DIOCESE OF CORK, CLOYNE AND ROSS

Diocesan Synod Address given in Cork by The Right Rev. Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross 9th June 2012

Key Themes from the Bishop of Cork's Diocesan Synod Address 2012

Introduction

Dear friends in Christ, we meet in Diocesan Synod in the name of God the Holy Trinity to consider again the work of the local Church here in Cork, Cloyne and Ross. I welcome each of you. Thank you very much for being here today.

Last Year - Being Irish

Last year in this address, I referred to the visit to Cork of Queen Elizabeth II and, allied with my own journey to the Somme, to Flanders and to Cambrai, I traced something of my own family's history, I spoke about a theme – and, indeed, issue – that is, I believe, important, not least in this decade of centenaries: the complex makeup in our day of what being Irish, in fact, is.

I was quite overwhelmed by the response to that aspect of last year's address: it seems to have struck a chord with many. I was even more surprised to find that a Diocesan Synod address could find its way into a new Irish history book and be extensively quoted, as has happened in this instance in Brian Walker's 'A Political History of the Two Irelands.' As some wag said on Facebook: 'It's official, Paul Colton is now history.'

I mention this for two reasons. First, I cannot promise this or any year to strike the same nerve of interest in a Diocesan Synod address. Second, I sense that the theme of who we are and where we fit in, allied, for example, with the interest shown in the 'Understanding our History' day conference we held several years ago, manifest also in the interest in Canon George Salter's recent television programme *An Tost Fada* (The Long Silence), and, indeed, in the programme of two years before - *Cork's Bloody Secret* - all serve to show that as a community, in the coming decade, we are keen to play our part and to understand evermore how we fitted in and were affected in those times, not least too as a means to developing our self-understanding today. I hope, therefore, that we may find ways in each of the coming centenary years to explore these histories in that context.

Ecumenical Greetings – 50th International Eucharistic Congress

When I was a chaplain at Cappagh Orthopaedic Hospital in Dublin a familiar sight was the altar which had been used during the Mass on O'Connell Bridge, Dublin, at the 31st International Eucharistic Congress in 1932.

On this day, the eve of the 50th International Eucharistic Congress which commences tomorrow in Dublin, an event of immense significance to Roman Catholics throughout Ireland, I take the opportunity to send fraternal greetings to our local sister dioceses: to Bishop John Buckley, the clergy and people of the Diocese of Cork and Ross; and also to Archbishop Dermot Clifford, the clergy and people of the Diocese of Cloyne. These greetings come with our prayers that this Congress will be an enriching pilgrimage of spiritual nurture and blessing.

A Very Different Ireland

Looking at the website of this year's Eucharistic Congress, and seeing the references to the Youth Programme and the Children's Programme; noting also the Pilgrim's Walk with its ecumenical dimension; and seeing also the invitation to download the specially devised App for iPhone and iPad, we are all reinforced in our awareness that in 2012 we are living in a very different Ireland from that of 1932. The Congress is reaching out to people, it seems, through all available media: YouTube and Facebook, Twitter and Flickr.

Communicating in our Time

'Go and make disciples…' Jesus commanded. 'How are they to hear…?' asked Saint Paul in his letter to the Romans. The proclamation of the Good News is entrusted to us. That is a multi-faceted task embraced in our worship, in our pastoral ministry, in our youth work, in children's work, in our schools and, in a host of other ways too.

Contemporary means of communication offer opportunities: including Facebook and Twitter. Currently, a student at UCC, is engaged in the experimental project of devising an App for use by visitors to some of the churches in the Diocese. If it is successful it can be expanded beyond this trial approach. A major revamp of our Diocesan website is currently also being planned.

Today I take the opportunity to encourage parishes and diocesan organisations to use our News Blog. In the last three months alone, the Blog has recorded separate visits from more people than there are in the Diocese; and from people in sixty-four different countries. Underscoring the importance of contemporary media is that, after own Diocesan website, the top two referrers to the News Blog are Facebook and Twitter.

The Blog presents opportunities for communicating what we are doing. I encourage more people in the Diocese actively to follow it; and I encourage more parishes to use it to announce and proclaim the good things they are up to.

Census 2011 and Episcopal Visitation 2011

Every national census and every episcopal visitation – and we had one of each in 2011 – confronts us with the reality that, in terms of religion and religious affiliation, we are indeed living in a new era. Of course, numbers alone are not the full picture.

The full Religion Report of the National Census will not be published until 18th October. I have no doubt that again there will be the perennial question of the gap between our numbers for members of the Church of Ireland locally and the actual numbers recorded in the Census. Where are the people we seem not to know about?

Meanwhile the initial publication 'This is Ireland: Highlights from Census 2011' offers some initial insights about religion in Ireland. It states what we all know to be the case: 'Ireland remains a predominantly Catholic country despite the large increases in other religions seen in recent years. No other religion comes close in importance with over 84 per cent declaring themselves to be Roman Catholic.'

