

This weekend, the Diocesan Administrator of the Diocese of Clogher, Monsignor Joseph McGuinness announces the annual diocesan changes for 2018. The changes are accompanied by a Pastoral Letter, entitled *The Future Mission of Our Parishes*, in which he outlines both the background to the changes and some of the steps that will be need to be taken immediately in all parishes so that they can continue to realise their mission.

The letter outlines the current reality in the diocese in terms of the diminishing number of priests and their increasing age profile. It states that the 37 parishes and 85 churches in the diocese are served by just 58 priests in active ministry. This represents a reduction of about a third in the number of active priests in the diocese in just twenty years. During the past year alone, the diocese has lost the service of 7 priests through death, serious illness and other reasons. While there was one new priest ordained, the letter makes it is clear that the number of active priests in our Diocese will continue to decline. This is highlighted by an analysis of the age profile of the priests serving at present. Of the 58 priests who are active in parishes, some 28 of these (almost 50%) are over the age of 65. Of these, 14 have retired from administration as Parish Priests, with more due to retire in the coming years. Only 7 priests are under the age of 50. Mgr McGuinness adds that ‘there are obvious implications in this for our ability to sustain the levels of pastoral and sacramental provision which have existed until now, as well as the administrative structures within our Diocese. The changes which I am making are the beginning of a process to deal with the reality of the present and the challenge of the future.’

The changes see the retirement of four Parish Priests and the appointment of several existing and new Parish Priests to take charge of more than one parish. Above all, the changes herald a new departure in how pastoral ministry will be carried out in the diocese. From now on, the availability of priests and the consequent provision of Masses will not simply be on an individual parish basis but will depend upon neighbouring parishes working together in the 7 Pastoral Areas of the Diocese. As Mgr McGuinness points out, this builds on the decisions made by Bishop Liam MacDaid in 2013 when he first created Pastoral Areas in the Diocese to encourage co-operation and collaboration between priests and people in neighbouring parishes. This collaboration will be put on a more practical footing, which will develop and flourish as time goes on.

Over the coming weeks, the priests in each Pastoral Area will meet with Mgr McGuinness to arrange weekend and weekday Masses and other liturgies in a way that provides a range of Mass times for parishioners across neighbouring parishes and enhances the community dimension of the liturgy and provide the basis for much more significant and visible lay involvement in parishes, such as lay people leading some liturgies. Another aim of these new arrangements is to reduce the workload of priests and to make provision for holiday cover and the possibility of illness.

In addition, administration of parishes will, progressively, be delivered from administration points or offices at key locations around the diocese, so that parishes can share the increasing burden of administration, financial compliance and communications as well as providing people with an efficient and responsive service.

In his letter, Mgr McGuinness outlines his vision for a wide range of lay ministries in the diocese. ‘Lay ministry within our church is central to its mission. Fully appreciating and expanding the whole range of ministries across our Diocese involves both great challenge and exciting potential. This is not about making up for the diminishing numbers of priests. It is a response to the baptismal calling of each one of

us. It is about encouraging every one of us to reflect upon what we can give in service to our church community', he said.

One key ministry is that of Permanent Deacon. In recent months, the Diocese of Clogher witnessed the ordination of its first such deacon, Deacon Martin Donnelly, Enniskillen. Mgr McGuinness calls on 'any men in our Diocese who feel called to this ministry to make contact with their local priest to seek more information and explore whether this may be a possible path of service for them.' He goes on to say that the permanent deacon is only of many ministries; that women and men are needed to serve in all parishes in liturgical ministries, as catechists, lay pastoral workers or in youth ministry, or to share their skills in safeguarding, management, finance, communications, and so on.

Above all, Mgr McGuinness calls for more vocations to the priesthood, noting that without priests there cannot be a celebration of Mass. He encourages parents to support a son who shows interest in becoming a priest. His letter puts great emphasis on the joy of priesthood.

The letter concludes with a reflection on the mission of the local parish and of the church in general. It draws from the vision set out by Pope Francis early in his pontificate, one which gives preference to 'the missionary option'. Mgr McGuinness calls on parishes, working together, to re-discover that missionary option. Noting that many will see the scenario facing the diocese as challenging, he outlines how the diocese overcame similar crises in the past, by discerning the signs of the times, adding that the diocese and each parish is called to do the same again today. Therefore, he concludes, the changes should be looked on not in terms of self-preservation but in terms of the great possibilities that lie ahead for the People of God.