DUBLIN AND GLENDALOUGH DIOCESAN SYNODS ADDRESS 2025

the archbishop

DIOCESE AND PARISH: A WAY OF LIFE AND A WAY OF MISSION

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain … psalm 127.1

WELCOME TO THE KING’S HOSPITAL

We have been welcomed this afternoon to The King’s Hospital Palmerstown for the Dublin and Glendalough Diocesan Synods. We meet here by kind invitation of the Headmaster, Mr Mark Wallace, and the Chaplain, The Reverend Canon Peter Campion. The diocese has enjoyed strong and vibrant links with KH over many years and centuries, both in Blackhall Place and in Palmerstown; for us to be here in what is a significant year in the life of the school is a great honour. Our invitation is of long standing, to mark the 350th Anniversary of The King’s Hospital in 2019. Our coming here has been delayed by the dreadful Covid-19 pandemic. We are delighted to be here today to mark this anniversary with the school community. We might well go so far as to say that a thriving school is what a church might look like.

The motto of this school is: A school and a way of life. There is every good reason for us to dwell on this motto and to celebrate it with the school community of today. It means that a place, a location that creates and carries memories is at the same time a way of living, how you experience and understand a life that is yours to enjoy and a life in which you are encouraged and facilitated to flourish. Old structures constantly house new ways of living. Being welcomed here today reminds us of the connection in our own work as a diocesan synod between faith and learning. A synod is the meeting of the ways of the whole diocesan family represented by its clergy and laity, not the gathering of a small number of the elected few. Meeting as a synod, unlike other meetings, is an imperative of The Holy Spirit from the earliest days of the church of God. Both life and learning go hand in hand. As well as covering a set curriculum, a school prepares, equips and gives voice to young people as they go into a wider world beyond the school gates. A school forms its community organically and newly every year. Fresh hopes, different takes on old buildings, inherited methods, existing knowledge challenge positively the person and the people that a school is by new life racing and laughing along the corridors, in the playing fields and on the river. In the same way, church cannot happen solely inside the church building or inside the meeting room. An imbalanced understanding of static life as an end in itself is a distorting factor in the defining and the developing of a way of life. Church, like school, has to be on the move, not least as it seeks to present Jesus Christ the way, the truth and the life.

The mission of a church, therefore, is to work out how to encourage people of different age ranges and of different life experiences to find believing in God as an event, an activity that is life-positive, life-changing and life-enhancing. The work of mission of a diocese is to discern how to encourage such new people along with such people who already exist inside its walls to do what? - to stay, to be refreshed, to show in easy ways in everyday life that they have been changed positively by God and to show that others will enjoy this transformation to a new way of life.

The motto of The King’s Hospital is tremendously helpful to us in all of this and in 2025 gives us the energy to re-set. Our being here is timely and tuneful.

SCHOOL AND CHURCH: CONNECTED BY LEARNING AND ADVENTURE

Your church and your parish can be like this - here and now. Prayer and Mission are to be our theme for 2025/2026 and these are the ways in which this transformation can come about. First, there are more and more people today who are curious about religion, what it is, on what footing it stands and what effect and impact it has on people who practise it. Secondly, when it comes to community, we have never before in Ireland had so diverse and so organic a society. Nor has there ever been before so great a need of people in parishes to uphold and, by their own lived commitment to community, to speak up and to advocate for the people who are our neighbours, next to us in work, on public transport and in the supermarket, the people who shoulder our need of the highest level of hospital, medical and nursing care and our need of IT support and innovation. The targeting of many such people whatever their age, nationality or creed by native Irish people for ill is both a tragedy and a scandal. Not only is it embarrassing and hurtful, it is indefensible. Members of parishes can shift the culture forwards by exercizing goodness; they do it; we need to do more of it because of the changing character of our living neighbourhoods.

