Reflection on Priesthood hopes, fears Mount St Anne’s 20 June 2017.

Good evening

I am Fr Willie Byrne P.P. of Allen Parish.

Tonight I am going to share with you some of my thoughts, hopes and fears around priesthood today.

I spent most of my working life in another profession that of Military Aviation before beginning studying for the priesthood in Carlow College in 1989.

I was ordained deacon in 1995 and spent that year working in an inner-city parish in East London just about a mile from Finsbury Park scene of the latest terrorist attack.

I was ordained priest in 1996 and since then have worked in a number of parishes rural and urban and combinations of both in the south and north of the diocese

Each of these appointments brought both opportunities and challenges how one approaches their ministry in any given situation is important.

The attitude taken to the task of curate or parish priest that one takes whether the parish is large with a number of churches and a very large population or a small parish with one church and a small population.

If I approach the task with the negative attitude that I am overworked (and who isn’t) too busy too tired the task is too great – then the work that I do as a P.P will get me down.

As I have already said I have come into the Priesthood as a late vocation. I spent the first half of my life in a totally different profession or occupation.

Today as I look at all my former colleagues they are all retired some are doing part time or voluntary work.

The priesthood has given me a whole new lease of life and energy for the second half of my life.

When I look at fellow priests who have given the whole of their lives to God I ask myself where do they get their motivation and energy from to go on in fact their dedication and commitment is inspirational.

But I would ask the question is it fair and just to ask someone to maintain such a level of responsibility to 75 and beyond.

These men when ordained worked in parishes where there was plenty of priests, the population was small, administration and programmes were not as burdensome as in the politically correct society that we live in today where workload over the years has increased considerably with so many policies and procedures and programmes to follow.

There of course there is nothing wrong with all the policies, procedures, programmes and committees they are very necessary for accountability and for the protection of all they all add to the administration burden but are necessary for the smooth running of a parish.

On Sunday last we celebrated the feast of Corpus Christi the final Mass of the first communion programme. For most of our parishes the celebration of First Communion took place during the month of May. The final first communion programme Mass always takes place after the celebration of first Eucharist bringing the programme to an end. For this Mass we ask Children to dress up again in their first communion clothes as some parish organise a small Corpus Christi procession to end the Mass. This Mass is usually poorly attended with probably less than half of the communion class attending. After putting in such and effort and expending so much energy in the programme throughout the year this poor turnout at the end can be disheartening for many involved.

But let’s look at it in another way - for many parents first communion is over they have made the effort. In a way we be heartened that on this last Sunday of the programme still so many parents have make the effort to bring their child to this mass and perhaps many of these minority of parents will continue to come to Sunday mass with their children.

Each day I see as new opportunity I cannot do all that has to be done today and that ok I will do what I can and leave the rest to another time. We need to be able to say no and delegate.

As priests we have to learn to delegate to others and when we do so we need to let go ourselves and not interfere my way or no way isn’t always the best policy. It’s surprising the innovative ways and other perspectives that people can bring to a job or task.

In a large rural parish like where I am in Allen it is very difficult for the different communities that for the parish and take great ownership of their own area to understand or relate to one united parish community.

There are six separate communities based around the four football clubs, the three churches and the five schools.

Each church has its local identity and community and rarely do people from one church area attend church or liturgical celebrations in the other church area bar funerals.

With the dwindling number of priests and the possibility of fewer masses the concept of an overall parish community is for the Parish Pastoral Council is very clear but for many others in the parish, it is a long way off.a long way off.

On the other hand around the three churches there is an active dedicated and vibrant local church community.

An illustration of this would be the bi-centenary of Milltown Church which we celebrated recently. Here the local community took ownership of the celebration its organisation and planning as well as voluntarily giving the whole church and grounds a huge face lift.

It is possibly part of our human nature to look inward and locally and not to take into account the bigger or broader picture.

If we were to place the Catholic Church worldwide on an A4 page then take a safety pin and put a single pin prick or dot on that page then Ireland is that one dot in relation to the universal church. Its only when you visit somewhere like Lourdes or Fatima or world youth day that the reality of the enormity of the universal church becomes apparent.

Have I hope for the future, yes of course I have. Never in the history of the catholic church have there been more vocations and ordinations to the priesthood, maybe not here in the English speaking world.

However in the English speaking world there is the beginning signs of an increase in vocations. In the diocese of Boston two new seminaries have recently opened and it’s the same throughout many parts of the USA. To cater for increased number the American College in Rome has recently completed a multi-story accommodation block.

I have no doubt that this increasing trend of vocations will be repeated in Ireland and the United Kingdom in the years ahead.

In the meantime we have to make the best of whatever changes that are necessary to meet the current needs of our parishes.

In the last few years our diocese has reorganised the structure of the deaneries. This transition has worked very well and effectively reducing seven deaneries down to three.

Events like the chrism mass, John Paul II awards, Eucharistic congress, Diocesan pilgrimage, and Diocesan picnic in August, World Meeting of Families all help us to unite as the family of the church.

Through our participation in these events and in our local liturgical celebrations they all give us energy and hope and deepen our relationship with God and others. They offer us opportunities to share our gifts and talents, to see the bigger picture and in seeing the bigger picture they help us locally to see and do what needs doing.