

Moving forward together in hope

Bishop Leahy's Christmas message

Pope Francis has a wonderful phrase: "do not let yourself be robbed of hope!". It's good to be reminded of that great virtue. Perhaps more than in the past, we need to keep hope alive. It's more than a superficial cheerful optimism. It is a trustful attitude to life.

Hope needs deep roots. We know only too well the limits, setbacks and sins that challenge us, as well as the tragedies and difficulties in the world around us. As Christians, however, we believe in a "higher and deeper power". We believe we can abandon ourselves to God, just like a child with his or her mother, believing in love in all circumstances and at all times.

Christmas is the season that explains this hope. The intimacy of the crib with "the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay" as a favourite Christmas carol puts it, tells us that God has not remained aloof in the clouds. He has entered our world. There is now a human heartbeat in God.

Because of Christmas, we know God is thinking of me/us. God is my/our best fan, as Pope Francis put at the World Youth Day this year, which a large group of us from the Diocese of Limerick attended.

As we approach Christmas, our Diocese has many reasons to go forward in hope. We held a wonderful Diocesan Synod in April this year. It was an experience of the God-who-is-with-us, the God who gives us what we need to go ahead. It provided us with a new beginning in our mission that is ever ancient, ever new. I hope you enjoy reading the report of our Diocesan plan 2016-2026 based on the Synod.

In wishing each other well for Christmas and the New Year, let's pray that hope will be rekindled in each of our hearts, especially in those who, for whatever reason, feel sad at this time. Let's make sure that none of us is robbed of hope! Nollaig shona!

+ Brendan Leahy

Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Plan 2016 - 2026

Based on the April 2016 Synod

Synod journey now arrives at the implementation stage as more inclusive church evolves in Diocese

Over two years since Bishop Brendan Leahy initiated the first diocesan synod in over half a century, Limerick Diocese on Sunday last unveiled an agreed Pastoral Plan for creating a more inclusive and modern church.

In his homily to a packed Cathedral in December 2014 when he officially convoked the Synod, Bishop Leahy said that the process leading up to it and the gathering itself would be a time when "we clearly commit ourselves again to do our part to come closer together at all levels of Church and indeed in society".

What happened in the interim has been an absolute delivery

on those objectives, with an exhaustive analysis taking place across the diocese, examining the Church as it is today, determining the problems, discerning the solutions and capitalising on the opportunities to create a more inclusive Church. Last April's gathering was shaped by an 18 month listening process that engaged 5,000 people across the diocese - the largest poll ever taken by an Irish diocese.

No issue was left out as the journey to April was traversed and when 400 delegates gathered at Mary Immaculate College eight months ago, there was a century of proposals covering everything from dealing with hurt in the Church to

enhancing its faith formation, hospitality and welcome.

The Synod's inclusiveness was not just in the fact that it was the first Synod in Ireland to have such a large lay representation - over 75% of delegates were laity - but also had more than a dozen representatives of other faiths attend.

It ended with a real sense of achievement as a fully representative gathering gave its opinion on all matters pertaining to the Church today.

But, in truth, that was by no means an end; just a point in the journey.

The months that followed heralded - under the guidance of

Bishop Leahy and Synod Director Fr. Eamonn Fitzgibbon -

another period of analysis as the 100 votes from the Synod were interpreted and meetings were held with facilitators.

Then on October 15th, all 400 delegates regrouped in the Strand Hotel where they were presented with a draft plan that was subsequently amended based on the feedback, ultimately arriving at the unveiling of the Pastoral Plan on Sunday last by Bishop Leahy at the final Mass of the Synod journey.

It's now implementation stage, with the agreed actions across the six themes now set to be delivered and a more inclusive Church emerging.

Theme 1: Community and Sense of Belonging

Cup of tea after Mass - why not!



Hospitality after Mass and creating lay parish teams to visit homes, hospitals and nursing homes are among two of the recommendations that parishes will be encouraged to implement over the lifetime of the Pastoral Plan formulated from Synod 2016.

The first theme of the Synod - 'Community and Sense of Belonging' - was the most engaged theme during the build up to last April's gathering and, according to the Pastoral Plan, focuses

now on two approaches - the parish itself and people who are on the margins.

With regard to parish initiatives, the concept of 'Hospitality after Mass' proved very popular at the Synod, with 95% voting in favour of it.