The population of Ireland grew by the significant number of 90,000 people in the year past. We are still a small country with lots of underutilized space and room. But it is worth remembering that we have probably never had such a broad sweep of types of churches in the diocese to encourage us in our discipleship, our witness and our worship to be a broad church with invitational mission at our heart: parish churches; two cathedral churches; one, and now a second, Pioneer Project with hopes of more to come; Trustee Churches of a broad range of traditions – in all of which spiritual needs can be and are being catered for differently. These are not novelties, these are not vanity projects; these are established, confident communities of faith. The parish and the diocese remain the key building blocks of our ecclesiastical structure. In no way is this to diminish other authorized forms of life and ministry. In fact it is to protect them. We are a diocese not a hypermarket.

Choice is not about a range of consumer options. Choice is about the deliberate decision to commit to the local presentation and expression of parish and church life, to work at it and to invite people in and to let your parish community speak back to you and out to others. So many people absolutely love it. Week after week, I see evidence of this as I make my way around the United Dioceses engaging with parishes and their people who have great pride of place to harness and to offer, sharing it generously with established people and new people alike. They do this because it is God’s initiative, God’s invitation and we are the doorkeepers. This is because place and purpose come together in parish and people. This is how church and way of life come together. This is our gift. For the next decade, this should be our focus of mission. And it should cluster around the local footfall of The Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion and the straightforward instruction by Jesus to those whom he healed: Go now and do the same as I have done for you! In light of the Diocesan Prayer Initiative, I have every confidence it will be so.

In previous years, I have offered you in my Diocesan Synod Address perspectives from The Lambeth Conference of 2022 and from across the Anglican Communion. I have offered you the facts and figures to show that, despite the reality that little more than five thousand people right across our churches and parishes actually go to church on a Sunday, on a good Sunday, we remain in an unique position to relaunch ourselves as a generous, functioning church. The geographical areas of Dublin and Glendalough along with the ever-expanding numbers of people commuting in and out of Dublin for work during the week are home to one-third of the population of Ireland North and South. This alone means there are lots of new people in our midst. There is no scope for inertia or for bleating nor is there reason to do so. There are opportunities everywhere for the people of God – that is you and me – to be missional for God in the world of God’s creation where it will most be appreciated: locally and parochially.

REVIVAL, REGENERATION, REFRESHMENT

We hear of Revival. We hear of Regeneration. This is not an external work – something we watch, something we track on our phone, something other people do. It is internal work – it is something that we do, we accept and engage so as to be part of it, it is something that God does in us – and it is exciting because place by place, parish by parish we can own it. It comes about through a change of heart. After all, Holy Scripture tells us: the Kingdom of God is at hand, the Kingdom of God is within you. We need to discern this Kingdom of God, to disclose it, to develop it, to disseminate it. This is mission as we live it with a sense of purpose and with a direction of travel. We are told that, under the current in-house Census, the Church of Ireland is stable, we are ‘holding our own.’ But with our population rising year on year country-wide, we are at a crossroads yet again and ‘holding our own’ is not enough nor will it take us far. It is not solely about our numerical survival. It is about our spiritual expansion. It is about our Godly enlargement. And that is why we are calling it Mission. It is about our sharing who we are and what we do and why we do it. We are, therefore, at a crossroads in an Ireland where there are more and more external neighbours, new, forgotten and as yet unknown, for us to befriend – we are at a good place to land as we strike out in prayer and mission for 2026.

In my experience, words like Revival and Regeneration often make regular church people groan: It is not for us, we do not have the people, we do not have the resources, we do not have the money; HELP: Get me out of here! But I urge you to press: PAUSE. What about another word: Refreshment? This is not about the financial bottom line; this is not about breaking even or having a surplus; this is not about numbers because the numbers are not good anywhere. We need to shift our gaze from quantity to quality, to the quality of relationship that we have, that we can create and sustain and that we can share with new people. It is most of all about energy and engagement. It happens through presence locally and through generosity parochially. We are being regulated into oblivion in everyday life in general. This is not a specifically negative criticism of those who are implementing the regulation as required. Regulation has no soul; a diocese has to have a soul and a diocese has to keep rediscovering its soul in every generation. This is why you and I together need this Missional Prayer Initiative. And this can happen only through the energy and the effort that emanates from members of this synod because it is the Holy Spirit that blows through a synod and we need to heed that fire and that inspiration.

