

HOMILY NOTES - SUNDAY 24A

CARRICKFERGUS & WHITEHEAD

ACCEPTANCE & ENDORSEMENT OF THREE YEAR PARISH PASTORAL PLAN 2017-2020

BLESSING OF LOURDES PASTORAL CENTRE

Readings : Sir 27.30- 28.7; Ps 102; Rom 14.7-9; Mt. 18.21-35

I *"We live for the Lord"* (Rom 14.8)

I thank Mary McCormack, chairperson of the Parish Pastoral Council, and Paul Smith, its Vice-chair, for presenting the Three Year Parish Pastoral Plan.

You have presented it against the backdrop of the Word of God. Today the liturgy of the Word reminds us that as Christians we are called to a high standard of lifestyle. The readings focus on forgiveness, and on more – their subject is that expansiveness of heart, mind and attitude that reflects and makes present the restorative love of God made concrete in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This Parish Pastoral Plan brings together ways to make this expansive love of God the driving force of this community's life. It set out ways of activating St Paul's statement about the meaning of the Christian life : *"we live for the Lord"* (Rom 14.8)

This Parish Pastoral Plan is a programme to help all parishioners who make up this parish community of Carrickfergus and Whitehead to live life contributing to and experiencing the belonging, the support and the joy of a living Christian community. This parish Pastoral Plan offers each parishioner ways to become involved in all of that great work of faith and Christian community building now or in the future.

I thank all who worked on the preparation of this Parish Pastoral Plan and all who contributed to bringing it to fruition. I salute Fr Peter Owens' initiative in launching the project that has led to the Pastoral Plan and I know that he is most appreciative of the interest, work and time so many have invested in this initiative. Together with all of you I am grateful to Jim Deeds, a member of the staff of the Diocesan Living Church Office, for facilitating your elaboration of the Plan. Jim continues to carry out outstanding work throughout the parishes of our diocese.

The Pastoral Plan reflects the vitality of the parish and the vibrant spirit of voluntary service and personal sense of vocation that abounds among you all. It is also a remarkable testimony to the prophetic foresight of this parish community. I am therefore delighted to receive and to endorse the Parish Pastoral Plan for Carrickfergus and Whitehead 2017-2020.

II *"Peter went up to Jesus and asked" ...* (Mt 18.21)

As you presented the Parish Pastoral Plan, you cited words of St John Paul II, successor of Peter. With these words he exhorted the pastors of the particular Churches *"confidently to plan the stages of the journey ahead"*. Furthermore he asked that in such planning they harmonise the choices of each diocesan community with those of neighbouring Churches and with the universal Church.

There is a certain felicity in the coincidence of our listening to this gospel text built around Peter's question, the launch of this Parish Pastoral Plan and your invocation of the words of the deceased Pope John Paul II. For as we gather each Sunday in our local parish communities around the table of the Word of God and the table of the Eucharist, we are spiritually nourished and energised by the same Word of God and the same Eucharist as is read and celebrated in countless parishes around the globe.

Each parish community, each Christian community is a cell of the universal Church to which John Paul II refers. Here in Carrickfergus-Whitehead in the diocese of Down and Connor we form and are a local Church. At the same time we form part of that great Church presence around the world – and we shall experience something of that vitality on the occasion of the World Meeting of Families in August of next year, an event incorporated in the initiatives foreseen in your Pastoral Plan.

Likewise each parish, each diocese, is a vital part of the living continuum of Christian life in human history. The lived experience of human history on this coastline is at once a challenge to the search for ultimate meaning in life and a testimony to the power of the Christian gospel to forge and inspire faith, forgiveness and hope.

The tragic, misguided and unchristian history of sectarian pogroms suffered by this parish cause the lantern of its abiding positive, inclusive and ecumenical vision, as set out in this Pastoral Plan, to shine even brighter. Set in the continuum of history this Parish Pastoral Plan testifies to the power of the restorative call of the value system echoed by today's gospel text : *"not seven, I tell you, but seventy times seven"*. With its forty-one vectors of action set out under its five headings:

1. Open, Welcoming Community
2. Faith and Worship
3. Our Parish Priest and Lay Ministries
4. Lay Participation
5. Passing On the Faith

the Parish Pastoral Plan sets out concrete ways to enable the parish to respond in concrete every-day terms to the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

III *"Confidently to plan the stages of the journey ahead"*

Now almost two decades into the third millennium, our generation of parishioners continues to decipher, discern and respond as Christians and as Church communities to the massive changes – anthropological, cultural, technological, scientific, economic and political - which characterise our times. These changes impact on all areas of life and experience, including the life of the Church.

Mapping and shaping the future of our parish and diocesan communities is necessarily an experimental and somewhat opaque process. It is a process to be undertaken with Christian hope and in a solidarity exercised by the entire parish and diocesan community. It will require and demand understanding, patience, care for others, and enlargement of heart and mind on the part of all. The skills and life experience of all are key to shaping the future of the Church communities.

In this process the work of the Parish Pastoral Council is an invaluable support to the Parish Priest who in the years ahead will have the care of a number of parishes in a Pastoral Community, made up of several parishes.

In the years ahead in this diocese of Down and Connor the life of the Church will be energised by the type of Parish Pastoral Plan you have elaborated, for :

- It sets out a pathway to continue and sustain the loyalty to fellow parishioners, the parish and to the universal Church which has been the hallmark of Carrickfergus-Whitehead throughout the years
- It provides a framework to make the parish community the dynamo and engine of pastoral care, offering each parishioner the possibility to play a part in the great mosaic of parish activities
- It offers crucial support to the priest, who as pastor of the entire parish community must see to and care for the common pastoral good of all – and now his care, and the care of the parish as a vital entity of pastoral care, includes the Pastoral Community which include six parishes.
- It gives us all a sense of mission, of co-responsibility for the witness value, credibility and presence of the Church, as the body of Christ, in our times.

This significance of this occasion brings to mind the words of an Austrian historian in regard to the Church after the Second World War. His words remain pertinent today. They echo the call of Pope Francis in all his words and actions and they give us all food for thought and an impetus for renewed faith-inspired action :

*"We have not learned love – neither love nor to love – and therefore we do not create spaces for irradiation, spaces or moments of freedom. We are caught in the vortex of those who are frightened and those who frighten; we are used by managers and salesmen of horror. And we forget that a renewed world will belong to those who give happiness and teach it to love and to live"*¹

This Parish Pastoral Plan, the fruit of your work in Carrickfergus and Whitehead, sets out the way of gospel love, the way to love one another as Christians. I thank you all for this great work and I wish you God's blessing as you implement it in the years ahead.

Amen.

¹ F. Heer, *Ehe in der Welt*, 1955, p 8ff., cited by José Luis Narvaja, SJ, in *The Meaning of Francis' International Politics*, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 0817, 15 September 2017, pp.16-23.