**Killala Diocesan Pilgrimage to Knock.**

**Rosary Sunday, October 4th, 2020.**

A tiny particle, by now familiar in its shape on our television screens, has spread through our planet, our Common Home, Earth and brought it to its knees, in the space of less than a year. Every aspect of life has been touched by this tiny particle; fear generated, over a million deaths caused, over thirty-four million illnesses recorded and every economy, country and individual affected. Very few occasions in the history of the world have seen a catastrophe on such a worldwide scale.

Even if two wars in the past were described as world wars, most of the great catastrophes in history were confined to a number of countries or continents. Equally, these catastrophes were generally man made, with individuals or countries leading each other into war for either religious or patriotic motives. But this pandemic is different. It is not out there. It is in the very air we breathe, the surfaces we touch and the people we meet.

Human reaction to the pandemic has been easy to see. The initial lockdowns flattened the predicted curves. Gradual relaxation brought relief and hope. Side by side with this came a certain ease, where the need for humans to be together caused the infection to increase again and the so called second wave to begin to emerge. Just now, without a vaccine, only God knows where we are going and when this will end.

Human reaction to catastrophes in the past has been varied but it has also nearly always been marked in particular by a turning to God in prayer. And turning to God in prayer at a time of need is at the very heart of our relationship with God. It is at the centre of the way in which God makes himself known to each of us in faith. Sometimes we feel guilty about this and say to ourselves; ‘I only turn to God when I’m in trouble’. But all through the psalms in the Old Testament God says to us, as he does in Psalm 50; ‘Turn to me in the day of trouble and I will save you and you will honour me’. And Jesus continued this.  When looking at the city of Jerusalem in its distress he said; “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,.. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Mt 23.37).

For well over a thousand years this turning to God in prayer at times of difficulty and distress has shown itself in the practice of turning to Mary in prayer and, in particular, in praying the Rosary. We need only recall how Pope Pius V asked the Christian world to pray the Rosary to ask God for victory in the crusade against the Ottoman Turks which culminated in a famous sea battle at Lepanto in 1571. And when the Turkish fleet were beaten against all the odds, the Pope established the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary on October 7 in thanksgiving to the Mother of God. And there are other, lesser examples. There is, for example, the story of eight German Jesuits who lived just a kilometre away from ground zero when the Atomic bomb exploded in Hiroshima, Japan in August 1945. They attributed their miraculous survival to observing the message of Fatima by praying the Rosary daily. And, of course, we have Lourdes and Knock, and we have the lived experience of so many people, including ourselves, who pray the Rosary, especially at times of personal difficulty.

Last April, when the pandemic was raging, Pope Francis wrote a short letter. He said: ‘The month of May is approaching, a time when the People of God express with particular intensity their love and devotion for the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is traditional in this month to pray the Rosary at home within the family. The restrictions of the pandemic have made us come to appreciate all the more this “family” aspect, also from a spiritual point of view. For this reason, I want to encourage everyone to rediscover the beauty of praying the Rosary at home in the month of May. This can be done either as a group or individually; you can decide according to your own situations, making the most of both opportunities. The key to doing this is always simplicity, and it is easy also on the internet to find good models of prayers to follow.’

Simplicity is the key to saying the Rosary today. We don’t need to gather everyone in the kitchen before we can start. We can say it in the car while we are driving, handsfree, no beads, just our fingers and we have ten of them. We can say it while out for a walk or a jog. We can sit quietly at home, on our own, when we have no one to visit us. We don’t need open churches in order to say the Rosary. We can pray it anywhere. And we can say it as we gather at the bedside of one about to return to the Father’s house in death.

As this pandemic continues to hold its grip on us, we all need to turn to God in prayer and, in particular, to Our Lady. Archbishop Eamon Martin, Archbishop of Armagh, has made this plea to the whole country for a family rosary crusade during the month of October. He said; “That is why I am calling for a “Family Rosary Crusade against Covid-19” during October – encouraging you to pray the Rosary, or even a decade of the Rosary, each day during the month of October. Pray for your own family and loved ones and for all those whose health or livelihood is being seriously impacted by the coronavirus crisis.”  On this Rosary Sunday 2020 I urge all of us to turn to God and to Our Lady, to pray for an end to this pandemic. Prayer has got us through great difficulties in the past. It will do the same for us today.

Today is also the Day for Life in Ireland. The Irish bishops remind us on this 25th anniversary of St John Paul II’s letter Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life), that we renew the call for respect for the dignity of all life, to life’s natural end. The parish is a ‘family of families,’ (Amoris Laetita, 87). We ask our parishes to be places of welcome, where we can support pregnant women and celebrate the precious gift entrusted to all of us. We recognize that family is often ‘a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems.’ (Amoris Laetitia, 57). We grieve the loss of life due to abortion; over six thousand in the past year alone. We seek, therefore, a change of minds and hearts about the innate dignity of the child in the womb and the care of pregnant women. Pope Francis writes, ‘The gift of a new child entrusted by the Lord to a father and a mother, begins with acceptance, continues with lifelong protection and has as its final goal the joy of eternal life … For God allows parents to choose the name by which He himself will call their child for all eternity’ (Amoris Laetita – The Joy of Love, 166).

And the bishops end with a note of hope from the Psalms; especially in the face of the pandemic.

Hope in Him. Hold firm and take heart.