We need to plough the furrow, we need to sow the field of our charitable purpose and of our charitable output and not solely of our charitable compliance. What we urgently need to do through The Prayer Movement 2025 is to release local energy. I will support and encourage these initiatives in and through my own ministry; and I want to be able to celebrate them with you as they emerge and develop. But I need you to tell me what they are in order to do this and in order to pray them forward. Regulation in and of itself is not a charitable outcome. It is a prerequisite of charitable activity and it is a facilitator of charitable function. Our urgency is now about spiritual and human assets, not financial and material assets. Therefore, our task is about building and growing faithful confidence. Let me tell you briefly about the trailer to a radio play I heard not all that long ago. It illustrates my point. The play was about two elderly people who had a robot in the house doing all sorts of things for them at their command. At a certain point, the lady in question said to the robot: Do sit down and let me make you a nice cup of tea. (She may even have had the Boxed Set of Father Ted and enjoyed watching it.) The robot replies to the radio audience: I do not know what they mean. They simply do not understand that I cannot love them … Regulation cannot love us. God can love us. We can love one another and our neighbours.

THE CAMINO OF THE EVERYDAY

While The Camino may not feature strongly in our Reformed self-understanding, I suggest that it ought to. It has always been, and has come back into being, a school (for the soul) and a way of life. The idea of walking The Camino, the idea of seeing your life as a camino is becoming more and more popular generally as people literally and physically seek to take charge of the ground beneath their feet. We in these dioceses are so well placed to take the spirit of camino and to understand it as a way of living out the mission of parish initiative being undertaken by the Diocesan Council for Mission through The Prayer Movement 2025. St James (Santiago) is very much part of our landscape in Dublin and as County Dublin morphs into County Wicklow at Shanganagh and Bray and again deep in County Kildare in St James’s Church Castledermot. I am greatly indebted to Ms Caoimhe Leppard for the most informative video she did about the Dublin City stretch of The Camino Ingles and commend it to you all. Caoimhe heightened our understanding and our appreciation of the camino significantly and helped us to put it back on the map of faith at the heart of the vibrant Dublin 8 area of our city.

St James’s Church, on the right as you leave the city going towards Kilmainham, while now repurposed as The Pearse Lyons Distillery, has as its west window, perhaps for the first time in its history, a depiction of a pilgrim on The Camino. This was once the place where it all happened; up to 100,000 excavated burials many of them pilgrims show us that this was the case. On Sunday 27th July this year I attended the Camino Mass is St James’s Church in the Roman Catholic tradition just across the road. The pivotal place of St James’s Church, Crinken (in the Church of Ireland tradition) on The Bray Camino as part of the wide reach of The Camino Ingles was spoken of and honoured. There was a couple of other things of note in this service attended by people from right across the world for whom the idea of the Camino is a living norm.

A few images struck me which I felt could be of help to us as we progress in our own Year of Prayer and Mission in these United Dioceses. The first is informal: on the step up to the altar, there stood a rucksack, boots and a stick. This is The Camino of The Everyday. We see the everyday components of this every day as children go to school, as people walk to work and as people take exercise. The Kingdom of God is within you: don’t just watch them, walk with them, join them. The second is formal: a beautiful banner in red with an embroidered image depicting St James with a walking stick ever so slightly lifted forward from the damask showing him in the act of moving. The Kingdom of God is within you: don’t just watch St James, walk with him, join him. And the third is a small statue of St James: it is made from the jet black stone of the Compostela region, glistening with life, vibrant with geology; it depicts St James seated as a teacher with the walking stick somehow holding together, by the genius of its sculpting, the arm of his cathedra and his own hand as a teaching authority. The Kingdom of God is within you, sit with him, listen to God, hold together God and yourself as a gift of your baptism. The energy is powerful. The energy is in being sent. The energy is in both the movement and the resting, the teaching and the action. So, the invitation to us all in this Year of Prayer and Mission is to rest, to learn, to stand and to move. It is from these Diocesan Synods that you the people of the diocese must go to change your stance from sitting to moving, from not doing to doing, from observing to praying. These Diocesan Synods are your invitation and your commissioning for engagement with this initiative of the everyday.

