**Mass of Chrism**

'Placing hope in faith' is the effort we are making as a diocese today to continue the tradition of faith in this diocese into tomorrow. Over the past year and a half we have listened to each other, come together as a diocesan community and now we are preparing to turn our listening into action. I believe that we have been blessed during this time with new energy, fresh hope and a deepening of our awareness of what it means to be Church in Ireland today.

One of the great mistakes that we make nowadays is that when we think about our faith we tend to think about the Church and not about Jesus Christ. And you don't need me to tell you that if your faith is based only on the Church, on what it does and how it lives, your faith is set on a shaky foundation.
But your faith and my faith is centred on a person, the person of Jesus Christ; who he was, what he said and how he lived. And this Holy Week gives us a great opportunity to focus on Him, as we journey with him through his entry in triumph to Jerusalem, his betrayal, his last meal with his friends, his agony in the garden, his death and finally his resurrection. Through the prayerful observance of these days each of us will, with God's help, experience the real hope which comes from making faith in him the centre point of our lives. Hopefully, these days will also further strengthen our own awareness of what it means to find hope in faith.

The spirituality of the diocesan priest, probably the most neglected of all spiritual writings, is anchored on the person of Jesus Christ. Our pastoral ministry is, therefore, an expression of what he means to us, personally and individually as well as professionally. It is a reflection of how well we have integrated his life and his example into our own values, teaching and way of life. The challenge we face today as diocesan priests is not to be distracted by all the negativity but to continue to keep our focus firmly on Christ and to present him to the people of our time in a language to which they can relate. As we grow older and our number grows less, one of the things that concerns me is the increasing demand which is on us to celebrate the Eucharist. And what worries me is the fact that if we celebrate two or three Masses   a day we will lose something of our own personal experience of the presence of Christ in the Mass and not have our own faith in Him nourished as it should be in the Eucharist. Pope Francis constantly reminds us, we do not become priests to "administrate" or "to manage or supervise" or, worse, "for our own personal gain", but to put before the people committed to our care the life and example of Christ. This is the core of our priestly vocation and our diocesan priesthood.

I was driving back through the parish of Lacken recently when I began to think about St Patrick. As we know, the only place in Ireland where he says in his writings that he lived, is the Wood of Focluth, in Lacken Parish. Of it he said; "I heard the voices of those who live by the wood of Focluth, near the Western Sea". And I began to think about the Breastplate of St Patrick when he speaks only of Christ; Christ be beside me and so on. And I realised that despite the inhospitable conditions out there in winter, Patrick was spared of so much of what passes for Church and religion today. He had no worries about child safeguarding or charities legislation or data protection or the issues which arise with school boards and so on. As the founding father of us, Irish priests, he was able to focus on what we are all called to focus on; on Christ and making him known. And we could well do with making his prayer the mantra of our lives; Christ be beside me. Christ be before me and so on. So while we cannot ignore all the issues which surround our ministry today and the many difficulties facing the Church, we also need to keep our ministry in balance in order to stay focused on its core; our own faith in Jesus Christ which is the sine qua non of supporting faith in our parishes. Recently, Pope Francis gave us a glimpse of his focus on Christ in his own life. He said; "But not only does He walk with us: he remains with us, in his Church, He remains in the Holy Eucharist, he remains in his Word, He remains and lives in the poor people. This is the closeness of God toward his flock and we have to try to do the same."

Each year, at this Mass of Chrism when, before God and you, the people of this diocese, the priests and I renew our commitment to your service, I know that you would want me on your behalf and on my own, to acknowledge and thank the priests for the outstanding service which they give in this diocese. Despite the passing of years, the decrease in our numbers and the increase in their workload, the priests of this diocese continue to minister with a generosity and commitment which is exemplary. On your behalf and on my own, I say to the priests 'thank you'.

For me personally, the glass is always half full and not half empty. And I tend to look at the green shoots of hope rather than the barren ground of regret. After all the negative material presented in Rome versus Republic I was really heartened by the conclusion the program came to, namely, that despite everything that has happened, faith is still meaningful for very many people in Ireland today. Our ministry as priests is therefore to do all we can to encourage the green shoots and support the faith which lies under the embers of the past.