

There are some invitations that one accepts out of a sense of duty. There are others that one is happy to accept for a variety of reasons. And then there are those invitations which when you receive them really make your day! Well, when I received the invitation from Father Peadar Murney to come here today for this celebration of the Thanksgiving and Rededication of this Church, it really made my day!

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I was here at the laying of the foundation stone of this church. As Curate in the then single Parish of Cabinteely I lived in Auburn Road where the current Presbytery is. I watched this Johnstown side of the Parish grow and develop. I still have great memories of the schools here - at that time still in their early days, they had only reached up to fifth class. The schools were from their very foundation exceptionally good schools with great teachers. We had a youth club, whose youths are now perhaps grey-haired.

I remember well the evening of the laying of the foundations stone. I was in charge of the altar servers and felt that I had everything under control for the ceremony. You have to remember that at the laying of a foundation stone you have to manage an Archbishop in the midst of a building site, with nothing of the current asphalt and landscaping, and with plenty of mud if it rains.

Fortunately, it was a nice evening. When he arrived, however. Archbishop Ryan, instead of beginning the ceremony directly as planned, began talking to the altar servers asking did they knew who he was. Thank God they did. Then as the Archbishop made to move on, one of the servers, to all our surprise piped up, and asked "and how much do you make?" It was not the type of question which would help the career of a young curate, although I learned later that it is question that many young people make to public figures.

Anyhow, it seems that my career did not suffer all that much and here I am back today as Archbishop to celebrate the rededication of the Church. This is a great community. It was a community even way back in the early seventies where there was never any problem of finding people prepared to take an active part in Church life or in service to the community. It was a community which showed great warmth and friendship and support. I still remember the kindness of people to me when both my parents died within months of each other while I was a Curate here.

The Gospel reading is about community. At first sight it might appear to be a little rigid and juridical, setting out norms to be followed when one member of the community refuses to reconcile himself with the community and has to be expelled. It takes up the point of the first reading from Ezekiel that the one who does not repent "shall die for his sin". The Gospel reading likewise takes up from Ezekiel the responsibility that the entire community has to "warn a wicked man to renounce his ways and repent".

This text obviously was put together by Matthew some time after the death of Christ when disputes were taking place in the emerging community. Matthew gathers together some texts of Jesus which would show that the community had authority, from the words of Jesus himself, to deal with such challenges.

But it would be wrong to place the entire emphasis on the notion of exclusion. Rather it is the opposite. The emphasis is on the unity of community. Unity is the true sign of the presence of Jesus in any community. Matthew uses the words of Jesus to stress that where the Christian community strives to remain united that he will be with them and he will bring their unity to fullness.

Jesus does not wish that anyone be lost. The verses of the Gospel immediately before the ones we have just heard show the extent to which Jesus is prepared to go to bring back the lost sheep, even leaving the ninety nine at risk.

The Letter to the Romans that we heard in the second reading stresses that the Christian community finds its deepest meaning in reflecting the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. If we fail to understand that love, then we have failed to understand who God is, what Church is and what the Christian life and the commandments are about.

The Christian faith is faith in God, but not in some generic God of our own creation. Nor is God just some anonymous element or power within or above the universe; God reveals himself first of all as a face, in a concrete life: that of Jesus Christ. Jesus

Christ in his life, in his death and in his resurrection reveals to us the love of God. Christians believe in a God who has spoken, who has revealed himself, who has entered into dialogue with humankind, a dialogue of love.

Too often that faith based on love and forgiveness has been distorted into an exacting, negative rule-book. Others have distorted the concept of freedom and security which faith should bring. I am amazed, for example, at the insecurity that surrounds the faith of so many. Faith should be a relationship which makes people free and secure in a mature fashion. A relationship which engenders insecurity, anxiety and fear is not the Christian relationship of faith in God.

Today's Gospel nonetheless deals with the difficult situation of someone who refuses to be reconciled, who refuses to respond in love. It stresses the responsibility of the community to act. It is the duty of the Church to point out and to warn. I have been genuinely shocked by some of the brazen violence I find in Irish society, the number of killings, and the calm way in which certain criminal sectors feel that they can commission a killing if and when they wish.

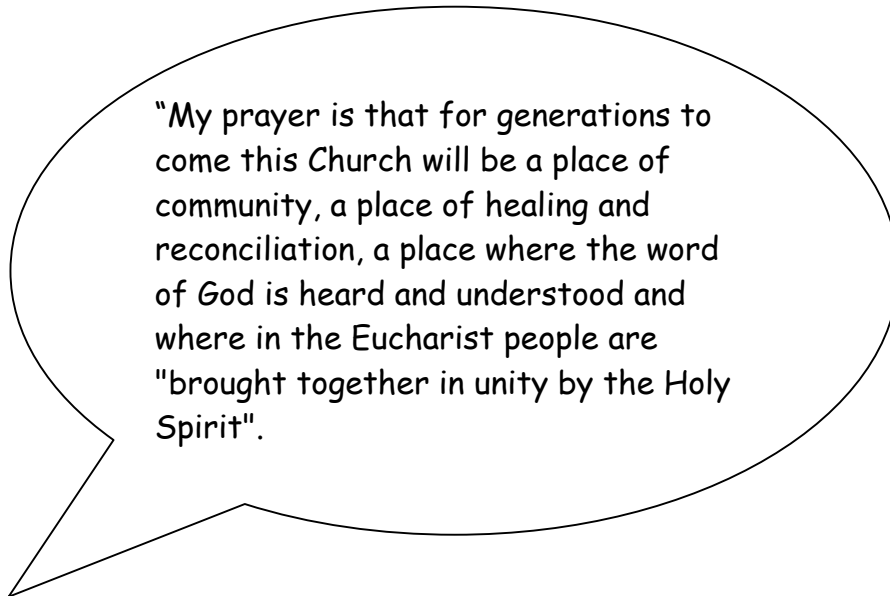
But the Gospel makes abundantly clear that expulsion from the community - even though this may be needed - is a last resort. The reaction of the Christian community is not to be simply judgmental, but to take every possible step to ensure that "a brother can be won back".

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A parish community, especially in our times, must be a community which reaches out to all. It must be a community which welcomes back, rather than cuts off. Our communities must aim at being communities of mature faith, but they should not become elitist ghettos. The Church by its nature must be open and it must open a

path of welcome for those who are still journeying, those who are still seeking, of those who are still weak, of those who are sinners.

This community in Johnstown Killiney has trodden that path over the years since its foundation. My prayer is that for generations to come this Church will be a place of community, a place of healing and reconciliation, a place where the word of God is heard and understood and where in the Eucharist people are "brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit".



May this refurbished building become home to a renewed community, a community which will ensure that the message of Jesus is passed on to further generations. The Message of the Gospel is always new. It is not yesterday's message, but a message which we must allow to challenge us in our lives today and tomorrow. We must ensure that the Message is preached. We must ensure that the right messengers are there: men and women formed in faith, authentic witnesses to the love and healing power of Jesus. May God bless this community and give it the strength to carry out its mission.

I come back to the altar server's question to Archbishop Ryan: "how much do you make?" How is the Archbishop of Dublin rewarded today? The answer is satisfaction: satisfaction when he encounters a community like this which is responding to the word of God, which is questioning itself about what is most important in life, which is building up in families a new generation, inspired by the message of the Gospel, the message of Jesus Christ, who is our guide, yesterday, today and for the time to come.