It will come as no surprise then that it has emerged as one of the recommendations. The consensus at the Synod was that the 'cup of tea' after Mass should not just be after special occasions but on a more regular ba-

sis. Other recommendations include establishing a Welcoming Group in parishes to give newcomers to areas an immediate sense of belonging. This is particularly important in the current era as people/families move around more frequently than yesteryear. The Lay Parish Visitation Team will be one of the initiatives that will deliver on the need for more lay involvement but also to take the pressure off clergy.

Another recommendation for parishes to consider is introducing an updated version of the Station Masses/Liturgies, while also on the 'menu' is the continuation of the tradition of inviting all children baptised during the year to a special Mass where they receive an individual blessing.

Other recommendations will be to foster the Family Mass and for parishes to collectively examine how they can make a difference to safeguarding our planet.

Theme 2: Pastoral Care of the Family

Parent support network among the initiatives under 'Pastoral Care of the Family' theme at Synod 2016

The Diocese of Limerick will next year seek to establish a network to support parents in their relationships, and with rearing their children.

The move is one of the action items under the Synod 'Family' theme, which was the highest ranking individual topic during diocesan-wide engagement in preparation for the April gathering.

The topic of family came up across parishes and all other groups during the listening and discernment process

that engaged with over 5,000 people across a 12 month period.

Under the action plan, 'Moving Forward Together in Hope', the diocese intends to liaise, link and engage with groups and agencies that have the appropriate experience and expertise in providing practical care in the areas of need for the family.

The plan also identifies providing support to those living with disability as an

action as well as a volunteer-led community bereavement support.

The Diocese will also, as part of its pastoral care of families programme, provide support to the Children's Grief Project in its work for children/young people affected by loss through death, separation or divorce.

Another action item to be delivered under this theme next year is the establishment of Good Neighbour Panels, which will involve

community volunteers being trained by Milford Care Centre's 'Compassionate Communities Project'.

The panels will assist people living with life limiting illness - and/or their family caregivers - to ensure that their social and practical needs are met.

The plan comes against the backdrop of the listening process last year in which the role that parents and guardians have was acknowledged as essential.

Supporting the family essential in society today

A diocesan forum on the family is to be established, an initiative that will also reflect Pope Francis' personal commitment to the topic of family.

According to the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Plan, the family is the school of human enrichment, where everyone belongs and has a place and where each is appreciated for the unique individual he or she is.

For these reasons, among others, Pope Francis told the Synod on the Family, that "The Lord is asking us to care for the family, which has been from the beginning an integral part of his loving plan for humanity."

Two priorities emerged at the Synod under the Pastoral Care of the Family theme - one to create a faith development outreach and the second was for practical care on areas of need, such as bereavement, disability and parenting.

Any approach to faith development with parents, needs to be dialogue based and engage with parents' "burning issues", the plan states.

The World Gathering of Families in Ireland in 2018 offers a positive context for prioritising faith outreach to parents now, it adds.

Following this, a Diocesan Forum on the Family will be established. The Forum will fulfil the role of a Diocesan Promoter of Pastoral Care to the Family.

Also in its action plan, the diocese will next year, having trained lay catechists/sacramental coordinators, be equipped to develop and deliver a support programme for parents to provide family catechesis and facilitate them in passing on the faith to their children.

It will also deliver a parish support programme for children preparing to receive sacraments.



Connecting and supporting people on the margins

The Diocese of Limerick is to network with cross-community support groups and agencies in an effort to ensure a more inclusive Church emerges in Limerick.

In the second of two key approaches under the Community and Sense of Belonging Theme, a range of initiatives are to be considered, including, care for people on the margins in the city, help for people with mental health issues, assisting those living with disability, responding to people hurt by the Church. Interestingly a diocesan response to the needs of the natural environment is also included in this theme.

A group will be established in the Spring at diocesan level comprising people who are aware of issues facing people on the margins. Among those the group will focus on will be people hurt by the Church.

This group will work on proposals for delivery of recommended actions. Among those recommendations is one that city delegates and parishes are encouraged to engage with and support the City Centre Community Network.

Similarly, the diocese will continue to engage with the marginalised through the Bedford

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The recommendations also focus on the area of mental health, including engaging with homeless, prisoners, travellers and others, encouraging a true missionary church.

Limerick Pastoral Plan

Row Family Project, which supports families of prisoners.

It also recommends working within the regeneration parishes by caring for and looking to

further the inclusion of the marginalised in the Church.

The recommendations also focus on the area of mental health. The Plan includes engaging with the homeless, prisoners, travellers and others, encouraging a truly missionary church.

