**Feast of St Muredach**

**August 12th, 2020.**

**Ceremony of the Blessing of Holy Oils.**

Today, as we celebrate the Feast of St Muredach and bless the holy oils which will be used in the pastoral ministry of this diocese over the coming year, we join the past to the present in a Christian presence in this area which extends to over sixteen hundred years. While the early days of those years are veiled in mist, two writings anchor them in time. The Wood of Foclut, situated in the present-day parish of Lacken, is the only place in Ireland named by St Patrick as a place in which he lived. The Tripartite Life of Patrick, written in the ninth century, then tells us that Patrick founded Ceil Alaid and that he appointed an elderly man of his household, Bishop Muiredaig as its bishop. If then were now, Muredach might have been cocooned from the beginning of his ministry as bishop of this diocese. The Tripartite Life also records the return of St Patrick to this area to baptise the young people whose voices he heard in a dream, which caused him to return to Ireland.

Those sixteen hundred years have seen the ups and downs of Christianity in our country; from a vibrant beginning to the last monk closing the door of the Round Tower in Killala in the eleventh century. To be followed a century later by the opening of the new doors in the monasteries at Rosserk, Rathfran and Errew. History then swings again from the building of the monasteries to their destruction in the sixteenth century and from the revival of Catholic Emancipation in the nineteenth century to Covid-19 and the world in which we now find ourselves. All through those years there were a numbers of constants; Mass was always said and oils were blessed for the administration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, ordination of deacons, priests and bishops, and the anointing of the sick. Today, we add another link in the long chain of the catholic faith in our diocese, stretching back to St Muredach, with the blessing of the oils that will be used in the administration of these same sacraments during the coming year.

In the short space of five months, our worlds have been turned upside down. As the month of February ended who could have imagined that in order to attend Mass you would have to watch it celebrated in empty churches on a computer screen? That in order to be prepared for First Communion and for Confirmation, you would be taught at home and that a lockdown would imprison you physically and mentally in your own home or cocoon? The new normal, in which these oils will be used to baptise, confirm, ordain and anoint the sick, will see us enter a very different world to the one from which we have come. And yet they will support us through this new era in the same way that they have been a constant in the life of the catholic church in Ireland over the past sixteen hundred years. The old monk closing the door on the round tower probably said to himself, that’s the end of the blessing of the oils. Centuries later, the old monks living in the ruins of Rosserk probably said the same. And yet, here we are today, albeit in the very changed circumstances of face masks and social distancing, doing the very same. And it confirms for us the truth of the words of St Paul; Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever. The circumstances in which the Gospel is preached and lived may vary from time to time, but the message endures forever.

During the coming year, the priests of this diocese will anoint with the oils we bless today, having themselves been anointed in baptism, confirmation and ordination with oils blessed in the past. Last year, using an image with which we are all very familiar nowadays, Pope Francis said: I would say this: We [priests] are not distributors of bottled oil. We anoint by distributing ourselves, distributing our vocation and our heart. When we anoint others with this holy oil, we ourselves are anointed anew by the faith and the affection of our people.” At this Mass today, I want to recognise and pay tribute to the way in which the priests of this diocese have distributed themselves, their vocation and their hearts, in the face of the challenges of the past five months, of the closing of our churches and in the much more difficult task of their re-opening. And equally, I want to acknowledge and thank all those in every parish of this diocese who have supported and continue to support all of us priests during this very difficult time. As the Pope said; you have anointed us anew by your faith, your support and your affection.

Pope Francis often recalls the many times the Gospel speaks of Jesus being surrounded by crowds. “The Lord never lost that direct contact with people,” he said. “Amid those crowds, he always kept the grace of closeness with the people as a whole, and with each individual.”  Today, as we think of the past and the future, of the difficulties and challenges of the past five months and the months that lie ahead, as we battle with social distancing, face masks, sanitizers and the re-opening of churches and schools, I would like to think that this difficult time will see the grace of closeness, between all of us who live under the care of St Muredach, bring us ever closer to God and to one another in a community of faith begun by Sts Patrick and Muredach.