



Gathering back

Since I took up my role as Bishop of Ferns I have been visiting the parishes for weekend Masses as often as I possibly can. To date, I have visited about 35 of the 49 parishes and look forward to being in the others in the near future. I hugely appreciate the welcome given to me as a stranger and I thank everyone who has extended that “Céad Míle Fáilte” to me. Without exception, I have noticed that the beautiful churches of Ferns are maintained with tremendous care and affection which indicates to me the important role they play in the life of each Community. However, our Church is more than its buildings even if they are often the most visible, permanent evidence of the Faith in our communities. But just as a house is not a home without people our Church buildings are not our spiritual homes without people. The Covid Pandemic of the past few years has brought about many changes in our interaction with people and our participation in the Eucharist and Mass attendance has also changed greatly.

Moving On

You may be tired of hearing about Covid and the effects it has had on our lives. Many rightly feel it is time to move on from Covid and indeed we have taken remarkable strides in doing just that and moving on from that dreadful experience.

We are amazed at how easy it is to forget the hardship of restrictions we lived through. It proves to us what we always believed that “life moves on”. I thank God for the progress we have made, but I am equally sensitive to the fact that Covid is still among us and that a lot of people are still suffering from its after-effects often referred to as “Long Covid”.

With the arrival of Covid, we were astounded at first that our Sunday Masses in Church had to be restricted and conducted without a congregation. Suddenly the words of Psalm 122, “Let us go to God’s house” no longer applied and we were left at home. It caused a great deal of pain to regular church goers even though they recognised this was vitally necessary to safeguard public health.

We surprised ourselves by how well we coped with the Eucharist without a congregation physically present. This was due in large part to the broadcasting of the Eucharist on television, radio and many Church webcams. This latter innovation is here to stay and will continue to provide a great service to the sick and housebound as well as allowing people to view funeral services from distant parts of the country and abroad. Technology served us well during Covid and continues to do so.

Up until recent times the word “tablet” just meant a pill but now tablets have become part of our lives even if we are in perfect health. We read the newspaper on them, play bridge against opponents on the other side of the world, hold business meetings and have family gatherings with people scattered all over the world. I heard a story recently about a couple in the west of Ireland who wanted to talk to their daughter in Australia and to see their new-born grandchild. While they were chatting and admiring the new

arrival, the dog under the table in Ireland barked at something outside and woke the sleeping baby 10,000 miles away. This is now our world and we are learning to navigate it even in our spiritual lives

Lenten Invitation

This Lent I am inviting you, the people, priests and religious of the diocese, to think about your own attendance at Mass in your parish and your commitment to your local Christian community.

I hope you will be gentle with yourself as you think about this, but I also hope that you will be honest in assessing how your life has changed and whether or not it may be time to revert back to a former practice that was seriously altered for the sake of health and safety throughout the pandemic.

I ask you to allow your thinking be guided by the two aspects of the Christian life - the personal and the communal - and especially where the two meet or are intertwined.

Coming back

The initial comeback to public Masses, even though it involved the wearing of masks and other serious guidelines such as social distancing, was a welcome relief. People braved the risks, and their hearts echoed the gospel words, "*Lord, it is good for us to be here.*" (Matthew 17:4).

There are those who for varying and understandable reasons of health have chosen to stay at home and follow the Mass on television, radio or online. Their participation reflects the Eucharist in its original and formative celebration – the church of the house or the upper room. It is a valid and worthy form of participation in the Eucharist for those who are unable to be present in their local church.

But it is also true to say that a large number of people have not returned to the Sunday Eucharist in their parish churches. It is a personal choice that they have a right to make, whether their choice is a result of serious consideration or simply lightly taken without much thought given to it. Many participate in very beautiful Masses from all parts of the world and find great nourishment in them. But this is Mass as a product to be consumed when in fact Mass is ideally a relationship. This is a reality that we as a Community of believers must learn to accept even if it causes us some regret.

