

A vibrant rainbow arches across a cloudy sky, its colors blending into the soft light of dawn or dusk. Below the rainbow, a calm body of water reflects the sky's hues. In the foreground, a dark, rocky shoreline with some sparse vegetation is visible.

# *Living our Faith in a Fragile World*

**Advent 2020  
Pastoral Reflection  
Bishop William Crean  
Bishop of Cloyne**



Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing away:  
God alone is changeless.  
Patience obtains all things,  
Who has God lacks nothing;  
God alone suffices.

*Saint Teresa of Avila*

# Living our Faith in a Fragile World

Dear friends in Christ,

Over these past months I, like most of you, have had to reflect on the impact the Covid pandemic is having on all our lives. The sudden uncertainty that it has generated has given the world a new awareness of how fragile life is.

After the shock of the early days, we began to draw on all our resources to cope with and manage life in these new conditions. In this regard our deep reservoir of Christian faith is appreciated in a new way. It has nurtured hope, uncovered a great spirit of generosity and brought a new resilience to the fore.

We will never forget 2020! A Spring lockdown, uncertainty and fear, cancellation of plans, bewildering change, new codes of behaviour, church liturgies online, funerals without supportive gatherings; human vulnerability exposed, lost jobs and much more. We naturally longed to return to 'normal'. But for Christians, postponing our mission is never an option. Faith cannot be quarantined - it has to be lived in the present, so I offer you these simple tips as an encouragement to keep watering the seed of faith within you.

We now have a chance to take a more thoughtful approach to life, checking on our spiritual health and cultivating the interior space. Pope Francis describes this process as "letting oneself be shaped by the love of Jesus, having His same sentiments (Phil 2: 5), and asking oneself continuously: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I do for Christ?"

Asking these questions opens our eyes to the world around us with all its need and draws us to be the missionary disciples that Pope Francis so often encourages us to be. This means putting our faith into action - to act responsibly in abiding by all the public health advice and regulations. It works - it really does.

## *Believe in God's Love*

First things first - think on God. In the midst of all the uncertainty, anxiety and fear, it is good to recall St. Peter's advice to the First Christians: "Cast all your anxiety onto God, because He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Belief in God's love is central to our Christian faith. We are not alone. We are not orphans. We remember Christ's words "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). He is with us to free us, support us, and be by our side every day. What matters most is to believe in love. It's one thing to say it, it's another to live it daily. Open your life to God who is Love and he yearns to work for you, with you and in you.

*I am with you always*

## *Live the Present Moment*

The many references to mindfulness in popular culture during this period of stress and strain are signs of a desire to focus on the present in other words living well the present moment which we often ignore. St. Teresa of Lisieux said, "You know that to love you, Lord, I only have today." Living each moment gives us the grace and strength to see, hear and touch God's closeness to us. A helpful practice is to say silently "for you, Lord" before each action during the day.

## *Love by Serving*

Restrictions and lockdowns have helped us appreciate the services that we often take for granted - from truck deliveries to shop assistants. We salute with gratitude all in healthcare and essential services who have given of themselves so generously in recent months. So many people have contributed much to society with their example of service.

We are all called to serve. A pandemic could be a time when we focus too much on ourselves, but our faith prompts us to keep reaching out. We are called to tend to a wounded world which means being the first to love, not waiting to be loved. The needs of the world are highlighted during a pandemic especially for those on the margins. Heavier demands are put on charities like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Simon Community and the Samaritans.

In his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis emphasises the importance of service - to set aside our own wishes and desires, our pursuit of power and to care for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people. Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, suffers that closeness and tries to help them....We do not serve ideas, we serve people. (n.115)

He invites us to serve others along with our sisters and brothers: "Here we have a splendid secret that shows us how to dream and to turn our life into a wonderful adventure. No one can face life in isolation... We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together... By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together". (n.8)

## *Slow Down and Look Deeper*

Covid-19 has helped many to look deeper and to refresh our approach to life. It has made us realise how the busy and chaotic way we were living was not good for us.

There are two aspects of this: firstly, to look deeper is to look under the surface. Everything and everyone is connected! Thanks to *Laudato Si* - Pope Francis' encyclical on the care of our planet, we are more conscious now that *everything* is inter-connected. This time of pandemic helps us to adopt a slower and a more thoughtful approach to life, noticing the awesome beauty of God's creation and be more aware of our need to care for our planet. Practicing gratitude is always a very good stepping stone to a healthier faith and way of living.

A second way of slowing down and looking deeper is to recognise that *everyone* is inter-connected. In his recent document, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis underlines how we are all sisters and brothers, created for universal sisterhood and brotherhood. As followers of Christ, our charity begins at home but it doesn't end there. We need to be mindful of those far from us and different from us, living in the developing world. It has been shocking during this Covid crisis to read statistics such as Malawi having only one intensive care (ICU) bed for every one million people.

