Holy Hill Hermitage - 25th Anniversary of its foundation.

A presence can change everything. Two friends out for a walk in the days just after the funeral, with nothing to do, no one to talk to and full of sadness. The anguish of the hours surrounding his death has passed. The support of friends in the hours leading up to his burial has gone. They are alone, with that awful loneliness that come to all of us on the morning after the funeral. There simply is nothing to say.

And a presence comes into their lives; unexpected, unidentified, unknown to them, apparently not knowing how they are feeling or anything of the event that has them shattered. And gradually, through talking their sorrow through, they come to realise that the presence is bringing them some comfort. They invite him to have supper with them and their hearts begin to tingle; as he talked to them, opened the scriptures for them and celebrated the eucharist by breaking bread with them. His presence transformed them.

The presence of this community in Holy Hill over the past twenty five years has changed many lives and transformed many people. The very definition of catholic has expressed itself here. People from all walks of life, people from all faith traditions and none, people with the strongest mental health and the most fragile, people with only a faint spiritual flicker in their lives, have all come here and been transformed by being here and by the presence of this community. I am reminded of a sign I once saw outside a fish shop in Charleville, near where I come from; if it swims, we have it. Well, if it is human or feeling only half human, Holy Hill has had it.

Presence is most effective when it is silent, when words are not needed to communicate it. And it is in the silence of this place, in the atmosphere which pervades here, that the flicker of  faith is allowed to grow, that religious conviction, in whatever faith tradition you belong to or in none, develops and people are transformed.

‘Farewell to the dreamer’ was the caption in the Summerhill College, Sligo, magazine which marked the departure of Bishop Finnegan from that school many years ago. And it was the dreamer who became convinced that the diocese of Killala needed a place where people could go to, in order to change the direction of their lives and rekindle the embers of a flickering faith. And the struggle to identify a community to come here was not easy but the benefits reaped by people who have stayed here during the past quarter century have been enormous.

And for the community, the experience has been a roller coaster. I have been with them for eighteen of those twenty five years and I have seen the victory of grace over all obstacles. Because only grace could have achieved what this place and this community have done for so many lives. In an idle moment during the recent ‘lockdown’ my mind roved over the variety of characters I have met here. To say that they qualified for the true meaning of the word ‘catholic’ is to understate. And to state that they were transformed by being here is not to exaggerate.

On that day, on that dusty road leading from Jerusalem to Emmaus, the presence was only fully appreciated when it left and became a memory. ‘Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked to us’. Holy Hill, in common with all of us priests and religious, are an aging community, with an uncertain future. A time will come for this diocese when twenty two parishes will not be staffed as at present by twenty priests, when services now given will not be guaranteed and the presence of priests in all our parish communities today will be a memory.  A time will also come when the same will be true of Holy Hill. And the elephant in the room, the question in the air is always; what will happen. What will happen? Literally, God only knows.

The elephant was also there about a thousand years ago when the clogs of the last monk clattered down the stone stairs of the round tower which still stands in Killala. As he shut the door for the last time, our questions were also his. But within a century or so a new form of religious life had sprung up in this diocese and Errew, Rathfran and later Rosserk were about to appear.

The blessing of the presence will never be lost; not only as long as those who experienced it are alive but also in memory recorded on the souls of those who heard about it. ‘Didn’t our hearts burn within us’ has had a long run throughout history.

Today we celebrate the past, we rejoice in the present and we place the future in God’s hands. We mark twenty five years of what has been created here and what has been achieved here; most of it recorded only in the hearts of those who have come here. And we realise that, as on the road to Emmaus, the presence that is Holy Hill can still silently transform.