A Rethink

The purpose of this Pastoral Letter is not to guilt anyone into returning to active participation in Sunday Eucharist. However, it is the responsibility of all who value the Eucharist and the Sunday gathering to preach love and loyalty to the Eucharist to all our sisters and brothers. This is where the personal and communal aspects of being a Christian come into play.

The Eucharist is our meeting with Christ in a special way. The teaching of the church on Eucharist speaks fittingly of Christ's *real presence* after the changing of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ in the Mass. It is something we do because Christ invited us to do so when in the words of the Last Supper he said "*Do this in memory of me*".

A return to the Sunday Mass in our public places of worship (Parish Churches) is our way of honouring Christ's sacrifice. We give thanks for his *real presence* in the Eucharist by offering our own real presence at Church and thus making real our participation in this most communal of acts.

I gently invite people who have not been back in Church since before the Pandemic to rethink their decision this Lent and to come back to Sunday Mass so that they will enjoy its benefits and blessings in their lives. Come back only for the love of Christ and this purest of motives will benefit you greatly.

It is my firm belief that parishes need to play their part in the return to worship and to be innovative and imaginative in building up the Christian community again. In churches where Covid restrictions are still

in place I encourage them to be relaxed so that a sense of normality can be restored to our Sunday celebration.

At meetings recently I was encouraging the priests in the parishes, with the co-operation of parents, to re-establish the ministry of Altar servers where it has been lost. When I visit the schools, the teenagers I speak to who served Mass, without exception, remember it as a time when they were connected to church. We yearn for the participation of young people generally in Church life and so we need to take positive steps to encourage it. In the same way, preparation Masses for First Holy Communion and Confirmation and other family Masses can be ways in which parishes could rebuild the links to the Sunday Mass. These tasks are challenges to all of the people across the Diocese who value their “own place”. The building that you hold in your heart, and which has been at the centre of your family story with weddings, funerals and baptisms deserves to be honoured by the “real presence” of the community honouring the Real Presence that lies within.

Easter: A Comeback Time

My prayer for the Diocese of Ferns this Lent is that we, as a community of believers, will take part fully in our Eucharistic celebrations in our Parish Churches. May the words of the Psalm inspire and motivate us: *“And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever”*. (Psalm 23:6)

In a way I am inviting you to a New Beginning on your faith journey. But you might say – “there’s nothing new in what I will see and hear on a Sunday”. But I think newness can be found when we open our eyes to it. Every day is a new day, different to what went before and different to what is to come. Who best recognizes newness? Parents with a new baby or indeed parents whose child has taken their first step, gone to big school for the first time, gone to secondary, got their first car, flat and so on. But newness also comes when we begin, the day after a funeral, to navigate life without a partner, a friend, a parent. Newness also comes when we are told to lay aside a fear that we had about our health or indeed when we begin a new stage of life with the accompaniment of a new lifelong companion of a health condition. Every moment in the Liturgy becomes new when we recognize that we are always living in new moments, good or bad, and that the Mass is the place where the journey through the Cross to the Resurrection is renewed in our own community, in our own local church.

As Lenten reflection leads into Easter we are reminded of the confusion of the apostles in the early days of Christ’s resurrection. They were confused, disappointed, and angry and upset in so many ways. Likewise, many people are left confused in the wake of Covid and the many challenges of our world today. It shouldn’t surprise us that we have mixed feelings around our faith – sometimes confused, angry, disappointed, disillusioned and indifferent.

On the road to Emmaus Jesus appeared to two of his downcast apostles. They did not recognise him and laid their woes upon him. In turn he explained to them the path Christ took to resurrection. It was only when he joined them for a meal in an upper room of a house (a place of worship) that they recognised him in the breaking of bread. Afterwards, they said, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32).

In an echo of the Emmaus story, we might once again sit at the table of the Eucharist and invite Jesus to join us as the disciples did. The synodal journey that Pope Francis has invited us to be on with him is a journey that can best be done in personal and real contact with each other and with the Lord. I want to conclude by wishing each of you and your families a rewarding journey this Lent.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, likely belonging to the author of the text, positioned at the bottom left of the page.