



DIOCESE OF ELPHIN

# Some Definite Service

A PASTORAL LETTER ON DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION IN CHANGING TIMES

## Title

The title of this Pastoral Message, *Some Definite Service*, is taken from a meditation written by St. John Henry Newman, a section of which is printed at the end.

## Cover Image

The cover image is of a mosaic on the wall behind the Baptismal Font in St. Patrick's Church, Drumboylan. It depicts St. Patrick baptising Eithne and Fidelma, possibly at Tulska, and a member of the St Patrick's Missionary Society, Kiltegan, baptising a new Christian somewhere on the African continent. Fr Patrick Whitney, founder of the Kiltegan Missionaries was born in Drumboylan.

## Icons of Mysteries of Light

On the 16th October 2002, Saint John Paul II published an Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae (RVM)*, in which he inaugurated the Year of the Rosary. In this letter the Pope introduced five new mysteries which he called *The Mysteries of Light or Luminous Mysteries*. He explained their significance as follows: *"Moving on from the infancy and the hidden life in Nazareth to the public life of Jesus, our contemplation brings us to those mysteries which may be called in a special way 'mysteries of light'. Certainly the whole mystery of Christ is a mystery of light. He is the 'light of the world' (Jn 8:12). Yet this truth emerges in a special way during the years of his public life, when he proclaims the Gospel of the Kingdom. In proposing to the Christian community five significant moments – 'luminous' mysteries – during this phase of Christ's life, I think that the following can be fittingly singled out: (1) his Baptism in the Jordan, (2) his self-manifestation at the wedding of Cana, (3) his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, with his call to conversion, (4) his Transfiguration, and finally, (5) his institution of the Eucharist, as the sacramental expression of the Paschal Mystery."*

As we reflect on our mandate to *"Go Make Disciples"* (Mt. 28:19), the appropriateness of these Mysteries for us as a Diocesan Christian community becomes clear. I encourage all who pray the Rosary to include the intention of Discipleship, Mission, Priesthood and Religious Life, particularly on Thursdays when we join with the Universal Church in praying the *Mysteries of Light*.

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## Changing Times

The world we live in today is changing very rapidly. Modern technology makes all sorts of things possible that were never possible before. Major world events are beamed into our homes and onto our mobile phones almost before they happen. Nothing seems to be permanent; everything is disposable and we expect to replace it with something better. But people – and young people especially – are now expressing real concern about the things that cannot be replaced; the polar ice, the oxygen levels in the atmosphere, the bees that are so essential to the fertility of plants.

Against that background, every person is unique. Nobody else can take my place. There is a desire in the heart of each one of us for something permanent; for a love that lasts, for a light that the darkness cannot overcome, for a life after which there will be no death. Our parish communities are about that kind of hope; a hope that is nourished by God's Word and by

the Eucharist. Like everything else in this world, our parish communities have to adapt in order to survive. But how do we adapt and at the same time remain true to who we are, as a Church rooted in our relationship with Jesus and built on the teaching of the Apostles?

## Forming Disciples

The ministry of Jesus was not about establishing structures. During the three or four years of his earthly ministry, much of his time was spent inviting people into relationship with God and forming disciples. At the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, we read that he told those who were gathered with him to *"go make disciples"* (Mt. 28:19). That is the mission of the Church. If we have buildings, or management structures, these are not an end in themselves. All these things are of value if they serve the mission of the Church, which is to live as Jesus lived and to form new disciples.



## Discipleship Comes First

As the Gospel tells us, large numbers of people gathered around Jesus wherever he went. Some of them were there out of curiosity or in the hope of seeing a miracle, but many of them were disciples, people who saw Jesus as an authentic teacher who was sent by God.

Down through the centuries, in the tradition of the Church, it is clear that all the Baptised are called to be what Pope Francis now calls “missionary disciples” (active followers of Jesus). Another way of putting this is to say that, by Baptism, we share in the priesthood of Christ by offering the gift of our own lives in service. Those who are ordained to priesthood are called to exercise that same priesthood on behalf of the whole Church, by acting in the person of Jesus and offering the sacrifice that he offered. Being a priest is not just about carrying out certain functions. Whatever we do as priests flows from our relationship with Jesus; from being “with Him”, as the Twelve were, and learning from Him.



1. The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan

## Our Parish Communities Today

In the Diocese of Elphin we have thirty seven parishes and almost a hundred churches where Mass is celebrated every Sunday. There are many good things going on in our parishes and there are literally thousands of people actively involved in ministry and service of one kind or another. On the other hand there are significantly fewer people coming to Mass on Sunday than in the past and the material needs of the Church are provided generously by fewer families. In the Midlands and the West that is partly due to the decline in rural population, but it also has to do with a weakening of faith. It would be easy for parishioners – and indeed for priests – to lose heart, if we were to judge everything by statistics and opinion polls. But Jesus is the same today as He was yesterday and it is around Him that our parish communities need to be formed.

