

# Parish Pastoral Councils

**Bishop Paul Dempsey of Achonry looks at a way forward for parish ministry. This article is adapted from *The Western People*, from his address to parish councils in his diocese.**



A big part of my life requires that I'm on the road a lot. As I drive through towns and villages around the country, it is common to see convents and religious houses that have become derelict and are accompanied by 'For Sale' signs. It symbolises the end of an era. There are two ways of facing this new reality in the Church. We can lament its demise, or we can search for the new possibilities the Lord is offering us. The visible infrastructure of religious houses and convents sym-

bolised the strength of the Church in decades past. Perhaps we took things for granted and became too parochial and inward looking. Structures such as the parish are necessary; we need them, and they are important, but there is a question we need to reflect upon before we look at renewing structures in the Church today.

I would suggest the basic question would be the following: 'What are we about?' As Christians, as Catholics, we are about knowing the person of

Jesus Christ. From our encounter with him, we are motivated to answer his call to mission, to proclaim his Gospel to the world. Amid all our discussions today is there a danger we forget the basics, the foundation that we are built upon? It is crucial we are clear about this, otherwise we are building on sand. If our mission is clear, then the necessary structures will follow.

There are a few 'buzz' words central in the life of the Church at the moment; the main one is 'synodality'. This is Pope Francis's vision for the Church, one that listens to and discerns where the Spirit is calling us. He wants us to 'walk together' as brothers and sisters in Christ. Pope Benedict's vision was similar, he talked about 'co-responsibility'. He emphasised how priests and people are 'co-responsible' for the life of the Church. One challenge that has emerged is the words themselves: 'synodality' and 'co-responsibility'. They are somewhat foreign from our everyday language and understanding. To help with this, I refer to a small book published by the late Fr Enda Lyons in 1986. The title of the book is *Partnership in Parish*. Having read through it again recently, I believe it closely captures the spirit of synodality and co-responsibility. Partnership in ministry, between all stakeholders, is what we need to explore more, reflect upon more and pray about more.

This goes to the heart of what Parish Pastoral Councils are about. Priests, people, religious, deacons and bishop working together in partnership to carry out the mission of proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ given to us in our shared baptism. If we get this right, the rest will

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follow. It's not about 'my territory'. It's not about what 'I want' for 'my corner' of the parish or diocese. Our mission is about how we proclaim Jesus Christ in a culture where the transcendent has become foreign. How do we attract people to Jesus Christ in a renewed way today?

In the introduction to his book, Fr Enda says that he wishes to present 'a vision for what a parish might be'. That is our task as a community of disciples. As members of Parish Pastoral Councils, we are called to work together on a vision for what parish life might be in these changing times when the relationship with the divine has become distant for many. We need to work together to explore new possibilities. It is an exciting challenge! I'm reminded of the words from St Paul:

'Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.' (1 Cor 12:4-7)