**Homily - Centenary of the founding of the Legion of Mary - September 12th 2021.**

The first meeting of the Legion of Mary took place in Myra House, Francis Street, Dublin, on 7 September, 1921. This meeting was the seed which has grown into a worldwide organisation during the past one hundred years, with a presence in over 170 countries throughout the world, a membership which runs into millions over that time and three outstanding servants, Frank Duff, Edel Quin and Alfie Lambe, two of whom have now been declared ‘Servants of God’ and the other ‘Venerable’, en route, with God’s help to their beatification and canonisation. This seed was sown in Mount Melleray Abbey in county Waterford when the then Abbot gave Frank Duff a book to read on Our Lady. From there it has grown into the most successful Catholic initiative of the 20th century in Ireland. It received its most moving tribute at the Vatican during the Second Vatican Council, when, as the late Cardinal Suenens of Belgium wrote; “I had the joy of having the Pope invite Frank Duff as an auditor to the Vatican Council.  When Cardinal Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster, who held the floor at precisely the moment that Frank Duff took his place, saw him enter, he publicly announced the fact to the assembly.  The 2500 bishops rose to give him a warm and moving ovation.  It was an unforgettable moment:  the thanks of the universal Church to the pioneer of the lay apostolate.” Certainly an unforgettable moment; 2500 bishops in St Peter’s Basilica standing up to give an ovation to an Irishman, your founder.

The first meeting of the Killala Curia took place in the Hibernian Hall in October 1937, a mere sixteen years after the Dublin meeting.  Already in existence in this diocese, Legionaries from Ballina, Belmullet, Easkey and Enniscrone attended. The first Curia President elected was Mrs Bourke, grandmother of the future President of Ireland. Supported by clergy over the past one hundred years, Archdeacon Hegarty, Belmullet, Canon Healy, Kilglass and Canon O’Connor, Ballina attended the first meeting before Canon Ned Mac Hale, Canon Paddy Hegarty, Fr Kieran Holmes and Fr John Loftus continued this tradition of diocesan support. Today, the Killala Curia has 12 Praesidia and 1 Junior Praesidium. Thanks to the faith and leadership of many lay people and a number of priests, Killala diocese has played its part in the growth of this great movement.

The Legion of Mary is, at heart, a ‘grass roots’, lay movement which is supported by priests and bishops. While the work carried out varies from parish to parish and time to time, much of what has been highlighted as important in these Covid-19 days has been carried out quietly by Legionaries over the past century; visiting the elderly, the isolated, the cocooned, ensuring that they were safe and that their needs were cared for, praying in churches when Mass was not being celebrated and, before sanitising became the task it now is,  ensuring that churches were clean and Altars were appropriate for the celebration of Mass. Your policy, also, of reaching out to people who do not share our Catholic faith was a gesture of inclusivity before it ever became popular.

Lay participation in the mission of the Church, which has been the hallmark of the Legion of Mary for the past century, is seen by Pope Francis as the Church’s future. Speaking to the Church in Spain in 2020 he said; ‘The living Word of God needs to be preached with passion and joy through Christian witness, so as to break down even the highest walls that isolate and exclude. It is time for you, men and women engaged in the world of culture, politics, industry... by your way of life, may you be able to bring the novelty and joy of the Gospel wherever you are. I encourage you to live your own vocation immersed in the world, listening, with God and with the Church, to the heartbeat of your contemporaries, of the people.’

We live at a time in Ireland when the Catholic values and way of life which we hold dear are now not shared by the culture of our time or indeed by many of our people. The centenary which we celebrate today should, however, give us courage. If one man, having read a book on Our Lady in a monastery in Ireland, could establish a Catholic movement which is now worldwide and which has had so many million members over the past one hundred years; surely the vision of another man, Pope Francis, for the greater participation of a Catholic laity in mission of the Church can also be realised over the coming century. Key to this will be the existing policy of the Legion of Mary of reaching out to those who do not share our faith. This will be achieved, as Pope Francis has just said, by living our own vocation in the world, with passion and joy and listening, with God and the Church, to the heartbeat of our contemporaries, of the people. Our ability to listen, to learn and, I may add, to pray, and to do this with enthusiasm and joy, will be central in our success in making what the Pope calls ‘the living Word of God’ alive for the people of our time.

Finally, as I pay tribute to all of you today, let me also pay tribute to the very many men and women who support the work of the Church in this diocese at this time. Very often on dark, winters nights all of you leave the warmth of your homes to attend meetings of the Legion of Mary, St Jospeh’s Young Priests Society, St Vincent de Paul, the Knights of St Columbanus, Accord, Boards of Management of our schools, Parish Pastoral Councils, Parish Finance Councils, Child Safeguarding Committee meetings and the list does not end there. You are the ones, who as Pope Francis says, ‘bring the novelty and joy of the Gospel’ to our contemporaries. You are also the ones, who like the members of the Legion of Mary over the past one hundred years, will keep that flame of faith alight for the next generation.

I pray God’s blessing on all of you and on the work of the Legion of Mary during the coming century.