THE INITIATIVE OF THE DIOCESAN COUNCIL FOR MISSION

This happening here. This is happening now. This is an active, not a passive, initiative. The Diocesan Council for Mission, now a sub-committee of The Diocesan Councils and restyled as such, has developed and implemented the first phase of a period of consultation for every parish in the diocese to dig deep into the goodness that is there and to build a programme of mission not for but by the diocese. This needs your participation. I take you back to St James’s Church on James Street and to the sermon of Archbishop Dermot Farrell on July 27th of this year about the Camino – and it applies equally to us here and now. He said this:

We are quick enough to work out what we have to carry; being on a camino shifts to our being carried as we move. The momentum takes us onward. This is service and acceptance.

We have always souvenirs and other gifts and treasures that we take away from places we visit. We need to think of qualities deep within us and others with which we go away. This is spiritual.

We are never alone on a Camino; we are always in a community. This is togetherness.

This seems to me to be a good series of pictures to bring with us into the discussions and conversations that have been and will continue to be brought to every part of the diocese by members of the Council for Mission. The stated purpose of the meetings is a simple one: the gathering of information and the looking for common themes that will shape our diocesan priorities, our charitable purpose, our opus Dei (work of God). The stated method is to work through five pivotal areas:

Worship and Prayer,

Care and Service,

Teaching and Nurturing,

Mission and Evangelism,

Fabric and Finance.

I really do not think any of us could take issue with these. I commend them, support and encourage them and I trust that you will do likewise and give of your best.

The small print of this initiative is vitally important, if this is to have hope of success. There are words and phrases like:

… aiming for an overall sense, so don’t get bogged down in detail.

Be realistic.

No judgement or criticism is intended.

The message contained within this is the straightforward one: Try your best and don’t waste your energy blaming others for what it not happening; after all it simply may not be the right thing for your parish at this time … but something will be the right thing, please find it, please invent it, please do it! This is a faithful, not a forensic exercise. The direction of travel is the setting of local priorities in each of the above five areas. It is impossible for all parishes today to do the same things. It is not expected that they should. My advice is to do your best and to celebrate it and to tell us about it. Competition among parishes is not the point or the purpose of this engagement. You are its point and its purpose and your discerning The Kingdom of God within you and in your midst in order that it may radiate from you.

PARISH

A parish is a civic community, a religious community and a denominational community all the time and at any given moment. For the civic community, all you need do is to look over your shoulder at hurling, football and camogie and at Country Shows; for the religious community, all you need do is to look at any and all of your ecumenical neighbours without whom we would neither survive nor thrive today; for the denominational community, all you need do is to look at yourselves. And having looked at yourselves, I suggest that you begin to look out again to both the religious and the civic and to remember the words of Archbishop Farrell: on the Camino of life, when you think you are on your own, you are always in a community. We have to remember that the parish is not the only entity in the ecclesiastical equation. The parish, every parish, needs the cathedral; because, without the cathedral and the elastic relationship between its dean and chapter and the bishop, the parishes are disconnected congregations and the people are without a mother church however close they may be geographically or however much they may work together. Both cathedral and parish are connected irretrievably and rightly with a diocese.

