**Presentation of the Benemerenti Medals to John and Noeline Cummins.**

**February 20th, 2022.**

**St Muredach’s Cathedral, Ballina.**

Pope Francis today recognises the outstanding service given to the diocese of Killala, over many decades, by Noeline and John Cummins. I have the honour, therefore, on his behalf, to confer the Bene Merenti Medals and Scroll on them. In so doing, I am conscious that this is the first time I have presented a single scroll to two people, to a married couple, in recognition of their joint service of the Church.

In the belief that the age of chivalry hasn’t quite passed, let me begin with the Pope’s recognition of Noeline’s work. Twenty years ago, yesterday, my appointment as bishop of this diocese was announced. Some weeks later, on April 7th, Noeline, as Chair of the Parish Pastoral Council stood where I now stand and formally welcomed me to the diocese and to this parish. On that occasion, I well remember the warmth of her welcome, which immediately made me feel at home here. I also remember how, in Irish, she recalled on that day the anniversary of the untimely death of her father. Noeline, both your parents are in our thoughts today.

Noeline’s contribution falls into three categories; her involvement in the Parish Pastoral Council of Ballina, her commitment to primary education and her work with Ballina Churches Together. As a member of this parish, she has not only given sterling service to the parish pastoral council over many years but she was its Chair during much of the Restoration of this Cathedral undertaken around the year 2000. She has also been a very active member of the Ballina branch of the Soroptomists, eventually becoming their National President. For those who are unfamiliar with them, the Soroptomists describe themselves as women inspiring action, transforming lives, vibrant, dynamic, working on global to local projects that help improve the lives of women and girls. They are, in short, an organisation central to the life of any community.

Her role in education is well known to those who have attended Culleens National school , where she taught for many years, eventually becoming School Principal. What is less known, are the endless hours over endless years when she has, on a completely voluntary basis, travelled the length and breadth of this diocese interviewing candidates for the teaching posts in our schools, a work she continues to do to this day. Less known also is her work with Ballina Churches Together, of which she is a Trustee, together with Bishop Patrick Rooke of the Church of Ireland, and myself.

Ballina Churches Together is unique not only in this county but also in this country. It is the only local based initiative where the four main Christian churches, Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic, come together to leave the pulpit and to go out with the Christiann message to those on the margins of society. Noeline has worked for over ten years with this project and in all of this, as a Trustee, she shares an ultimate responsibility for this work.

The education of the young people of this diocese in our schools is one of the commitments that John and Noeline have in common. Both primary school teachers in Culleens National School and both Principals of that school, when they closed their school doors on retirement, they continued to support our schools at diocesan level. When Brother Sebastian retired as Chair of Killala Diocesan Education Committee, John very kindly took his place, and despite repeated attempts on my part, no one has yet committed to taking John’s place, after some seventeen years of dedicated service. As Chair of the Committee, John is the liaison person between all the schools in this diocese and myself, as Patron. He listens to complaints and concerns. He organises interview panels and advises on amalgamations. He negotiates with CPSMA, the national body for primary schools, and he travels the diocese in support of everyone involved in our primary schools.

Add to that his role as Diocesan Liaison Person for child safeguarding in this diocese. When concerns are raised or complaints are made about children who may have been abused or in danger of neglect or abuse, John is the one they contact. He then reports to me and together, with the other members of the Diocesan Child Safeguarding Committee, we ensure that children are safe in this diocese, that concerns are addressed and where an allegation of abuse is made, that every effort is made to support those involved. As you may well suspect, this is difficult and challenging work. John has done this work, again for over seventeen years until the recent appointment of Ms Aileen Cawley.

And as if all that were not enough, John stands in to play the organ when needed at weddings, funerals, Confirmations and First Communions.

John and Noeline, like many other people in this diocese, do this work on a voluntary basis, without pay. They give of their time, energy and experience to bear witness to Christian values in our community. Pope Francis would want me to repeat to both of you his words of gratitude to volunteers he addressed in Panama some years ago;  ‘You have dedicated your time, and your energy and resources, to putting into practice your Christian concern.  You could have easily chosen to do other things, but you wanted to be involved, to give your best to making possible the miracle of the multiplication not only of loaves but also of hope.  Here, once again, you have shown that it is possible to set aside your own interests in order to help others.

And he continued; ‘The world stands in need of concrete signs of solidarity, especially as it is faced with the temptation to indifference.  It requires persons who, by their lives, defy such individualism, which is the tendency to think only of oneself and to ignore the brother or sister in need.’ Then he goes on to say;  Be always happy and full of joy.  Let your work of mercy be a humble and eloquent continuation of Jesus’ presence who continues to bend down to our level to take care of everyone.  For love “builds up” (1 Cor 8:1), day after day; helping our communities to be signs of fraternal communion.

And finally, he said; ‘The Lord always blesses the generous, and he can never be outdone in generosity.  Every time we forego something that we like for the good of others and especially those most in need, the Lord pays it back a hundredfold.  For when it comes to generosity, no one can beat him; when it comes to love, no one can outdo him.’

John and Noeline, my prayer for you and for your family is that the Lord will continue to be generous to all of you, bless you with good health, peace and happiness.

Forgive me. If I have gone on for too long; it’s merely a reflection on the extent of the service given by Noeline and John.

I now invite you to receive the Scroll and your decorations.

FRANCIS, THE SUPREME PONTIFF,

using his power to honour by a mark of distinction,

has seen fit to bestow upon husband and wife, John and Noeline Cummins,

these gold medals, established for those who richly deserve them for their Christian witness.

From the Office of the Vatican, August 13th 2021.