Those two introductory sentences are worthy of examination. They point to the enduring place religion, in some form, even if only residual, in many instances, has in Irish life. Approximately 4.25 million out of the total of about 4.6 million claim to be religious in some way with about 270,000 declaring they had no religion and another 72,000 not stating their religion. The number of people who say they have no religion has increased by 45% in five years.

Numbers are, as I say, only one veneer of reality. We know that deep down there are profound and discommoding questions about the nature of religious affiliation and belonging in our communities. These are translating into real and challenging questions, not least in terms of personal freedoms and rights, education, health, and the relationship between religion and the State.

The two introductory sentences point also to diversity: the large increases in other religions, not least a more than 50% growth in the Muslim community and its third place in terms of size in Irish religious life. The growth in other minority Christian churches is also noteworthy. These posit questions about our interfaith dialogue and relationship with these groupings.

The reference in those introductory sentences to the enduring majority position of the Roman Catholic Church places, if I may say in fraternal friendship, a particular onus on that Church to be a prime mover, to take the initiative and lead among us all, in every locale, in building ecumenical and inter-faith relations. The duty, in my view, is always on a majority, in whatever context, but particularly in the context of the wider Christian household, to manifest a particular concern for minorities and to take the lead in developing common ground.

Census 2011 shows that the Church of Ireland grew in the previous five years by 6.4 per cent. This is corroborated in our own Episcopal Visitation. I will not dwell on the detail today; it is my intention to make available the full report and analysis later in the year. However, some points and questions arise:

- There are 3716 households in the Diocese: that's 387 more than ten years ago and 190 more than five years ago.
- However, in the same period the number of individual members has only gone up by 130 to 7,799.
- A smaller number of parishes than previously – just three, in fact - say that they are declining in numbers.
- We are not an ageing Diocese: the numbers show the age profile has stayed constant over the last ten years and falls broadly as follows: 36% under 30; 37% between 31 and 60 and 27% 61 or more.
- Here, however, are two disturbing questions for us all, (and these may, in part, if further analysed, be elements in the perception of an ageing or declining population):
    - The number of registered vestrypersons declined by 119 over a ten year period, from 3465 registered to 3246. Is that a yardstick of commitment and adult involvement in church leadership? Perhaps, or perhaps not, but certainly by no means the only one.
    - Of more concern, and a greater challenge is the number of people in the Diocese attending Church on Sundays. In 2010 the average percentage attendance was 28% of our population. In some parts of these islands and Europe generally that would be considered very high. However, it is down from 36% five years before and from almost 40% ten years before. Instead of wringing our hands about it, we all locally, need to ask, what can we, and what are we going to do about this?

Engaging with Diversity

Those are all questions based on detailed analysis. More broadly, we need of first importance to ask ourselves frequently what is our understanding of ourselves as a Church; what is our vision?

When I was enthroned in Saint Fin Barre's Cathedral in 1999 I took my sermon text from the letter to the Ephesians 'As God has called you; live up to your calling." (Ephesians 4.1). What sort of Church do we believe God is calling us to be?

On that occasion, I set out three elements in my vision and invited you to join me on a journey of sharing that. They were and remain:

- Giving the priority place in the life of all our parish churches to worship.
- Allowing that worship to overflow into the whole of our life: putting the spirit of the incarnate Christ at the centre of the ordinary things of every day.
- Mobilising everyone - all the baptised - in ministry.

I spoke about Zanobi Strozzi's painting of the Annunciation. It speaks to us of our response and obedience to God's call to each one of us. In my sermon that day I pointed to the wall around the Annunciation moment in the painting as something I did not like; and also to the fact that the religious action is remote from the life of the city which is in the distance. I said that 'a Christianity that hides from the realities of the city – of society, of real people in real places – is a denial of the incarnate Jesus who stood alongside people and offered them "life in all its fullness".

I still believe this to be so. Far too many Christians want to retreat from the realities of the day into a closeted spiritual world; compartmentalised from the uncertainty and greyness of life and its difficult choices and concerns. I hope that Christians and parishes in this Diocese will never adopt a fortress or retreating mind-set. People, in times like this, naturally crave the certainty of extremes – the once-called black and white, rather than the grey fuzziness where so much of our living in relationship with each other and with God has to be worked out. People talk about 'lines in the sand' in relation to contentious issues – a terrible metaphor in my view; the tide comes in and out twice a day and immediately, like life itself, creates a new reality for us to engage with.

Are we not instead called to live uncomfortably and prophetically in a place where the edges of belonging are fuzzy rather than defined; attracting people in rather than pushing them out; breaking down barriers; taking down walls of division; including rather than excluding. On my visit back to Vancouver last summer I saw this sign of welcome over the doors into the Cathedral: 'Open doors; Open Hearts; Open Minds.'

