

Pastoral Message of Bishop Kevin Doran

To the Faithful of the Diocese of Achonry
and the Diocese of Elphin



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is just over six months now since the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Luis Mariano Montemayor, made known to us the decision of Pope Francis to initiate a process of closer cooperation and consultation, which is intended to lead eventually to the merging of our two neighbouring dioceses of Achonry and Elphin. A similar process was proposed at the same time for the dioceses of Tuam and Killala.

I am aware that this decision, coming when it did, left many people in the Diocese of Achonry feeling shocked and disappointed. It was difficult for the diocese to lose a young and energetic Bishop. Following discussions which had taken place over a number of years, I expected that there would be some reconfiguration of the six dioceses of the Province of Tuam.¹ My own appointment as Apostolic Administrator of Achonry took me by surprise. Since I took over responsibility for the Diocese, I have been greatly encouraged by the warm welcome and support that I have received from so many people. To date, I have visited two thirds of the parishes, and I look forward to continuing those visits in the weeks and months ahead.

Why is this Happening?

People have asked me “*why is this happening?*” The merging of dioceses is not new and it is not unique to Ireland. It is not

easy, in a small diocese, especially with lower levels of religious practice, to find the human and financial resources required to do all that is necessary for pastoral care and good governance. Both Achonry and Elphin are small by the standards of the Church around the world. The hope is that, with our combined resources, we will be able to exercise our mission more effectively.

As the Apostolic Nuncio said, when announcing the proposed changes:

“We know from personal experience that life is a process of adaptation to changing circumstances. Although we seek to preserve at all times our essential identity, we adopt measures to meet new challenges as they arise. That is true also of the life of the Church and it is reflected in what we are doing today. To meet the evolving needs of the Church in the ecclesiastical Province of Tuam, it is necessary to envisage a gradual process of reorganisation, which will, it is hoped, give added impetus and vitality to the communities concerned.”

What Has Happened So Far?

In the period since April 2024, various consultations have taken place, including the six gatherings that took place in recent weeks.

1. The Province of Tuam consists of the dioceses of Tuam, Achonry, Clonfert, Elphin, Galway, Killala.

Some initial decisions have been made, reflecting what has been heard. It has been agreed, for example, that:

- the two dioceses will join together for the Pilgrimages to Lourdes and Knock, as well as for young adult pilgrimages
- the two dioceses will work more closely together for the formation of lay ministers and Parish Pastoral Councils
- we will plan together for the activities of our youth and young-adult ministry
- we will establish a working group, drawn equally from both dioceses to consider what other actions might be necessary to allow us to work more effectively together and, if the process evolves further, to eventually become one diocese.

Some people have understandably asked very practical questions such as: *“What will the Diocese be called?”*, *“Where will the Cathedral be?”* and *“Where will the Bishop live?”*. These questions have not yet been considered in any detail. I can say, however, that in many cases where dioceses have merged, both cathedrals have equal status. These are known as “co-cathedrals”.

One Body in Christ

Because of our shared Baptism, and our sharing of the Eucharist, before ever the question of a merger arose, we are – as St. Paul reminds us – *“one Body in Christ”*. Our dignity as Christian communities has nothing to do with our relative size. We are pilgrims on a journey and our mission is to support one another and to welcome the stranger.

In recent weeks, we have been blessed to have six gatherings, in which approximately five hundred people participated, from both dioceses. I am very grateful to all those who participated and to those who facilitated the gatherings. We promised those who came to the gatherings that we would make available a summary of all that was said.

This report has now been prepared by a group of seven people from both dioceses, and I am happy to present it to you now. I hope it will be widely discussed at Parish gatherings and in family homes. This is just a beginning.

Prayer - Entrusting this Process to the Holy Spirit

Each of us has different gifts to bring, but all of us can pray. It is important that we bring this process to prayer, asking the Holy Spirit for guidance and help. In that way we can be sure that we will make the decisions that God wants. We have prepared a prayer for our two dioceses, which is available on a separate card and online. I encourage you to pray this prayer, whether on your own or in the community of the Church.

With every blessing and thanks for your support,



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Doran'.

+Kevin Doran
Bishop of Elphin
Apostolic Administrator of Achonry

6th November 2024
Feast of All the Saints of Ireland

Summary of Feedback from Gatherings held in Autumn 2024 in the Diocese of Achonry and the Diocese of Elphin

Introduction

During a three-week period in September and October 2024 a series of six consultation gatherings took place at various locations in the dioceses of Achonry and Elphin. Approximately five hundred people took part in these conversations, including members of the lay faithful who are active in parish and diocesan leadership roles, together with the bishop, clergy and religious.