In previous generations, when people went everywhere on foot, we needed more Churches

and more Masses. People in our Diocese look after their Churches very well and are very clear in saying that they don’t want their local Church to close. Today, however, we have far more Masses than we really need to provide for all those who wish to participate in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is meant to be about gathering people as “*one body in Christ*”. We need to respect the identity of local communities, but that doesn’t mean that we can go on the way we are. If we multiply Masses, we divide people and we dissipate the energy that comes from being a community of faith.

I have noticed a strong resistance to any reduction in the number of Masses or even any change in the times of Mass in many of our parishes. When a priest retires or dies, there is an assumption that another priest will be sent. So far, we have been able to manage, but only because of the generous commitment of elderly priests, retired missionaries and guest priests from overseas who have “left everything” for the sake of the Gospel.

There will be significant changes in the next few years, because there are less retired missionaries and there are only twenty seven Elphin priests under the age of seventy five. Most of the guest priests are here for three years and, unless they are EU citizens, they cannot stay longer than six years. We are blessed to have three men in formation for priesthood, which is higher than the national average, but they cannot be expected to replace all those who have retired or died in the past twelve years since we last had an ordination.

## The Church Draws her Life from the Eucharist

Saint John Paul II tells us that: *“the Church draws her life from the Eucharist”* (Ecclesia de Eucharistia #1). That is because, in the Eucharist, the promise of Jesus that he would be with us always, is fulfilled in a unique way. As we are drawn into relationship with Christ through the

offering and receiving of his body and blood, we become what we receive. We become the body of Christ! Then our daily sacrifice and service and all the good that we do become a part of his work of salvation. That is how every Christian is formed into a missionary disciple.

Saint John Paul II reminds us, however, that, an ordained priest is essential for the Eucharist. That is because the Eucharist is something that Jesus does, not something we do. He does it through the ministry of the priest who, by ordination, becomes Christ for the community that he is called to serve (cf Ecclesia de Eucharistia #29).

This is not to say that the priest, in himself, is more important than anybody else. As a man, the priest has his own human gifts and limitations, his own goodness and his own struggles with sin and temptation. Through the mystery of God’s grace, however, he acts in the person of Christ at the table of the Eucharist. Someone else could stand at the altar, say the same words and perform the same actions, but it would not be the Eucharist.



2. The Manifestation of Jesus at Cana



## Christ Continues to Call

I believe, without question, that Jesus Christ continues to call people to priesthood. The difficulty is that, with all the other distractions there are in modern life, relatively few people seem able to hear His call. The question then – and it is a question for all of us, not just for the Bishop – is this: “how can we, as individuals and as a community, create spaces for listening? How can we cooperate with the intention of Jesus, that we would have enough priests in the future, so that we can continue to draw life from the Eucharist and the other Sacraments?” This is part of a bigger question, namely: how can we as faith communities continue the mission entrusted to us by Jesus to *“go make disciples”*?

Everything depends, of course, on our faith in Jesus who continues to invite people into relationship with him as he has done in every other generation. In his recent letter of encouragement addressed to young people and to the whole Church, Pope Francis writes:

*If we are indeed convinced that the Holy Spirit continues to inspire vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, we can “once more cast out the nets” in the Lord’s name, with complete confidence.* (Christus Vivit # 274)

## The Importance of Prayer

In the bible we are encouraged to “pray to the Lord of the Harvest, to send labourers into his harvest”. We sometimes talk about prayer as if it were like calling out the “fire-brigade”; something that we only do in an emergency. Prayer is the ordinary daily conversation that we have with God and, just like the conversations we have with our family members and friends, it is about the things that are important to us. If it is important for us to have priests, then we need to bring that to prayer, both our community prayer and our own personal prayer:

- Giving thanks for the priests we have and asking God’s blessing for them

- Asking for the wisdom and the courage to discern and follow God’s call in our own life
- Praying very specifically for those whom God is calling, that they will respond generously.

When we pray about something, of course, it is more likely that our own hearts will be opened to see more clearly how we, ourselves, are called to respond.

The family is where we learn to pray. Families in the past often went to Mass together, prayed the angelus or the rosary together, or at least prayed grace before and after meals. Prayer in the family home doesn’t have to be long and arduous.

The important thing is that it is a regular part of our family life. In that way, the family home is opened up to the Spirit of God. Family members support one another in becoming aware of the presence of God who gives us life and calls us into relationship with him.