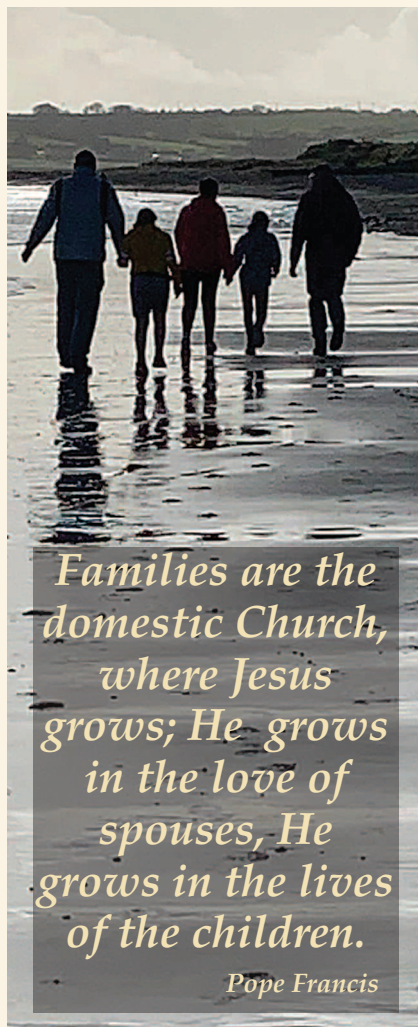
In *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope shares his dream of a new sense of worldwide outreach and social friendship that is needed in the post Covid-19 world. One practical way to do this is to support charities such as Trócaire and World Missions Ireland.



## *Build up your Family as a Domestic Church*

Covid-19 has impacted on family life in all kinds of ways. While for some, it has brought challenges, for many it has shown the importance of spending more quality time together. We have heard of whole families coming together, in a way they haven't

for years, to participate in online Mass and some families have set up sacred spaces in their homes. We are all called to build up our family as a 'domestic church' - a home church, a family church and that doesn't mean just prayers and rituals. It is about life in all its aspects. Families have begun to care for one another creatively - in everything from cooking to entertainment, from finance to education, from sport to communication. All of this is an experience of Church in a full sense, the 'spiritual worship' of which St. Paul speaks in Romans 12. While there's no such thing as a perfect family, through the love, compassion and forgiveness that family members can give one another, we allow Jesus' presence to be felt among us and this is the Church radiating Christ in our world.



*Families are the domestic Church, where Jesus grows; He grows in the love of spouses, He grows in the lives of the children.*

*Pope Francis*

## *Mark Sunday in a Special Way*

Sunday has always been ‘the source and the summit’ of each week in the life of Catholics. Gathering together for the Eucharist/Holy Mass goes to the heart of who we are as Church. As Cardinal Sarah from French Guinea said recently: “we need to meet our brothers and sisters who share the sonship of God, the fraternity of Christ, the vocation and the search for holiness and the salvation of their souls in the rich diversity of ages, personal histories, charisms and vocations”.

Even in the face of restrictions, when it is possible to have public celebrations of the Mass and the sacraments, they should be beautiful and not reduced to a minimum. Those who are not in the vulnerable category because of age or underlying condition, should always try to attend Mass on Sunday. It builds us up and at the same time we build up our community.

It can be that we are unable to participate at Mass but we should still work at marking Sunday in a meaningful way. When participating in our local Mass online, it’s good to remember that we are welcoming Jesus in spiritual communion. We can access the Sunday readings from a missal and take a few moments to prepare by sitting with God’s word. Children will benefit greatly from this. Sunday is an ideal day also to think of doing some simple acts of love and kindness for those we know who are sick or alone. A phone call or a letter will be very welcome if restrictions don’t allow a visit. It might be an occasion too, to visit a cemetery to pray for our deceased loved ones.



## *Pay Attention to Simple Daily Practices*

Faith needs to be nourished everyday in little ways. For instance, saying simple morning and evening prayers and encouraging our children to do so. When we build sacred moments into our lives, they become supportive habits: creating pockets of silence and stillness in our lives, saying grace before meals, blessing ourselves with holy water at a font by the front door, pausing for the Angelus, reciting a simple decade of the Rosary during a car journey, saying a quiet word of thanksgiving for blessings great and small - as in 'Thanks be to God' or '*Buíochas mór le Dia*'. Everyone will find their own way but prayer is very important - it grounds us, strengthens us and connects us to God, who lives within us.

Short prayers that can be repeated often during the day include 'My Lord and my God', 'Lord have mercy', 'Sacred Heart of Jesus I place all my Trust in You' and 'Your will, not mine be done'. God hears all prayers - spoken and unspoken.





## *Tune into the Seasons*

The Church year is marked by liturgical seasons and feasts that bring focus to our faith life - Advent, Christmas, Ordinary Time, Lent, and Easter and it is good for us to be attuned to them. May and October, for instance, are both dedicated to Our Lady, and many families often pray the Rosary together during them. October is also the month when we focus on mission. November is traditionally a time for remembering our departed loved ones, and for visiting cemeteries. Advent begins on the last Sunday of November and prepares our hearts to welcome Jesus at Christmas. How we celebrate Christmas this year might be very different but this joyful season can never be cancelled. And so we ask ourselves: how can we capture these seasons and themes in our own homes to add meaning and depth to family faith?

