



'A Time to Pull in our Nets and take stock'

A LETTER BY BISHOP DENIS TO THE PEOPLE & PRIESTS OF KILDARE & LEIGHLIN DIOCESE

February 2026

A few weeks ago, we welcomed the arrival of a new year, many of us naturally look forward to what this New Year might bring. In 2022 the diocese took its theme from St. Luke's gospel, where the first disciples were asked to put out their nets for a catch (Luke 5:4). Now, early in 2026, we simply draw in the nets momentarily to reflect on what has been caught and to decide where our next journey might take us.

Sifting through our Nets

In the past year alone, we have seen twenty-five women and men commence formal training to become Lay Pastoral Ministers, specialising in either pastoral care or faith formation. In time they will support clergy and parish teams in many ways including sacramental preparation, catechesis, adult faith formation, liturgy, bereavement and funeral ministry and ministry to the elderly and the sick.

The past year has seen honest engagement by priests and deacons with a new language of 'Pastoral Area'. We welcomed the ordination last October of another five Permanent Deacons for service in our diocese. In June we hosted another very successful 'Parishes Alive' Day in Carlow College, St. Patrick's. The theme was 'Moving Forward in Hope' where parishioners learned from one another what gives life to their parish and what makes their parish distinct and special. Next June we will host the third in the series called 'Parishes Alive - Becoming Synodal', with a particular focus on adopting a more synodal way of being Church in the parish context.

In these early weeks of the New Year our Diocesan Pastoral Council is being renewed, our Council of Priests continues to grapple with matters of mutual concern to our clergy and people, and our Diocesan Commission for Liturgical Formation resumes training for various liturgical ministries following its very successful Liturgy Conference last September.

While rooted in the tradition of the Church, the call to synodality from Pope Francis, and continued by Pope Leo, stands out as a seismic shift in how we are as Church and has inspired us to re-evaluate our mission, to haul in our nets, even if just for a moment.

Appreciating our Fishermen

As I travel around the diocese, visiting parishes, I meet many people and hear many things. I get a real sense of the gratitude among the people for their local priest. This gratitude translates to phrases like "he is our priest", "our man", along with the caveat "don't move him"! There is real affection for the local priest everywhere I go. While parishioners deeply appreciate their priest, the priest is equally appreciative of his parishioners, and I hear this appreciation again and again at clergy gatherings.

With fewer priests it is increasingly challenging to provide a resident priest in every parish and there are a number of parishes now without a resident priest. I'm very conscious that there is a growing cohort of older men in active ministry; I want to assure them, this is not taken for granted and I know the affection and esteem in which each one is held.

As I have said on so many occasions, a priest is fully entitled to retire at 75, having given stellar service to God and His Church for so many years. Where a priest decides to retire I will provide all the support I can to underpin this decision, including suitable accommodation.

While I acknowledge the work of these priests, we remember we have a shared responsibility to care for all our priests, especially our older men and I ask you to be reasonable in any requests made of the local priest; he will not and cannot reach on everything.

Letting our Nets down once again

The Final Document from the Universal Synod on Synodality emphasises a deeper understanding and appreciation of our baptism as a calling to be lived out fully and completely. As Church there will always be a need to refocus on our core mission, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. For too long we have been overly attentive to the 'maintenance' responsibilities to the neglect of evangelisation, spreading the Word. It is clear that all the baptised have a role in this mission and we must do all we can to foster that sense of mission among all the faithful. All of us are called; all of us are chosen.

I see these as moments of transformation; with lay groups supporting the mission of the parish as clergy and laity work side by side, with an awareness of their baptismal calling. Out of this will emerge ministries to the bereaved and those in mourning; to our schools assisting in the sacramental programmes and to our parishes in the varied liturgical and pastoral ministries.

A New Language - Pastoral Areas

Pope Leo in speaking recently to clergy and parish representatives of the Diocese of Rome reminded them of the value of Pastoral Areas: "they are designed to better connect neighbouring parishes in a given territory with the centre of the diocese". He went on to say, "we need to think and plan together, going beyond pre-established boundaries and experimenting with joint pastoral initiatives".

Our diocese of 56 parishes, 117 faith communities built around our churches, now consists of 11 Pastoral Areas, collaborative communities of 4 to 6 parishes.

A new model of Church is emerging with fewer clergy and greater lay involvement. It will no longer be possible to have a resident priest in every parish and diocesan appointments have become more challenging for me every year. I do not see this changing any time soon. Grouping parishes into pastoral areas allows for the considered deployment of clergy and lay ministers as well as providing improvements around training and other supports. Already, it is so positive to see the richness of the collaboration of parish groups.

In Conclusion

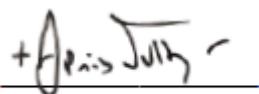
Our diocese has a long and distinguished history of communicating our faith and staying connected to one another. The work of Faith Development Services along with the appointment of Pat Roche as Diocesan Director of Parish Development continues to emphasise the importance of supporting the local, while also being attentive to the bigger picture.

We should be under no illusion about the challenges ahead and the changes they will bring. With the reduction in the number of priests it is not going to be possible to sustain the same number of Masses in every church. The Sunday Mass is what sustains a community, and we must consider a schedule of Masses that is more manageable for our clergy and our Pastoral Areas. I believe that lay led liturgies will become a feature of parish life now and into the future, giving parishioners a vital opportunity to come together in prayer.

I ask you all to continue to support and pray for our priests and parish groups and to be generous and welcoming to those who volunteer to take on additional roles in our parishes.

May St. Brigid, St. Conleth, and St. Laserian guide our next steps as we continue to put out our nets for a further catch.

Every blessing,


Denis Nulty