¹⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 43, Cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 32.

¹⁹ Cf. VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 34, 38; *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 27-34.

²⁰ Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

than for what they can contribute. In a community, we meet one another as real people; heart can speak to heart. In a mere institution we meet only in specific roles or functions. One is part of a structure or institution only for limited purposes and is involved only to a limited extent. Increasingly we 'belong' only in the second, partial sense. The loneliness and rootlessness of modern life arise because there appears to be nowhere in which we can be fully ourselves, nothing that calls for, or is worth, our full involvement as whole persons.

Of course there is an overlap. Every community needs a structure and even the worst structure may show occasional flashes of real human empathy and concern. But in the end we need to belong to groups which are primarily communities if we are to flourish as human beings. Even more importantly, we need to belong wholeheartedly to the Church as a community, or better as a *communion* in the life of the Blessed Trinity, if we are to flourish as Christians. Bishop Newman pointed out the importance of achieving balance between the structural and the communal aspects of life:

The social problem *par excellence* has always been the effecting of a balance between the community and institutional aspects of society. Overemphasis of the one at the expense of the other is certain to cause dissatisfaction and restlessness. To stress the aspect of community, without remembering that of institution, is to set in motion a process that will culminate in anarchy. Likewise to stress institution, while forgetting community, is to launch a development which must end in authoritarianism²¹.

Society as a whole can and should be primarily a community whereas the State is an institution. The Church needs to have an institutional aspect, but she is primarily a communion, whose goal is holiness; in other words, the Church exists to gather us into union with **the** Risen Christ in the life of the Blessed Trinity²².

THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

It is no accident **that** Pope John Paul turned in his Limerick homily to the place of the family. The family is the most basic community, "the primary vital cell of society"²³. It is "**the primary field of Christian action for the Irish laity, the place where your 'royal priesthood' is chiefly exercised**".

In the family we learn how to belong, how to relate. We learn the basic qualities of respect and fairness. It is the first community. In the family we learn to face many of the issues that arise in the life of society – the generation gap, the tension between individual freedom and the common good, the need to respect the interests of others and not just to pursue one's own, the recognition of the gifts of others not as a threat but as a cause for rejoicing, the awareness that different people have different roles and responsibilities; the knowledge that every member belongs and must be listened to, that the family 'would never be the same without them'. In the family we learn that shared interests and priorities in an atmosphere of love build a community.

These are the qualities needed to counter the loneliness and rootlessness that can characterise modern living. It is no wonder that the Pope points to family life as a vital element in giving people, and especially young people, the ability to find their roots and their sense of belonging.

The family is also 'the Church in the home'. Children are born as the fruit of married love which is an image of God's love (Eph 3:15), and an image of the love of Christ for his Church (Eph 5:21-33). "In what might be regarded as the domestic church, the parents are to be the first teachers of the faith for their children by word and example"²⁴.

²¹ NEWMAN, J., *Conscience versus Law*, Dublin 1971, p. 147

²² Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 27; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 773.

²³ VATICAN II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11.

²⁴ VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

Parents do that above all by being an image of God's love for their children. In a good home, a child first experiences the realities which enable us to understand the God who is revealed in the Scriptures and above all in his Son. Growing up in a good family we experience love that is reliable and faithful; we experience forgiveness and generosity; we experience truth and trust. Of its very nature, that love points beyond itself. It is no accident that in speaking of their love people use words that properly belong to God: "People in love cannot help speaking of their loved one as divine and adorable and of their love as undying, everlasting, eternal. They cannot help feeling that their love comes from beyond themselves and carries them beyond themselves"²⁵.

More than that, in family life we learn to be builders of community. A family closed in upon itself, like an individual closed in upon him or herself would be dysfunctional. So too would any community that failed to look outside itself. Family life is not just a training for social living; it is the beginning of living as part of a community and the foundation for the attitudes of respect for and openness to others:

It rests with parents to prepare their children from an early age, within the family circle, to discern God's love for everyone; they will teach them little by little – and above all by their example – to be concerned about their neighbours' needs, material and spiritual... Children must be trained, besides, to go beyond the confines of the family and take an interest in both ecclesial and temporal communities²⁶.