Another recommendation is to expand the 'Compassionate Community Café Conversations' currently run by Milford Care Centre into parishes to foster open and community based dialogue about the importance of having difficult conversations.

Other proposals brought forward by delegates include having the issue of 'learning disabilities' in the plan, as well as generating 'Intra-Faith and Inter-Faith' dialogue, creating links to other faith groups and developing a Diocesan response to Laudato Si - Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment.

Another strategic action recommended is that a network of Small Christian Community groups be established throughout the Diocese to meet monthly, to share a reading of Scripture, linked to life and building up community.

Diocese to explore initiatives from John Paul II awards to using music to engage our youth

Trained youth leaders will be able to choose from a range of initiatives suggested in the Limerick Diocese Pastoral plan revealed this week. Among the suggestions put forward for ensuring there is a greater connect between young people and the Church is a pilot programme for the launch of John Paul II awards next year. Developing a programme of pilgrimages locally, nationally and internationally to build on the success of existing pilgrimages is also to be explored. Similarly, there is a recommendation for providing more retreat possibilities for young people in primary and secondary schools, college and young adults. Another proposal is using music as a means of engaging young people in their church and liturgy.



The establishment of Youth Cafés will also be considered, as will be developing ties between church and local youth groups, including sport and culture groups. The diocese will also continue to use and further develop its use of social media especially with young people. Under this initiative, every parish is to have a Social Media presence, e.g. a Facebook page. The diocesan office to take a central role in training and helping people/parishes to develop skills. The recommendations are in response to a range of issues that emerged among young people during the Synod listening process. Those issues included the use of accessible language in liturgy, competing interests with mass times (e.g. sports activities), the need for youth clubs and youth friendly Masses.

Making young people feel more connected with the Church – Diocesan Synod action

Creating a Church that ensures young people feel more connected at local as well as diocesan level is a key priority under the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Plan - 'Moving Forward Together in Hope' - from this year's Synod. The diocese has spent the months since last April's gathering analysing the data that emerged at the Synod and has come up with a plan of action to ensure it serves the needs of the people Limerick going forward. One of the key Synod findings was the need for the Church to do more than lament young people's disconnect with it - instead it must engage in purposeful action to address this. The plan launched this week sets out a hope that, by implementing its agreed actions, young people feel connected, involved and active in a mul-



Delegates from April's Synod voted in favour of reconnecting with the youth and the Pastoral Plan has set about core actions to follow to achieve this.

Picture: Keith Wiseman

tigenerational church whereby grandparents, parents and children minister to each other. "The overall thrust of the vote on the proposals at the Syn-

od was to replicate at a local level the success of the youth ministry at diocesan level - to create local opportunities for young people to meet their peers in the Eaglais Óg," the plan reads. The core action agreed under the 'Young People' theme was for the diocese to develop and begin the delivery of a youth ministry training programme for volunteer youth ministry leaders. This programme, which will be prepared next spring and delivered in the autumn, will include a range of elements, including safeguarding, music, media, mental health, evangelisation. The Synod had a strong youth representation, with one commenting that the process had given renewed confidence that the Church in Limerick really cares about young people.

Greater lay involvement in church liturgy, from homilies to funerals

Parish volunteers are to be trained to lead liturgies in the Limerick Diocese on designated dates when priests are away on in-service training. The measure is one of a number identified under the 'Liturgy and Life' theme - one of six separate themes for which actions have been outlined in the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Plan, the Synod 2016 action plan unveiled on Sunday. The Synod itself heard in April that creating a more accessible Church across prayer life and environment was essential going forward. The need for meaningful, joyful liturgy was of concern across all groups in the 18 month listening process that led up to the Synod - with music in liturgy ranking as the highest individual topic, particularly among young people. The Church environment itself was an important topic, particularly for people with disabilities

and the traveller community. In response, the Pastoral Plan has outlined a range of measures which will support the intimate link between life and liturgy.

enhancing the quality and experience of liturgy at a local level achieving 'conscious, active and full' participation. "And here we saw that the em-



