**St Muredach’s Cathedral, Ballina.**

**Return to Sunday Mass.**

**July 26th, 2020.**

My first words to you this morning are words of gratitude. I thank God today for all those who kept faith alive and brought our Christian values to life over the past four months by their generous witness and example. Our healthcare workers and their backup teams surpassed themselves, tirelessly serving the sick and witnessing powerfully to the tenderness and compassion of God. Many of you, our parishioners volunteered your services, carrying groceries and other essentials to those living alone, or reaching out with love and encouragement to the sick and housebound. And I want to thank our priests, who have remained fully at available to serve you their parishioners in the very challenging and changed circumstances of the past four months.

Sadly, the Covid19 virus has already devastated the economy, destroyed livelihoods and brought untold grief to those families whose loved ones have died. That is why we must continue in the coming weeks and months to be people of prayer, faith, concern and witness. We must all remain responsible in keeping the virus suppressed by practising safe physical distancing, good hygiene and by continuing to respect health guidelines on movement and gatherings.

It is such a joy to gather physically for Mass today as well as to join virtually with many others who are participating over webcam. In the coming weeks, with God’s help, we will continue to increase the number of people who can gather inside our church buildings, in accordance with Government guidelines. I appeal to you therefore to be patient and understanding, and to cooperate in helping us fulfil our Church guidelines.

I know that some of our priests and many people remain vulnerable and will be unable, at first, to be with us in person. Please do not feel under pressure to rush out to attending Mass - the Sunday obligation remains suspended and you may prefer to wait, or to come out at a quieter time during weekdays.

Today, I want to thank all volunteers throughout the diocese who have agreed to step forward in helping us manage the transition back to full parish life and celebration of the sacraments. Your tireless generosity is appreciated by all of us. Your work is a further sign of the increasing involvement of our lay faithful in the life and ministry of the Church – something this diocese is working hard to achieve, especially through our **Placing Hope in Faith** initiative.

There is a real sense that today is a new beginning. It’s our first day back to Sunday Mass as a parish community after months of painful absence. It is an opportunity, therefore, to take a fresh look at going to Mass and possibly rediscover the important place of Mass in all our lives. Many years ago, Cardinal Daneels of Belgium, talked about going to Mass. He said that the importance of Mass does not lie in the language used; Latin, English, Irish or Dutch. Neither does it lie in who the priest is or who the preacher is. He said; “It is more a matter of how we approach the mystery at the heart of the liturgy”. Then he said: Mass “is the place where I enter to recognise myself and reality and allow myself to be transformed by Christ.” And he goes on to say that the role of the priest is to help “the people to see beyond the surface into an invisible world”.

‘Allowing ourselves to be transformed by Christ’. Recognising the many ways in which Christ is present to us at Mass; in the Readings, in the sacrifice of the Mass, in the celebrant and in each other. And then when we recognise Christ, allowing him to transform us into his likeness by what we do and say in our everyday lives. The fact that we are back together this morning after four months of lockdown makes us appreciate just how wonderful it is to be together – even if we have to be socially distant, to actually listen to the Readings once more from this pulpit and to be about to celebrate the sacrifice and receive Holy Communion ; albeit in somewhat strange circumstances. In a real sense, therefore, as the Cardinal said, we can see beyond the surface of the virus, of the challenges which it presents and the sadness which it has brought, into an invisible world and glimpse something of the mystery which is at the heart of our Christian lives. And it is this sense of the mystery – the mystery of God’s presence to each of us at Mass – which we fail to appreciate so often, and which young people in particular find difficult to grasp. But it is this sense of mystery, this sense of God being really present with us at Mass, which brings us hope; hope, as Julian of Norwich said, ‘that in the end all will be well.’  As we take these new steps into the now virus and post-virus world, let us hope that we will discover and live with a new sense of the mystery of God in our lives.