PRESSURES ON FAMILY LIFE

We know only too well that the ideal of family life is often not the reality. The Second Vatican Council was well aware that 'this happy picture'²⁷ of married life is not always verified. Social trends, economic pressures, selfishness and other factors can have a painfully disruptive effect on family life. In Limerick, the Pope recognised the new difficulties by which "**the stability and sanctity of marriage are being threatened**". The stresses on family life have continued to grow in the last quarter of a century. Many people have experienced in their own lives or in the lives of those close to them the sadness of the break up of a marriage. Everybody knows families for whom the struggle seems endlessly uphill or families that have been struck, sometimes repeatedly, by dreadful tragedy.

In Limerick the Pope in reflecting on these struggles wished to reassure married couples of the importance of their role in society and in the Church. In particular he stressed the dignity of parenting and the role of fathers as well as mothers in building family life: "**Do not think that anything you will do in life is more important than to be a good Christian father and mother... The future of the Church, the future of humanity depend in great part on parents and on the family life they build in their homes.**" There was, incidentally, no condemnation or disapproval here of work outside the home, simply a statement of priorities. A society in which work was seen as 'more important' than parenthood would have its priorities very wrong.

The Synod of Bishops discussed the role of the Christian family in the modern world in October 1980. In the document in which he summed up the work of the Synod, he looked at the 'interplay of light and darkness' that marked the situation of the family in the world²⁸.

'FREE GIVING'

Among the rich insights he presents there are some that particularly complement his Limerick homily. He speaks about the relationship between the members of a family as being characterised by what he calls 'free giving' – "heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue,

²⁵ IRISH BISHOPS, *Christian Marriage* (1969), 1.

²⁶ VATICAN II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 30.

²⁷ *Gaudium et Spes* 47.

²⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 6.

disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity". These are clearly the building blocks of true community. He goes on:

Thus the fostering of authentic and mature communion between persons within the family is the first and irreplaceable school of social life, and example and stimulus for the broader community relationships marked by respect, justice, dialogue and love²⁹.

In a society which risks becoming more and more depersonalised and dehumanising, the family "continues still to release formidable energies" that can overcome anonymity and keep a person conscious of his or her personal dignity and uniqueness³⁰.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

In the same document, **Pope John Paul** draws a practical conclusion that follows inevitably from his statement in Limerick that **"the Christian family is more important for the Church and for society today than ever before"**. Support of and care for families is an essential task for anyone who is concerned for the good of the church and of society: "No plan for organised pastoral work at any level, must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral care of the family³¹". This is a principle that should be to the forefront whenever we are discussing the needs of our parishes and clusters. How can we help to foster "authentic and mature communion between persons within the family"? What are the practical difficulties that families face in our community? What are the facilities or groups or resources that might make a difference to a child or young person and to his or her parents? Are there families in our community who feel isolated or who have particular problems that risk overwhelming them? What can we positively do to enrich family life? Do we look like a hope-filled, supportive community in which the younger generation are needed and welcomed?

Married couples and families themselves can play a very important role in **caring for and supporting families**. The sense of loneliness in modern society is particularly intense when it is the loneliness of a family struggling with no sense of being part of a supportive community to whom they can turn. This is a test of whether we really are a "lovable" community that witnesses "to the life-giving power of the Gospel by the quality of its evangelical life, by the truth of its liturgical prayer, by a climate of mutual support, by the seriousness with which it is involved in human problems"³².

The Christian community as a whole needs to be concerned about the social and legal support for family life in matters such as education, housing, working conditions, social welfare and taxation and in regulations about migration³³

THE FIRST SCHOOL OF RELIGION

The communion to which we are called is a communion in the life of the Blessed Trinity. It is the beginning of a life which exceeds and fulfils every human hope. It is the flowering of our union with Jesus Christ, "the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and of civilisation, the centre of humanity, the joy of all hearts and the fulfilment of all aspirations"³⁴.

At the end of his homily, therefore, Pope John Paul reminded us that: **"The home should be the first school of religion, as it must be the first school of prayer. The great spiritual influence of Ireland in the history of the world was due in great degree to the religion of the homes of Ireland, for here is where evangelisation begins..."** The continuation or a fresh

²⁹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 43.

³⁰ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 43.

³¹ *Familiaris Consortio*, 70.

³² TILLARD, art. cit.

³³ Cf. VATICAN II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 11.

³⁴ *Gaudium et Spes* 45.

beginning of daily prayer in the home would, he said, “**be the greatest gift you could give me as I leave your hospitable shores**”.