## Parents

I know that parents worry a lot about their children. I often think of the Gospel story of how Joseph and Mary lost Jesus in the Temple and how frantic they must have been. No mobile phones in those days! While our world is different and more complex than the world of Jerusalem in the first century, the key concerns of parents are essentially the same. Will they be healthy? Will they be happy? Will they be safe? Will they be successful? I think we have a different understanding of success today than we had in the past. The focus tends to be about what we have rather than who we are.

That day in Jerusalem, when they found Jesus among the teachers, Mary and Joseph came to understand that their child was moving into a different space. *“Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business”* (Lk 2:49). That was the purpose of his existence. It was the heart of their vocation to help their child to be what God was calling him to be.

I honestly believe that, in the same way, if parents encourage their sons and daughters to be open to the call of Christ, this would be the best way to ensure their child's happiness and success.

## The Vocational Mission of our Catholic Schools

It is both unfair and unrealistic to expect that the school can be the answer to every social need. The mission of the school is to support the mission of the parents, not to replace them. If I suggest that our schools should be actively involved in the promotion and care of vocation, I am not actually saying that they need to add more content. Faith is not just about content, it is a lens through which we look at the world around us. If Catholic schools are faithful to their ethos, then everything they do will be about helping every young person to see life as a gift from God and to consider how he or she can use their particular gifts in the service of God and of humanity.



3. The Proclamation of the Kingdom

In that context there should be nothing unusual about suggesting that some of them may be called to priesthood or religious life.

## Me – a Priest?

St. John Henry Newman wrote: *“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another”* (Meditations and Devotions, 3). Most men are not called to be priests, but some of you who are reading this probably are called. The last thing in the world that I would want, is to push people into priesthood when it is not their vocation. On the other hand, if it is your vocation, I would certainly want to help you to discover it and to follow it. There are a few things that I would like to say to you directly:

- If Jesus is asking you to share in his mission, then that is a sign of his friendship. You can trust him to stay close to you. In over forty years as a priest, I have come to realise that, in spite of my

own limitations, Jesus works through me to touch the lives of others. He is at work through his Holy Spirit when I celebrate the Mass, or the anointing of the sick; when I preach or give absolution in confession. Often, when I feel that I have failed, I discover that he has succeeded in spite of me.

- You will hear some people say that it is impossible to live a fruitful life as a celibate man; or that it is a very lonely existence. That has not been my experience. Yes, of course I have sometimes been lonely, but that is not necessarily connected with being alone.

Married people also experience loneliness. You can be very lonely in a crowd. Loneliness is the experience of being incomplete in oneself. St Augustine, reflecting on this experience, wrote: *“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you.”* (Confessions, Book 1).

The mistake that people sometimes make is in thinking that Celibacy is the absence of



relationship, or the rejection of our sexuality. It is quite the opposite. Celibacy is about taking all that human energy that is in me as a human being and placing it at the service of God and of the people of God. Nobody can do that by cutting himself off from others.

Whatever warmth or tenderness; compassion or love we have to offer as priests must be nourished in real, honest relationships with other people, including our families, our friends and our parishioners, as well as in our relationship with God.

Pope Francis said; *“there is no such thing as a perfect family”*. Likewise, there is no such thing as a perfect celibate man. A celibate life, like married life, with honest effort and God’s grace, matures over time. Just as Christian marriage is a way of making the love of God present in the here and now, a celibate life, lived with generosity, can be a rich reminder to all of us that our ultimate fulfilment is in relationship with God.

- A priest is called into a close relationship with Jesus, but he is not, by definition any better or holier than anybody else. Holiness is about being focussed on God’s service. Every vocational decision involves trying to understand what God wants, not just what you might want yourself. God wants your happiness as much if not more than you want it yourself.

So what I would suggest to any young person is that you develop the habit of sitting in the presence of God in some quiet place. Ask him to give you the wisdom to recognise the gifts that he has given you and to show you how he wants you to use them. Look at what is in your heart; not just on the surface but deep down. Don’t be afraid to share your questions and your hopes with some wise person of faith whom you trust. Take your time. God has all the time in the world.



4. The Transfiguration on Mount Tabor

## The Mission of Women in the Church

I recognise that people sometimes struggle to understand why the Church does not ordain women. The reality is that Jesus had many women disciples, including Mary his mother, who brought him into the world. The first witnesses of the Resurrection were women; among them Mary of Magdala, who is described by Pope Francis as the “apostle to the apostles”. But, even against that background, women were not numbered among the Twelve. That is why the Church believes that she does not have the authority from Jesus to ordain women.

All of the evangelists describe how Jesus chose twelve men from among his disciples “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have the authority to drive out demons” (Mk. 3:14). It is these same twelve who are with Jesus on the night before he died for the celebration of the Passover and the institution of the Eucharist. (Mk. 14:17).