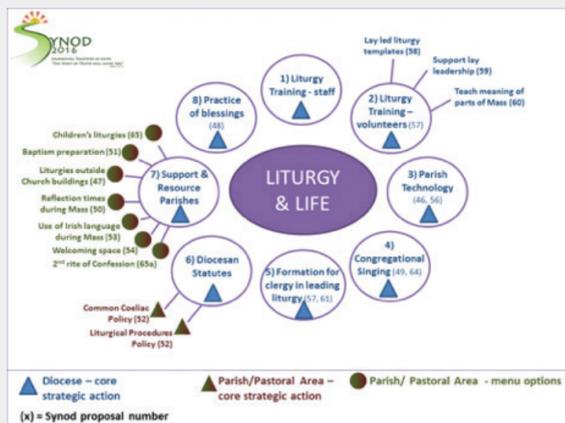
The plan reads: "We must explore and advance the development of liturgical ministries in the diocese. The core thrust of the vote (at Synod) was towards

leadership in liturgy was a key enabler for this - both for liturgies led by clergy and by lay people." Liturgy and Life is another theme in which the Diocese has already taken steps on, with two representatives from the diocese having been assigned for Liturgy Training in Maynooth. Lay-led liturgy templates will be developed, while the diocese will also enable and support lay leadership in liturgies and parish prayer (e.g. lay led liturgies of the Word, other occasional liturgies such as Good Friday ceremonies, prayers for the dead in funeral homes, reception of remains at funerals etc.). In the short-term there will be opportunities for local volunteers to lead liturgies in the diocese on a designated date when priests are away. The diocese will also teach people the meaning and source of all parts of the Mass and sacraments.

Child friendly and welcoming spaces, greater use of technology and congregational singing on the horizon

Creating a child-friendly space in churches and facilitating 'play and pray' during Masses are among the recommendations from the Diocese of Limerick under the 'Liturgy and Life' theme in its Pastoral Plan outlined on Sunday. A range of proposals have been outlined across seven core strategic actions, all aimed at creating a more accessible liturgy that meets modern needs. Among the wide ranging actions identified is a proposal that the diocese undertakes an initiative to equip each parish church with modern technology as well as having liturgies outside Church buildings. There will be consideration given to reflection times during Mass, as well as creating a Welcoming Space in Churches. There will be liturgical music and resources for family/children's Masses and young people's Masses, with separate sessions for children and a kids club and Christmas and Easter concerts.

There's also an intention for there to be more general and imaginative use of the second rite of confession. At the Synod itself in, one of the largest votes of approval (97.4%) was for developing congregational singing and, in keeping with that, a training initiative will be designed and delivered by liturgy staff this coming year to foster congregational singing. Also, the newly established Institute for Pastoral Studies in MIC, Thurles will provide a Summer School in 2017 for clergy and as part of this ongoing formation will be delivered on homilies and leading liturgy. A set of Diocesan Statutes are also to be finalised outlining liturgical procedures and policies. Conditions here will include a common coeliac policy while a policy for other liturgical eventualities will be clarified and developed where necessary.



Initiatives to support formation and strengthening of faith for all ages

The Diocese of Limerick is to embark on a range of 'faith formation' initiatives, from enhancing children's sacramental preparation to helping adults who have had positive experiences tell their story. The Pastoral Plan developed from last April's Synod sets out a range of measures to ensure the continuation of faith formation and explores new models of leadership for a Church in a changing reality, where the lay faithful are being entrusted with particular tasks in communities. While the voting under the 'Faith Formation' theme at the Synod was more wide-ranging than other areas, it saw that the core concerns coincided with the two proposals that received the strongest vote in the whole Synod last April - an intentional faith

formation initiative to share the Good News and the equipping of local volunteers to lead that initiative. "We believe that the core intention here is for a multi-layered approach to faith development - one that would succeed in connecting with people across the course of their lives rather than just at particular moments of sacramental preparation," the plan states. The Diocese has already acted by employing a full-time employee on adult faith formation. The additional measures in the plan embrace all age groups, from developing a Sunday School Model for children to a faith development strategy that prioritises adults.

With regard to adults, a central element of the strategy will be the training of volunteer lay catechists, animators or coordinators at a local level. Teenagers/young people will also be a focus, with a working group to evaluate existing catechesis and religious education of young people. There will also be an effort to seek creative ways to engage with people, through a 'Mission with a Difference' - a 'festival of faith' with open air events that will take place from 2018 onwards. Critically also, proposals under this theme of Faith Formation will support those who have had positive experiences in articulating not just what happened then but their faith experience and journey.

