The Missionary Witness of the Parish
We were reminded last week that the Church exists to spread the Good News and that all the baptised share in this missionary vocation. This week we turn our attention to the Parish and its missionary nature. Various recent Church documents and Papal statements have acknowledged the importance of parishes, the good which occurs in and through them but also that parishes across the globe need to be renewed in a missionary zeal.[1]

Later in this process we will reflect on what, if any, structural changes might be desired or even necessary for our parish system. However, this week we will discern how missionary our parishes are.

The Importance of Parishes
The Parish has a long history. In the New Testament St Paul describes small communities meeting in houses: the forerunners of parishes. Since then parishes have become a mainstay within the Catholic Church where communities across the world have come together in their Parishes to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus, the Eucharist and other Sacraments and be sent out as missionaries. Along with family our Parish was pivotal to our own growth in faith and love of God. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Parish.

Vatican II was prophetic in writing: *"the care of souls should always be infused with a missionary spirit"*.[2]
In continuity with this teaching, Saint John Paul II specified that: *"Whilst the Parish is perfected and integrated in a variety of forms, it nevertheless remains an indispensable organism of primary importance in the visible structure of the Church"*,
whereby *"evangelisation is the cornerstone of all pastoral action, the demands of which are primary, preeminent and preferential"*.[3]
Subsequently, Benedict XVI taught, *"the parish is a beacon that radiates the light of the faith and thus responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart, giving meaning and hope to the lives of individuals and families"*.[4]
Lastly, Pope Francis recalled that *"the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers"*.[5]

A Changed World
There has been dramatic social and cultural changes throughout the world over recent decades. The Western Highlands and Islands have not been untouched by these.

As society changes Parishes are called to discern the signs of the times, adapting both to the needs of parishioners and priests as well as to the needs of people living within their locality and indeed the entire world. Thankfully the teachings of the Second Vatican Council regarding the nature of the Church and the subsequent magisterial insights on

[1] For example, The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church, 2020; Final Document of the Synod of Bishops 2023;
[2] Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church Christus Dominus, 30 (1965)
[3] Discourse to the Congregation for the Clergy, 1984
[4] Homily in Our Lady Star of Evangelisation Parish of Rome 2006
[5] Evangelii Gaudium, 28 (2013)

parish and mission are helpful. Reorganising parish structures and the way pastoral care is exercised in our local areas can be disconcerting but it does also open new opportunities for growth and mission. We must continue to trust that God is with us, leading us. Nor should we forget what beautiful that things happen when the many charisms gifted to all the baptised are embraced and used harmoniously.

Our Diocesan Desire for a Renewed Sense of Mission

In three consultations over the past decade, and in countless conversations in every parish, a constant concern expressed by both clergy and laity has been a desire for renewed missionary activity. You have spoken painfully of loved ones and many in your areas who are indifferent to or who even possibly reject God and/or the Church.[6] It is worth noting that during the Synod of Bishops 2021-24 our diocesan thirst for a renewed missionary spirit was mirrored not only by the other seven Scottish dioceses but in all the seven Continental Reports!

Our Discerning Mission process invites parish communities to hear afresh the Lord's call to go out of themselves, to undertake changes which enable reform in a spirit of communion and collaboration, of encounter and closeness, of mercy and kindness so that the Good News can be more effectively proclaimed.

Pastoral Conversion for Mission

One of the central themes of the new evangelisation is pastoral conversion, whereby Christian communities become ever more centres which encourage an encounter with Christ.

Pope Francis said, *"If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life"*. He challenged Parishes to move beyond *"the false sense of security"* which familiar structures can give us *"while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37)".*[7]

Missionary activity occurs in many places but the Parish remains a core locus. It must be remembered that the parish is not primarily a building but a community of believers under the guidance of a priest. The priest has a particular responsibility in renewing the parish in a missionary spirit. However, the call to mission involves every single baptised person and every aspect of the parish.

When listening to the Spirit reflecting on the signs of the times it is necessary to be open to producing new signs. For example, in the past the Parish was the primary gathering and social centre but is no longer so. Therefore new forms of accompaniment and closeness to people must be found. This shouldn't be seen as a burden, but rather as a challenge to be embraced with enthusiasm.

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[6] Peoples' grasp of this reality is not just anecdotal but validated by the annual census

[7] Evangelii Gaudium, 49

Need for Evaluation
It is crucial that we do not restrict our discernment to concluding that we need more missionary zeal. It is equally important that we discern *how* we are to be missionaries, *what manner* of outreach is needed today.

When speaking to the Roman Diocesan Assembly[8] Pope Leo asked the participants not to be complacent if their parishes, diocese or organisations had many well organised religious ceremonies and activities because these had also to be evaluated. He asked that they discern if their activities:

(i) *"truly lead to Christ, whether it brings the Gospel into contact with the real lives of the people*

(ii) *make room for genuine relationships, within which people feel part of a community: they feel welcomed, accompanied, valued and jointly responsible. Let us commit ourselves to offering young people our time and a listening ear, both within and beyond our initiatives*.

(iii) (that their community) *cannot remain closed in on itself, but must share in people's hopes, vulnerabilities and questions; and it must learn to recognize, in what happens in the city's various neighbourhoods, the questions to which the Gospel can provide answers*

(iv) (if their activities) *encourage growth in faith? Do they form missionary disciples? Do they help to develop ecclesial responsibility? Do they foster a mature faith, capable of translating into concrete choices of life and service?"*

A Balance Response
As we respond to the Church's invitation to renew parish life a balance must be struck. Many opportunities for people to encounter Christ are already offered. Inspiring examples of service and selflessness abound. Abandoning precious traditions for the sake of it ought to be avoided. However, multiple examples of good endeavours do not mean that parish life is all that it could be. Is what we are offering today as helpful for the present age as it should be? Merely repeating actions which fail to have an impact upon people's concrete lives achieves nothing. To fulfil our missionary task properly we must discern our present situation. If the parish does not exude a spiritual dynamic of evangelisation, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilised, offering experiences that are devoid of evangelical flavour and missionary drive, of interest only to small groups.