I personally believe that it might be more fruitful to focus our attention on what women can do in the life of the Church than what they “can’t do”. The real problem, I think, is not the fact that women are not ordained. The real question is whether leadership in the Church needs to be identified with ordination. Women are just as competent as men. The gifts that women bring to ministry and to management, whether professionally or in a voluntary capacity, greatly enrich and are indispensable to the life of the Church. We see this all the time in our own Diocese which, quite frankly, could not continue to function without the gifts that women bring at every level.

I think it may be helpful, however, to establish some kind of process in our Diocese which would allow us to reflect in a more organised way on the role of women in the Church as well as on how we can support young women in discerning their calling in the Church today. I would be happy to hear from anyone who has any thoughts on what form this might take.

## The Abuse of Children

The Church is mandated by Christ himself to be the channel of his grace and mercy; his love and healing; his peace. For some people, however, abuse by a priest is their dominant experience of Church. For many people who grew up trusting the Church and trusting priests, the revelations of the past twenty-five years have been deeply disturbing and distressing. There is no doubt about the emotional and spiritual harm caused by child abuse. Each person’s experience of abuse is unique and deeply personal and only he or she can testify to the devastating impact that this has had on his or her life and relationships. We need to be absolutely clear that those who perpetrate abuse and those who facilitate it through their inaction, regardless of their position in the Church, betray their Christian vocation. The fact that clerical abuse is part of a wider societal problem does not change the fact that, for priests, it is a particularly serious breach of trust. Priests, like everybody else, are people with a

mixture of gifts and human limitations. But the vast majority of our priests, have exercised their ministry with integrity and have not abused children. The revelations about the actions of former colleagues have been a particular cause of distress and anxiety for them too. They have continued to serve their communities faithfully and to work with their parishioners to create an environment which allows for the active and safe participation of children in the life of the Church.

When we experience failure in business, in sport, in education, we don’t deny the value of what we were trying to achieve. We look at how we can do it better and we start again. Starting again is challenging, especially for those who have already served for forty or fifty years. That is why, now more than ever, we need bright, well-balanced, faith-filled candidates for priesthood who have a capacity to motivate people and to work in partnership with others to nourish and grow the faith in all the communities that make up our Diocese.





5. The Institution of the Eucharist

## Creating a Vocational Space in Our Parishes

Nobody is called to be a priest without first being a disciple. The priests of the future will come, as they always have, from among the disciples of Jesus. That is where we have to begin. There are thousands of good young people in our parish communities, but many of them do not really know Jesus. As Pope Francis says, the pressures and the rapid pace of change often *“leave no room for that interior silence in which we can perceive Jesus’s gaze and hear his call”* (Christus Vivit # 277).

People who are concerned about the decline in faith or the shortage of vocations often struggle to find an explanation. Have we failed to give the example of faith that would inspire young people? It is clear that, in many cases we have not succeeded in handing on a living faith to our young people. But pointing the finger does not actually change anything. It would be far more

helpful and constructive if, in each family, in each school and in each parish community, we could ask ourselves what can I do (or what can we do) that will help our children and young adults to know the extent of God’s love for them and to hear the invitation of Jesus Christ to be his disciples? It is only against that background that we can realistically invite young people to consider priesthood or religious life or, indeed, the sacrament of Christian marriage.

Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, young people today need someone to walk with them. They need someone who has the gift of listening to their hopes and fears; someone who can help them to discern where God is at work in their lives; someone who can help them to discover what is driving them, not on the surface but deep down in their hearts. This kind of accompaniment can happen at home and in the school, but it also needs to happen in the parish community. For that reason, through our office for youth and young-adult ministry, I am

inviting each parish to consider whether there is a parishioner who might be prepared to follow a two year programme of formation and to give the generous commitment of becoming a parish youth minister for a period of four or five years.

I leave you with the challenging and encouraging words of Pope Francis to all who are called to accompany young people.

*"If you are to accompany others on this path, you must be the first to follow it, day in and day out. That is what Mary did, in her own youth, as she confronted her own questions and difficulties. May she renew your youthfulness by the power of her prayers and accompany you always by her maternal presence".* (Christus Vivit # 298)



+ Kevin Doran (Bishop of Elphin)  
8th December 2019

Feast of the Immaculate Conception



## "Some Definite Service" Saint John Henry Newman, 1848

*"God has created me to do Him some definite service.  
He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another.*

*I have my mission.  
I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.  
I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.*

*He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work.  
I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place,  
while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments.*

*Therefore, I will trust Him; whatever I am, I can never be thrown away.  
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him.  
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him.*

*He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about.  
He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers.  
He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me.  
Still, He knows what He is about."*





**THE DIOCESE OF ELPHIN**  
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