## *Discover the Word of God*

This time of pandemic might be a very good time to open a Bible, to read 'the words of God, expressed in human words' and to draw nourishment and strength from their richness. It could be a good time to discuss one book of the Bible or some religious text in the popular format of a Book Club. You might simply sit with a passage you like, to see how it speaks to you differently now in these unusual times.

*Lectio Divina* is an ancient Catholic way to pray with Scripture and is practised in three simple steps: Read. Ponder. Pray.

READ. Take a short passage to read slowly and gently, listening for a word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today."

God is teaching us to listen, to seek him in silent presence.

PONDER. Take the word or phrase into yourself, slowly repeating it and allowing it to interact with your inner world.

PRAY. Use words, ideas, or images to interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. *Lectio Divina* has no goal other than that of being in the presence of God by praying the Scriptures.





## *Set out on Pilgrimage*

Pilgrimages are cherished events in the faith lives of Catholics who often make journeys to Knock, Lourdes, Rome or one of the various Caminos to Santiago di Compostela or one of our recent Irish Caminos. The bigger pilgrimages are not possible because of Covid-19 at present but some parishes have mapped out local Caminos to their old religious sites. There are so many special sites in our diocese – from Ballyvourney, Youghal, Corrin Hill, Killavullen and many



more, to our own beautiful cathedral in Cobh. Every parish church is a sacred place and it is quite possible to create a pilgrimage shrine or sacred space for people to visit. Most parish churches are and will remain open for private prayer, so your humble visit for a few quiet moments can be your little pilgrimage. Just remember, we can never *find* time, we always have to *make* it! The first steps in setting out on pilgrimage are in our heart.

We go with a desire to pray for ourselves, for those dear to us, for the needs of society and our world.

Our schools remain open, so pilgrimages to local and traditional sites could be an opportunity to create awareness of the benefits of pilgrimage – mindful, of course, of guidelines on outdoor gatherings.

## *Final Observations*

If you need more help to rekindle a prayer life, look to this valuable booklet compiled by our own Diocese of Cloyne:

[cloynediocese.ie/family-prayers-diocese-cloyne/](http://cloynediocese.ie/family-prayers-diocese-cloyne/)


Many useful books and other resources are available on the Irish website [www.veritas.ie](http://www.veritas.ie) under the guidance of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Many today observe the aptly named “digital parish” rapidly finding it’s feet. Fantastic energy and creativity has gone into reaching out to people online. There is an important balance to be struck here. Pope Francis said in April 2020 that while we must be grateful for the benefits of digital technology, there can be no such thing as a virtual religion or a virtual Church. This cannot be who we are. He said, we must “be careful not to virtualise the Church, to virtualise the Sacraments, to virtualise the People of God.”

What is important, however, is to embrace the best of our online environment and human ingenuity to help nurture and strengthen the outreach between our parishes and people.

We belong together and we belong together with Christ. Christ’s message is one of hope. The hope of God’s promised kingdom, in which all of creation will be gathered together in justice and peace, transforms our lives and points us beyond the present world with all its challenges. His gospel calls us to re-engage, to inject hope into our wounded world, to be responsible for one another’s wellbeing, and to place our hope and trust in Him.

With prayerful best wishes and blessing,

  
William Crean, Bishop of Cloyne



This is the time to be slow,  
lie low to the wall  
until the bitter weather passes.

Try, as best you can, not to let  
the wire brush of doubt  
scrape from your heart  
all sense of yourself  
and your hesitant light.

If you remain generous,  
time will come good;  
and you will find your feet  
again on fresh pastures of promise,  
where the air will be kind  
and blushed with beginning.

*John O'Donohue*



## To be a People of Hope

From the very beginning of our existence,  
from our first whimpering cries,  
we struggle to make sense  
of who we are and what we are  
and of the strange new furniture of our lives  
of sounds and smells, of warmth and cold  
of light and shadow, of hands and faces;  
to put together the bits and pieces of our experience  
into some kind of order,  
into some kind of pattern  
so that we might live without fear  
in the midst of the powers and the forces  
which threaten to overwhelm us.  
We cry to one another,  
‘What have you discovered?  
Do you know the way?’  
And to those who have gone before,  
‘Let your light go on burning;  
tell us your secrets.  
Set out your experiences  
in ways make our own,’  
lest we live as foreigners in the land,  
alien to one another’s ways,  
strangers to the spoken word;  
for to be human  
is to live in a world of meaning;  
but to be without meaning  
is to be a stranger to the human condition.

*by Patrick Purnell S.J.*



## Memorare

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,  
that never was it known that anyone who fled to your  
protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession  
was left unaided. Inspired with this confidence, I fly unto  
you, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother. To you I come,  
before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful.  
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions,  
but in your mercy, hear and answer me. Amen.