How can a Parish Renew its Missionary Zeal?
There is no straightforward and immediate answer to this. Careful discernment is required and a Parish Pastoral Council would be extremely helpful. The word 'tradition' comes from the Latin word *'tradere'* meaning 'to hand on'. The Church has handed on to the next generation spiritual and pastoral activities which have been proven over centuries to be helpful in allowing people to encounter God. Traditions need to be

[8] St John Lateran (Basilica and Cathedral of Rome), 18th September 2026

discerned and sometimes – at least in their externals - adapted to maximize their effectiveness in different ages and cultures. Such traditions include meditation on God's Word, the Eucharist and other Sacraments, Christian Initiation in the spirit of RCIA, Catechesis, acts of charity and building community with true personal relationships. This last point, community with true personal relationships, is especially interesting for us today.

Pope John Paul II believed that many people in Europe were isolated and lonely but, if the Church is a vibrant community - as it should be - people would be attracted to it. Therefore, in our present age which is marked by marginalisation and isolation, the parish community is called to be a living sign of Christ's closeness through our fraternal bonds, ever attentive to the new forms of poverty arising in our midst.

While in France Pope Leo emphasised the importance of warm interpersonal relationships that inspire trust and hope. This 'culture of encounter' is conducive to dialogue, solidarity and openness to others, as it is person-centred. A parish must be a place that brings people together and fosters long-term personal relationships, thereby giving people a sense of belonging and being wanted. In these times, marked as they are by indifferentism, individualism and the exclusion of others, the rediscovery of brother/sisterhood is paramount and integral to evangelisation.

In recent years larger numbers of migrants and refugees have arrived within our diocese. The Church asks local Christian communities to reach out to them, regardless of creed.
Some of our new parishioners are from the Oriental Catholic Churches (e.g. Syro-Malabar Catholic Church from India). The Synod of Bishops urges the receiving dioceses and parishes to take new approaches which respect diverse spiritual and cultural roots so that our fellow Catholics from Oriental Churches can maintain links with their own Church of origin whilst creating new ones here in Argyll and the Isles.

The temptation can be to keep our parishes "the way they have always been". Anything which refuses to change will die. Society has changed. God has called us to spread the Good News today and not 50 or 100 years ago! When times are challenging it is tempting to want everything to remain as they are now or even return to the way they once were. Spain is famous for its Religious Processions such as during Holy Week, local feasts and Corpus Christi. When Pope Leo preached in Madrid on Corpus Christi he reminded the Spaniards that their country had a great religious history but that it could not be remain in the past. He gave the example of their great Processions and that unless they spoke to the people today they could easily be reduced to nostalgia. With our rich religious heritage can his words not speak to our diocese also?

"Herein lies the task of Spain today and in the future: to ensure that the religiosity which has shaped and defined this country for centuries is not a museum of the past to be visited, but a school of faith from which to draw even today: A school that teaches us to kneel before God and before our neighbour, because no one can kneel before the Lord and despise their brother; A school that teaches us of the gratitude of love that becomes a gift, so that it may flow among us and break the chains of all selfishness; A school from which we learn that God is a real presence and that we too are called to be

present in the realities and challenges of society, not shying away, but personally committing ourselves to the building of the common good". [9]

Pastoral conversion demands personal and communal conversion. God calls us to work with him and this cooperation between the divine and human is a tremendous mystery. Yet we do know that when people proclaim the Gospel they are more credible when the witness of their lives accompanies it.

Appendix: Some References to the Parish in the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops

110 Pastoral action cannot be limited to tending to relationships between people who already feel attuned to one another but rather encourage the encounter between all men and women.

111 Traditional territorial bonds are being redefined, blurring the borders of dioceses and parishes. Living in such contexts, the Church is called to rebuild community life, to put a face to faceless entities and to strengthen relationships in this milieu. To this end, we must not only continue to value still useful structures; we also need "missionary creativity" to explore new forms of pastoral action and identify concrete processes of care. It remains the case that rural contexts, some of which constitute genuine existential peripheries, must not be neglected and require specific pastoral attention, as do places of marginalisation and exclusion.

116 The local Church, understood as a diocese or eparchy, is the fundamental sphere in which the communion in Christ of the Baptised is most fully manifested. As local Church, the community is gathered in the celebration of the Eucharist presided over by its Bishop. Each local Church has its own internal organisation, whilst also maintaining relationships with other local Churches.

117 The parish is one of the main organising units in the local Church present throughout our history. The parish community that gathers in the celebration of the Eucharist is a privileged place of relationships, welcome, discernment and mission. Changes in how we experience and live our relationship with locality require us to reconsider how parishes are configured. What characterises the parish is that it is a community that is not self-selecting. People gather there from different generations, professions, geographical origins and social classes and status. Responding to the new needs of mission requires opening up to new forms of pastoral action that take into account the mobility of people and the space in which their life unfolds. By placing a special emphasis on Christian initiation and offering accompaniment and formation, the parish community will be able to support people in the different stages of life in fulfilling their mission in the world. In this way, it will become more evident that the parish is not centred on itself but oriented towards mission. The parish is then called to

[9] Pope Leo's homily in Madrid 7th June 2026

sustain the commitment of so many people who in so many ways live and bear witness to their faith in through their profession, in social, cultural and political activities. In many regions of the world, small Christian communities or basic ecclesial communities are the terrain where meaningful relationships of closeness and reciprocity can flourish, offering the opportunity to experience synodality concretely.