The background to these gatherings was the announcement made by the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Luis Mariano Montemayor on the 10th April 2024 in the course of which he said:

"In due time, and following careful assessment and consultation, the present Dioceses of Tuam and Killala on the one hand, and Elphin and Achonry on the other, may be governed by one Bishop in each case, just as the Dioceses of Galway and Clonfert are today governed by one Bishop. If this process evolves still further, the associated Dioceses may then merge fully under their Bishop, and, in this way, the six Dioceses in the Province of Tuam will eventually become three."

The general tone of these gatherings was both positive and hopeful, with a significant focus on the opportunity for pastoral and spiritual growth. Understandably some concerns, fears and disappointments were expressed. This report aims to capture the key elements of what was shared at the gatherings. These are presented under a series of headings as follows.

Communication

The importance of good communication was heavily underlined at all of the gatherings.

People felt the need to understand better why the two dioceses are merging and wished to be kept regularly informed of developments as the process unfolds. Participants expressed the desire to be more actively engaged in this process as it goes forward at diocesan and parish level. Various means of communication were suggested including parish newsletters, social media, podcasts, as well as further in-person gatherings.

Diocesan Identity

In contemplating the proposed merger of the two dioceses, there was a clear hope that the process would be carried out with equality and fairness, respecting the identity, history and culture of each diocese. In that context, the issues which particularly arose included the name of the new diocese, the status of the Cathedrals, the location of the Seat of the Diocese and the residence of the Bishop. The geographic spread of the newly merged diocese would create its own challenges.

The Bishop

It was acknowledged that the Bishop is seen as the sign of unity in a diocese. There was a perception on the part of some that, in the current situation, the Diocese of Achonry, having an Apostolic Administrator, is not at present on an equal standing with the Diocese of Elphin in terms of leadership. People expressed a strong desire that the Bishop would be visibly present in the parishes, particularly at the time of the celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. It was further acknowledged that the new arrangement would add significantly to the workload of the Bishop.

Structures and Administration

Participants expressed the hope that the merging of the two dioceses would offer potential benefits for the mission of the Church in terms of pooling resources. There are also structural and administrative matters that need to be addressed, for example, finance and property management, governance, safeguarding, teacher employment panels, vocations and the appointment of priests and deacons. Concern was expressed that care for priests would not be lost sight of. It was recognised that there was potential for greater cooperation between parishes, especially those close to the borders of the two existing dioceses.

The Process

It was accepted that the process of merging the dioceses will take time and patience, which should neither be unduly prolonged nor rushed. The process should be transparent at every stage. It should ensure involvement of the younger age groups. The importance of the role of the lay faithful, especially of women in the process was highlighted. The hope was expressed that decision making processes would involve people at all levels in the Church in developing a plan, vision, mission and roadmap for this merger. The need to identify leaders in various areas of parish and diocesan life to advance the process was expressed. As the process moves forward, it was hoped that opportunities for renewal would open up.

The Mission of the Parish

Understandably, many of the hopes and concerns that were expressed by participants at all six gatherings related to the mission of the Church as it is experienced at parish level. Even if there were no question of the merging of the two dioceses, these are the questions that would most immediately touch the lives of parishioners. These hopes and concerns arise for parishioners in both dioceses and the gatherings provided an opportunity for them to be named. It was widely acknowledged that this would include evangelisation and formation for mission.

In all of the gatherings, it was emphasised that the lay faithful wanted to be actively involved in mission in their parish and diocese, including leadership and decision making. Women make a very significant contribution to the life of the local Church and participants felt that they should be given a more prominent role in leadership and decision making. Reference was made to the possibility of the ordination of women. It was also commented that it would be encouraging if lay men could become more involved.

The role of young people in the Church was an important theme in these conversations. There was a strong sense that, at every level in the Church, we need to engage more effectively with young people. It was suggested that they would have much to contribute to this process. At parish level, the involvement of young people would not simply mean coming to Mass. It would also mean creating opportunities for them to be actively involved, such as the Pope John Paul II awards and the involvement of young adults in Parish Pastoral Councils. It was suggested that youth and young adult ministry should be coordinated across the two dioceses. Concern was expressed that, in many of our parishes, the times of Sunday Mass coincide with the activities of various sports clubs and associations.

Even as the process of merging the two dioceses proceeds, we could already be sharing many activities (e.g. pilgrimages and liturgies) and pastoral initiatives (e.g. Accord). Hospitality is another part of our Christian tradition and would help to build up our parish and diocesan communities.

Prayer

The importance of prayer was emphasised at all of the meetings. In addition to our own personal prayer, it was suggested that opportunities to pray together would be an important part of the process of drawing closer and becoming one Body in Christ.