The Current Debate on Civil Partnerships

It is that invitation and conviction that shapes my personal approach and conviction to the current, hotly debated issue within the Church of Ireland and, indeed, wider Anglicanism. Last year when we met I referred to the commencement, in law, of the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights of Cohabitants Act 2010. I spoke of the active involvement throughout history and today of lesbian and gay people, lay and ordained, in the life of our Church, and of the value we have placed and dependence we have had on them.

Since our last Diocesan Synod the issue of church members in civil partnerships has become heatedly debated in parts of our Church. This led, while I was on sabbatical, to what participants tell me (including many from this Diocese) was a very positive conference in March in Cavan about sexuality. Many will think it an understatement to say that in turn, however, the issue became heated in its focus at the meeting of General Synod last month.

In spite of all that, I believe my questions of last year endure. Given that, as I say, lesbian and gay people are fellow members with us of our Church, and given that many of them are taking the opportunity to enter into civil partnerships, what is our pastoral and liturgical response to be?

Internationally, the commended mechanism for charting a course through these disputed waters, subscribed at last year's General Synod by the Church of Ireland – the Anglican Covenant - seems to be unravelling. Even yesterday the Scottish Episcopal Church was the latest province

not to adopt the Covenant. By March it was clear that a majority of Church of England dioceses had voted against it.

I am conscious that in this Diocese, and I emphasise this, that in this Diocese, as in every Diocese of the Church of Ireland, individual Christians have a variety of responses to this matter and to the debate itself. That said, I believe and hope that in this part of the Church of Ireland, the response to lesbian and gay fellow Christians will be marked by continued welcome and inclusion and, indeed, there is, to my mind, a sound Christian charter and path in those words I saw over the door of Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver: 'Open doors; Open Hearts; Open Minds.'

Being Anglican

I hope too that such openness will characterise the dialogue that the General Synod has committed the Church of Ireland to in relation to this matter in the coming years. A Select Committee is to be formed, on foot of recommendations, yet to be devised by the Standing Committee, and to be tabled at next year's meeting of the General Synod.

Several years ago, when speaking about this issue, I told you about my own nurture as a Christian and the discovery of my vocation while attending Church in Canada at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Metchosin, Vancouver Island. I told you of my pain in recent years that while my journey in faith had led me one way, for some in that parish, their journey had taken them another, arising not only from this issue, but principally, emerging from their reflection on what really lies at the heart of this matter: how are we to interpret the Bible.

Last summer I was back in Metchosin and spent a week with many of my now lifelong friends from that church – now two churches, I guess, as people, sadly went their separate ways. What I discovered, however, is that in spite of our different views, what we have in common, in faith, what we share, and what unites us, is far greater than that which divides us. It is, therefore, a matter of great pain that it has not been possible in that part of the Church to maintain unity and community in institutional terms.

I refuse to believe, however, that here in the Church of Ireland, such division translated into a implosive institutional fracture is inevitable. Such a trajectory would, I believe, be a denial of what many of us truly believe and value about being members of the Church of Ireland, and the Anglican way of doing things and believing, our method: shaped by Scripture, Tradition and Reason (all three) our endeavours, above all else, to give reality here and now to the love and presence of the incarnate Jesus, the embrace of difference and diversity, inclusiveness, tolerance, forbearance, openness, intelligent engagement with the realities of our time, comprehensiveness, the struggle to find the middle way – all to name just some of the dynamics that shape us. Or, as was beautifully summed up for me, by one of you who said to me: 'I don't want to be in a Church where I cannot kneel to pray with someone who thinks differently from me on this issue.' Moreover, I am convinced that it should be possible to attain a resolution of the issues, perhaps locally mandated, that can accommodate the diversity of views that are keenly felt in relation to this.

For me Alec Vidler summed up decades ago the genius and attraction of the, at times uncomfortable, frustratingly ill-defined sometimes seemingly muddled, church we belong to, but also the capacity we have to hold together within difference. He wrote:

> Anglican theology is true to its genius when it is seeking to reconcile opposed systems, rejecting them as exclusive systems, but showing that the principle for which each stands has its place within the total orbit of Christian truth, and in

> the long run is secure only within that orbit or … when it is held in tension with other apparently opposed, but really complementary principles.

'Open doors; Open Hearts; Open Minds.'

Our work as a Church – Columba
Last year I ended, on the day that was in it, by drawing encouragement from the example of the Apostle Barnabas.

Today is the Feast of the sixth century saint, Columba, dove of the Church. His life and experience teach us of the importance of learning and study; of faithfulness, courage and determination in times of tribulation and change; and, above all, he attests to the Christian belief that in spite of disappointment, struggle, failure and division, fresh starts, new beginnings, enduring achievements and lasting witness are all possible.

My prayer as we begin our work is that in our day together we will bring this determination, this faithfulness, this vision and this hope, to bear on our work together in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+Paul Cork:
9th June, 2012
The Feast of Saint Columba