

Dear friends,

Greetings as we set out on our Lenten journey!

A question often posed at this time is “What are you giving up for Lent?” While this may be a good question, over the years I have come to see Lent as a time of opportunity to reflect upon the deeper things in life. The days of Lent are modelled on Jesus’ time spent in the “wilderness” struggling with temptation and preparing for his mission. The experience of the “Wilderness” has formed part of the story of the People of God from the earliest of times. The Israelites, having escaped slavery in Egypt, faced the experience of the wilderness for forty years. They wandered aimlessly in the desert experiencing hunger and confusion. At one point despair set in and they desired to return to slavery in Egypt where they had some sense of security. However, they persevered, and God provided for them in their struggle (Ex. 16:2-15). The motivation of entering the Promised Land, which God had promised, encouraged them in the darkest moments.

### **WILDERNESS AS INVITATION**

The image of “wilderness” is a helpful one on our personal journey and on our journey as a community of disciples. One might describe the present moment in the Church as an experience of the “wilderness.” In this context, Pope Francis has invited us to embark upon a “Synodal Journey” to discern where the Holy Spirit is calling us as a Church at this point in our story. For some this is an exciting time of possibility, for others it is a time of concern, fearing where this might take us. In any case, it calls on us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-17) that the Holy Spirit will enlighten our hearts and guide us along the path the Lord wishes us to follow.

This journey is also reflected in our own Diocese at this time. We face many challenges that need our time and attention. The recent feedback from our synodal gatherings around the Diocese named many of these challenges such as: participation in the leadership of the Church, Adult Faith Formation, the role of women in the Church, Young people and their relationship with faith, and those who find themselves marginalised. Another area mentioned was Vocations. For many years we have spoken about the impending crisis around vocations to the priesthood and religious life. It is important that we continue to pray for vocations and encourage people to consider a life serving Christ in

others. With very few following this path today, the crisis has become very real. The last ordination to the Priesthood in the Diocese was 2013. We currently have no student studying for the Priesthood. The age profile of priests is increasing. Up to 2022, we had a resident priest in every parish, however, this has now changed, and sadly we will no longer be able to provide a resident priest in each parish. This will escalate in the near future as the statistics show, at best, there will be twelve priests serving in the twenty-three parishes of our diocese in ten years' time. It is important that we are fully aware of this reality and its implications. We have never been here before.

### **THE SPIRIT AWAKENS**

As with so many experiences in life, there are different perspectives to this new reality. Pope Francis invites us to have the “courage and humility to admit that a time of crisis is a time of the Spirit” (Address to the Roman Curia, 21st December 2020). The challenge for us is to be open to the Spirit and be generous in our response. This means having to let go of some of the familiar ways we have experienced parish life in the past. Pope Francis reminds us that “by dying to a certain mentality we will be able to make room for the newness that the Spirit constantly awakens in the heart of the Church.” (ibid)

To help us awaken to this “newness,” in consultation with the Diocesan Pastoral Leadership Team, I asked each parish to form or renew their Parish Pastoral Council by Sunday, 5th of February 2023. I thank the priests and all who have responded so generously to serving on their Parish Pastoral Council. Over the coming months the Diocese will hold formation sessions for members of the Councils throughout the Diocese.

### **PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS**

The Parish Pastoral Council has a crucial role in the life of the parish and the diocese. Pope St. John Paul II stated that “The call is addressed to everyone: lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world” (Christifideles Laici, 1989). This is echoed by Pope Benedict in 2009 when he reminded us that “The lay faithful must no longer be viewed as collaborators of the clergy but as ‘co-responsible’ for the Church’s being and action” (6th Assembly of the International Catholic Action Forum August 2012). Pope Francis, the Bishop of the Diocese of Rome, as recently as January 2023, has himself asked that each parish in his Diocese form a Parish Pastoral Council as an organ of “ecclesial communion, community

discernment and co-responsibility to which the bishop must listen.” These insights are very important in understanding the purpose and role of Parish Pastoral Councils. They are groups co-responsible for the life of the Church, invited to discern through prayer and reflection where God is calling. This is done in a spirit of unity and collaboration between the bishop, priests, and people.

### **CREATIVE RETHINKING**

The ultimate question facing us as the Church in Achonry is how the life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be proclaimed and shared with our children, grandchildren and the generations coming after them? Pope Francis is very much aware of this critical question. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he issues an invitation in response to it, he says: “I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 33).

### **JOURNEYING IN HOPE**

It is my hope over the coming months that we will be “bold and creative” as we begin a process of discernment and dialogue with members of the Parish Pastoral Councils, deacons, religious, and priests. This will be an opportunity to listen to one another. I have no doubt it will be a challenging process for us all and we may be tempted, like the Israelites, to return to that which we perceive as safe and familiar. However, this will not serve the mission to which we are all called to as disciples. The Lord remained with the Israelites in the “wilderness.” Through faith and trust they persevered and the Lord, in time, revealed the direction to go.

As we embark upon this journey together may we have the same faith and trust, knowing that the Lord is with us, and he will show us the direction to go. May he give us the grace to respond to his call with courage.

+Paul Dempsey,

Bishop of Achonry,

Lent 2023.