Home-school-parish links to be nurtured as part of Pastoral Plan

A focus on the partnership between home, school and parish will be very much to the fore as Limerick Diocese seeks to support faith formation efforts following the launch of its Pastoral Plan. The exploration of a range of new measures to support formation and strengthening of faith recognises that while the traditional approach in this key area has largely been the remit of Catholic schools, and focussed on children/young people, faith formation is a lifelong process. In particular, it acknowledges that adult

catechesis is considered the chief form of catechesis. The plan, which arises from Synod 2016 and the two year process of introspection in the run up to it. However, with regard to Catholic schools, there will be an ongoing focus that will develop the home-school-parish links and lead to a parish programme for children's sacramental preparation. The diocese will continue to implement the successful Grow in Love curriculum introduced in 2015, which is very much based on partnership between home, school and parish, actively involving

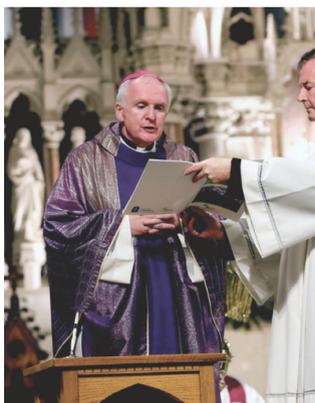


families in the faith formation of their children. The vision is that the parish community and parents will take a more prominent role in the future preparation of children. Similarly, the diocese will encourage its Secondary schools to engage with the Catholic Schools Partnership's process titled 'Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Voluntary Secondary School'. Third Level education, meanwhile, will be engaged through chaplaincy team. Each parish is to take responsibility for

the spreading of the 'Good News' among children, including by means of a Sunday School Model. The Diocese believes that the core intention here is for a multi-layered approach to faith development - one that would succeed in connecting with people across the course of their lives rather than just at particular moments of sacramental preparation. The plan will also see the establishment of scripture and Bible Study Groups across the diocese by 2018, "enabling us to rediscover who we are".

New models of leadership required as Church adapts to requirements of today

The need to look at new models of leadership in the Church is essential as the Church responds to the needs of the people as they are today, the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Plan has acknowledged. In the plan, the Diocese recognises that it needs to look at new models of leadership for two reasons, firstly because we live in a very different world from the one most of us grew up in. The need to look at new models is also imperative because the concept of a leadership that depends almost exclusively on the priest cannot continue. Among the actions recommended in the 'Moving Forward Together in Hope' plan launched at the weekend was the establishment of a working group on a leadership role for women in the lifetime of the Diocese. The establishment of the working group



Bishop Brendan Leahy celebrating the mass for the Conclusion of the Synod and the launch of the 'Limerick Diocese Pastoral Plan 2016-2026' at St John's Cathedral.

Picture: Keith Wiseman

will take place next spring and is one of seven strategic actions to be undertaken as part of the 'New Models of Leadership' theme. "We commit to working together to ensure the establishment of a Team Ministry structure in each of the pastoral areas in the diocese," the plan states. "We will do this in dialogue with priests and people, building on the principles of co-responsibility and collaboration aware that we all share in the priesthood of the faithful." Further actions under this core strategy include the establishment of Hub Committees through open communication/dialogue and consultation with all individual parishes through their pastoral council. The plan also identifies the development of a diocesan strategy for enabling communities to become vibrant parishes.

Range of initiatives to be considered to deal with inadequate structures

The Diocese of Limerick is to redouble its efforts to encourage vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In one of seven core strategic actions under one of the Synod 2016 themes in the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Plan - the follow-up to the Synod last April - the diocese will establish a forum with representatives from each area to promote vocations. Separately also, the Diocese will establish a working group to examine its current communications structures. The action plan also sees a commitment from the diocese to ensure there is a Pastoral Council and a Finance Committee in every single parish. Supports here will include an annual conference for pastoral councils and the development of a handbook for pastoral leadership. The moves are against the acknowledgement of the Diocese that the current structure no longer meets the needs and the challenges of our time. The plan provides for the establishment of a Team Ministry

structure in each of the pastoral areas in the diocese by building on the principles of co-responsibility and collaboration; and the establishment of a strategic leadership group for the diocese, one with the mix of expertise with the range of challenges arising from the Synod. Furthermore, the Pastoral Plan has outlined a number of initiatives to develop and sustain a strong volunteer base in the parishes and in the diocese. The aim here is for volunteers to work alongside paid staff. However, the plan acknowledges that for volunteerism to be sustained it needs a 'spirit' - a nourishment of faith and vision that Basic Christian Communities (BCC) can offer. Recommendations here include discernment of the gifts of lay people and the move towards employment in parishes, in clusters and/or in pastoral areas. Also, the appointment of parish/cluster administrative assistants and exploring the introduction of the permanent diaconate into the diocese are to be considered.

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Commitment given to ensure there is a Pastoral Council and Finance Committee for every Parish

Limerick Pastoral Plan