MISSION

We need to be precise about the word: mission too because it is wide open to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The sort of mission about which The Diocesan Council for Mission is talking for the year 2025-2026 is mission in the parish more than mission from the parish. This is crystal clear from the emphasis on the locality and its potential for a life of discipleship. We are being asked to concentrate in this instance not on mission abroad but on the mission of the religious parish in the total community of which it is part. This is a good rein-check. Mission, like parish, is in three parts. Mission is the subject, not the object, of our faith because the primary and the definitive mission is God the Son sent by God the Father working with God the Spirit. Of this there should be no doubt in this year of the seventeen-hundredth anniversary of The Council of Nicaea in the mind of anyone here. Mission is an institutional structure that enables parishes and dioceses and provinces to engage with the work of other such entities, whether they be local or further afield. We need look no further than the Parishes of Athy and of Rathmichael for this in our own dioceses and congratulate them on their missional enterprise, the former working with Kondoa Diocese, the latter working with Maseno North Diocese. Mission is thirdly an individual response to the invitation to be sent while we remain in our home place. This is mission at its most fascinating. This undoubtedly is the hardest mission of them all. Jesus Christ is our inspiration in this because his life and mission took off in his home place, in a limited sphere of operation and of influence, yet in a way that was A Daily Calvary (in the unforgettable phrase of my predecessor Dr McAdoo referring to his own experience as bishop of these dioceses) in a part of the world which is dear to us all here because of our diocesan link – another expression of mission – with The Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East. Jesus both was sent and remained in a small corner of the world – Galilee and Jerusalem – places of unutterable suffering and cruelty and inhumanity today where we long for a lasting peace and a reconstruction of lives and infrastructure, of institutions and communities, of hope and dignity. The Prayer Movement is not prescribing what you do or how you do it. The gift it proffers is encouraging you to think through everything that matters to you with the team and to work it out together. Again, I offer my support and encouragement in all of this as it develops and moves forward.

INVITATION AND INSPIRATION

This type of mission is not a thing of doing alone. It is a thing of praying. So, what does the prayer for this mission initiative in parishes say? It says that mission is everyday – so we all can do it. It says that mission is sending – so we are not alone, we are following The Son of God who was sent into a world created by God. It says that mission is worship and service – so we are all doing it and we need to encourage other people to do it with us. It says that mission is embracing our neighbour and serving our society – in all of these ways we bring on stage the Kingdom of God that is within us. This is the power of prayer in our hour of mission.

The good thing is that we have done all of this before – those of us who engaged in it at the time – through The Come&C Programme and The Five Marks of Mission (and let us never forget that the resurgence of The Five Marks of Mission across the Anglican Communion happened first through the prompting of me by one of our then-ordinands to do something about it). There is every good reason, with different and with fresh energy, for us to be able to do this again.

DIOCESAN SYNODS 2026

Let us return to the ethic and the motto of The King’s Hospital (King Charles ii of course): a school and a way of life. My hope would be that, as a culmination of this exciting and engaged year of exploration, we might have something significant to celebrate this time next year; that we might have an entirely different type of synod, a synod that declutters on procedure, a synod to which we invite the wide range of ecumenical partners we have across these United Dioceses, a synod where the voices of the people of the parishes might have pride of place and honour of esteem under God, a synod at which we might take the ethic of living and learning and build a diocese and a way of life, with compassion and with grace, without competition but with care, without criticisms that are assassinatory but with The Christ who was assassinated on Calvary and yet who is the one who was sent and who still sends us today and tomorrow.

Might it not be rather wonderful were we, for once, to have the confidence to open our windows and our doors and to invite to The Synods of 2026 members of some other Christian traditions along with members of other Faith Communities and to share with them what we have found about this open-ended term parish and its missional potential? We too live in their parish and they too live in ours. This might enable us to crawl out from under our stone and to learn together, to teach together and to celebrate together. Take the risk! Take the win! Take the Emmaus Road!

Unless the Lord keeps the city, the guard keeps watch in vain … psalm 127.2