**PUTTING OUT INTO DEEP WATER**

**23rd May, Portlaoise Parish Centre**

**PARISHES IN ATTENDANCE:**

Portlaoise, Ballinakill, Raheen, Mountrath, Ballyfin, Stradbally

(Clane from the Nass Pastoral Area attended this meeting as well)

**Welcome** - Bishop Denis spoke to all who had gathered to set the scene four our meeting and for this mission we are called to in putting out into deep water. He spoke of the decline in numbers of priests and priestly vocations as well as the decline in the attendance at Church of lay faithful. He highlighted that we have organised ourselves and the way we have operated as Church was no longer possible going into the future.

However, he reminded us that it is part of our collective baptismal calling to let the Holy Spirit speak to us in new ways at this time, as we explore how best to support one another in building the Church into the future. In this, he called us to look forwards, rather than backwards. He ended by telling us that these meetings are but one chapter in a bigger story, and that we need to look after each other as we forge new identities as clusters of parishes, called to work more closely together.

**Diocesan Pastoral Council** – A member of the Diocesan Pastoral Council then gave an update of their work in supporting Bishop Denis over the last number of years. These meetings and subsequent gatherings come from the deliberations of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, as well as the Council of Priests in the Diocese.

**Purpose of the meeting:** The meeting was facilitated on Zoom by Jim Deeds and in the room by members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council. As we began, Jim set out the purpose of our gather as follows,

***This is a time of fellowship, prayer and conversation together. This is our first step on the way to ‘putting out into deep water’ together, going and growing where the Holy Spirit is leading us. In that way, our hope is that we leave feeling refreshed, energised, galvanised and a little clearer about where God is leading us.***

Further, Jim explained that the meeting would be structured around three questions to be discussed and one moment of prayer together.

**Guiding principles for our meeting**

* **Optimistic stance** – everyone we meet is doing the best they can with what they have at this moment in time
* **45 second rule** – there is very little that cannot be said in under 45 seconds. In other words, nobody will seek to dominate the conversation
* **St Paulinus of Nola** – ‘let us listen to all the faithful because in each one of them the Spirit of God breathes’. In other words, we will listen to and respect each other

**Q1** The map setting out your cluster of parishes represents one of our first movements ‘into the deep water’ as we seek to discover where the Holy Spirit is calling us to go and grow. When we see these new structures/ lines and when we hear what Bishop Denis has outlines, how do we feel? What do we think?

These are a cross-section of the answers we heard:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Optimistic | Hopeful and exciting | Opportunities for our liturgies |
| This could be better for smaller parishes as long as they don’t get swamped | Fear of losing the next generation if we don’t change | Uncertainty, nervous and sad |
| Concern for clergy and small numbers | Operating on a bigger scale | Train and support lay people |

**PRAYER:** We prayed with Luke 5:4-7, a section of Scripture where we hear Jesus tell Simon to put out into deep water and pay out his nets for a catch. We spent time meditating on this piece and shared some of our thoughts:

* Jesus made them better fishers
* Increase our faith
* Trust
* Be positive, keep your humour and keep going
* Ask, teach, instruct – Jesus will do this for us
* Don’t worry
* Have faith in the Word of God
* There are no spectators – we are in this together
* All about Christ, less about our survival as Church
* We have a lot of faith and fear – let fear win over

**Q2** We agreed guiding principles at the start of this meeting and they helped ensure we did the best we could. As we prepare to put out into deep water together, going and growing where the Holy Spirit would call us, are their principles that we should agree to that would guide our decision making?

* Communicate – tell people what’s needed
* Rediscover youth participation
* Have courage to let go – be not afraid, be simple
* Keep Christ at the centre
* Make missionary disciples
* Stay in the boat together
* Faith will always be the comfort
* Face the reality in a spirit of openness
* Abandon fear
* Move forward with a plan and review at the next meeting
* We need to grow in knowledge of our parishes
* Be open and try new things

**Q3** We are proposing that we meet again in September to keep our dialogue going and to make more concrete plans into the future. In the months between now and then, are there some action points that your cluster of parishes might want to agree to that would help us go and grow where the Holy Spirit is leading us?

At a local level Graveyard Masses can be an opportunity for community and hospitality

Clergy will look at the numbers of Masses and share at the next meeting after assessing what is possible going forward

Explore how to have one message communicated across the parishes – using Link-up?

Move priests on a rota so that congregations get to know other priests

Celebrate what we have – the people involved in parish life

The Pattern at Fintan’s Well is a big gathering. Perhaps the parishes could go together?

**Reflection on meeting:** Bishop Denis gave us some of his reflections from the meeting, saying that what stood out for him was that people were not surprised that we are where we are. We have known that this day was coming. It is clear, he told us, that while there is good work happening, we still have things to do to build relationships and a new identity a clusters of parishes. He said that the hope lay in lay people and priests working together.

**Next Meeting: Portlaoise on Tuesday 5th September at 7pm for tea and coffee, with the meeting beginning at 7.30pm**