The fundamental attitudes and priorities of the ‘domestic Church’ are the attitudes and priorities of the community whose life witnesses to the “charity which possesses an intrinsic power of evangelisation”. He echoed this thought over two decades later as he looked towards the new millennium:

First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness... It is necessary... to rediscover the full practical significance of Chapter 5 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, dedicated to the ‘universal call to holiness’... The rediscovery of the Church as ‘mystery’, or as a people ‘gathered together by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, was bound to bring with it the rediscovery of the Church’s ‘holiness’ understood in the basic sense of belonging to him who is in essence the Holy One, the ‘thrice Holy’³⁵.

DECLINING VOCATIONS

The home is ‘**where evangelisation begins**’. It is also, as he pointed out, ‘**where vocations are nurtured**’. The decline in vocations to priesthood and religious life, which had already begun a quarter of a century ago, has accelerated in the intervening years. His appeal that families should foster vocations, pray for vocations, desire vocations is even more urgent today.

The declining number of religious sisters and brothers forces us to look at the vocation and mission of the laity in a new way. As religious become less visible in education and health care the question arises as to what role laypeople have in continuing the Church’s caring presence in these areas. The dedicated work of so many religious down the years should not lead us to forget that the Church’s presence in education and health care is a responsibility of the whole Christian community. The existing situation is a painful one for religious and for all of us, but it can give rise to new ways of involving lay people in the work established by a particular congregation, and may ensure that the services pioneered by that congregation may continue to be part of the life of the Church³⁶. The religious played an essential role in the life of the community not only in their active apostolates but, more importantly in their dedication to God. The community still needs that role.

We should not regard a continuing decline in numbers of people who dedicate their lives to God as inevitable, nor should we evade the questions it asks us about our Christian living. A Christian community which is not producing vocations to the religious life needs to examine itself as to whether it is the kind of vibrant, living community it should be. A Christian community which had ceased even to long for, pray for, work for and encourage vocations would be moribund. This final challenge in the Pope’s address in Limerick is entirely in harmony with his overall call – to foster a living, fruitful communion in the life of the Church.

What is said of the family is true of the whole community. It is meant to be a place “**where vocations are nurtured**”. Earlier this year I listened to a number of seminarians, not from this diocese, none of whom had entered the seminary before their late twenties. They all made the same point. They began to think of a vocation in their early teens. But when they came to the age of 18 they found the surrounding atmosphere very discouraging. They did not feel able to speak to their contemporaries or to others in the community about the possibility that they might have a vocation. It was not until many years had passed that they felt able to take the step of applying to enter a seminary.

³⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Tertio Millennio Ineunte*, 30.

³⁶ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 55.

Why did these men fail to find in the Christian community a supportive, encouraging atmosphere in which they could talk about their vocation? Among their contemporaries, how many seeds of a vocation had quietly died in those early adult years for want of nurturing and support? Is this not a symptom of a community where the deeper questions are marginalized and where it is not easy for heart to speak to heart?

The lack of vocations, and especially of vocations to the priesthood, points to the same challenge that runs through the Pope's entire homily. It is the challenge of building the spirit of communion. A focus on the mission and vocation of the lay faithful in no way diminishes the importance of the priestly role – on the contrary.

THE PRIEST – SERVANT OF COMMUNION

The understanding of the Church as a communion in the life of the Blessed Trinity is decisive for understanding of the identity, dignity, vocation and mission of the ordained priest³⁷.

Like every Christian, the priest is united to Christ in baptism, called to make Christ present in the world. By his ordination, he becomes a presence of Christ in a new way, precisely as Head of his Body. In the priest, the risen Lord is present to his people as the one who calls them and leads them and offers himself for them. The priest is “a living and transparent image of Christ the Priest”³⁸. Only a short time before he arrived in Limerick the Pope had said to the **priests** of Ireland, “you share in his priesthood; you carry on his work in the world”³⁹

The Eucharist is the action of Christ, offering his life to the Father in the unity and power of the Holy Spirit. The communion which grows among us is not our achievement but God's gift. It is an invitation into our Father's house, through the death and resurrection of his Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The role of the priest makes it clear that this is not simply a prayerful gathering of people offering their lives to God; it is the action of Christ the Priest to whom the community is united in his sacrifice; the priest acts ‘in the person of Christ’. To put it simply, when the priest offers Mass, Christ acts through him; Christ is present to the congregation through him⁴⁰.

The presence of the priest in the Eucharist also makes it clear that the communion which we celebrate and try to live is the communion of the whole Church. In union with the bishop and, therefore, with all the bishops of the world and with the Holy Father, the priest is a sign that this congregation is linked with the “pilgrim Church on earth... Pope John Paul, our bishop and all the bishops with the clergy and the entire people”⁴¹.

³⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 12; CONGREGATION FOR THE CLEGY, *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 1 – 11.

³⁸ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 12. Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE CLEGY, *Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 6, 7.

³⁹ Address in Maynooth, 1 October 1979.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1548.

⁴¹ *Eucharistic Prayer III*.

The communion that grows among us through the Eucharist and the other sacraments is the fruit of God's promise, and God's presence. That is why the Second Vatican Council said, "it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all"⁴². Priests and deacons are ordained to preach the word that invites us to believe in God's promise and to celebrate his presence. In preaching the word, the priest is communicating the message which all members of the Church are called to witness and proclaim to one another and to the world. He is also preaching the call to 'free giving', to "heartfelt acceptance, encounter and dialogue, disinterested availability, generous service and deep solidarity" as the standard not only for family life but every aspect of the life of Christians who are to love one another as Christ loves them.

The communion that grows among us is dependent on God's grace: it needs the great variety of gifts that the Spirit gives to God's people. The ministry of the ordained priest gathers these gifts and their fruits into the Eucharistic Sacrifice. It is also his ministry to "discover with faith, recognise with joy and foster with diligence"⁴³ the many gifts that exist among the laity, to recognise that a gift given to one person is given for the good of all (I Cor 12:7), to help identify ways in which our gifts might be used for the good of the community, to point to the responsibility of using these gifts to bring the Gospel to bear on all the great complexity of modern life, to help search for and point to the needs of the community and of the wider world.

The communion that grows among us is threatened by sin, by selfishness, pride, lack of integrity in our dealings with one another, exploitation of or neglect of the weak and vulnerable, failure to value and defend the inviolability of human life. It is threatened above all by neglect of God's merciful love which is the foundation and source of our communion in the life of the Blessed Trinity. The ministry of the priest, in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of Penance, is a ministry of reconciliation. In the sacrament of Reconciliation, as in the Eucharist, he acts in the person of Christ offering God's forgiveness and a restored or deepened share in the communion of Christ's Body and in Christ's communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Communion in God's life and in the life of Christ's Body can be received only as an unmerited gift, a gift freely given to us who in many different ways have rejected it or failed to appreciate it. That is why the Church "lives an authentic life when she *professes and proclaims mercy* – the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer... Of great significance in this area is constant meditation on the word of God, and above all conscious and mature participation *in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of penance or reconciliation*."⁴⁴

The priest is a *servant of the Church as mystery* because he actualises the Church's sacramental signs of the presence of the Risen Christ. He is a *servant of the Church as communion* because – in union with the Bishop and closely related to the presbyterate – he builds up the unity of the Church community in the harmony of diverse vocations, charisms and services. Finally, the priest is a *servant to the Church as mission* because he makes the community a herald and witness of the Gospel⁴⁵.

⁴² VATICAN II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

⁴³ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9.

⁴⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 13

⁴⁵ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 16.

UNWAVERING HOPE

The message to the People of God delivered in Limerick twenty-five years ago is a message for all of us – laity, religious and clergy. It is a call to live as God’s People, to be a community in which all of us know that “there is no such thing as a member that has not a share in the mission of the whole body”⁴⁶.

I hope that these reflections may help us to realise that the call is more pressing than ever and that the words spoken in Limerick a quarter of a century ago challenge each of us. Anyone who believes that the call is ‘really’ for other people has not heard it at all.

I hope too that these thoughts, demanding though they are, may be reflected on with the same unwavering hope and prayer with which the Holy Father concluded his homily:

From (Irish homes) may all Christians go forth, as Jesus did from Nazareth. May they go forth in the power of the Spirit to continue Christ’s work and to follow in his footsteps towards the end of the millennium and into the twenty-first century. Mary will keep you close to him, who is ‘Father of the world to come’. *Dia agus Muire libh!* May God and Mary be with you and with the families of **Ireland, always! *Slán go deo le brón is buairt, agus beannacht Dé libh go léir.***

+Donal Murray
Bishop of Limerick
September 2004

⁴⁶ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.