

Minute of the Parish Meeting

St Mary of the Angels - 4th June, 2018

The meeting began with prayer.

Context (Please see attached PowerPoint)

Fr Jamie Boyle gave a presentation which connected the Archbishop's closure proposal to St Mary of the Angels with the vision offered in 'We Have Found the Messiah.' The 2015 pastoral letter asks for a 'realistic assessment' due to reduced priestly numbers which may be 'unpleasant for some'. Fr Jamie noted this 'should have set alarm bells ringing'.

This 'first stage' was followed by a year long process of Cluster Meetings, attended by approximately 100 people across the Cluster. Quoting from the final Cluster report, Fr Jamie spoke of the perceived need for more intentional lay collaboration, the recognition that mission outreach was low, and that 'our priests cannot be expected to continue as things stand'. A 'radical idea' had emerged in the report that one of the parishes be 'mothballed'. Suggestions had emerged on ways St Mary of the Angels debts could be honoured, including support from the other parishes. Fr Jamie shared that there had been no representation from the Polish or Syro-malabar communities. Though the process was energising, Cluster meeting attendance numbers overall had been low. Our Cluster needs had emerged as 'lay leadership' and improved 'stewardship'.

A great deal of time had been lost waiting for other Clusters to finish the process. Though the parish council had begun work on stewardship that launch had been 'put on hold'. This had also led to frustration waiting for a 'focussed pastoral plan' from the Archdiocese.

The next stages of the process had been meetings with priests at deanery level, then a meeting of the Council of Priests, whose recommendation had been the closure of St Mary of the Angels along with a small number of other parishes. The Archbishop had then sent the proposal to the parish, inviting a response by the 18th of June 2018.

Reactions to presentation:

Parishioners felt that any weaknesses within St Mary of the Angels were also present in the other two communities in the Cluster. The parish had thought it was 'working towards' improvement after many years of decline. Their initial response was to reject the closure proposal, for many reasons, including:

- That the context nor the imminence of change had been clearly understood
- At no point during the process had the question of closure ever been raised
- The cluster meetings had been understood to identify development needs
- Cluster reports had been used by the Archbishop in a way never intended
- Problems were due to mismanagement
- 'If there was a clear forward vision for the diocese we might have been able to understand' but there was 'no clear vision'
- The parish was in the 'best condition' it had been in for years
- Could the Church not give us '60 minutes a week from clergy?'

A key issue emerged: the **criteria** by which the decision was made by the Archbishop. Was the building itself the real criterion? Fr Jamie responded that the criterion was better worshiping, more vibrant communities. The dispersal of the Slammanan community after their closure was raised. Fr Jamie acknowledged that sad reality, but said travel distance this time was much smaller. 'Every effort would be made to help people come to Mass.' At the suggestion merger would mean 'we become a new community' there was anger. It was felt that the 'community would be broken' and 'you would damage yourselves'. Camelon was a generous parish financially, which Fr Jamie acknowledged.

Finances

Finances became the focus. Fr Jamie apologised for not having presented accounts to the parish due to his many commitments. Points arising were:

- Deliberate stewardship of parish funds due to upcoming necessary expenditure
- Shock at the cost of replacing one window - £28,500 before VAT
- The possibility of funds from the council or grants
- Total deficit to Archdiocese of £71,000
- A small parish being made to suffer 'because the Archdiocese needed funds'
- Suspicion that the closure would mean 'a lot of money in the diocesan coffers'
- No financial transparency at Archdiocesan level
- Parish accounts being K£10-12 per annum better off since Fr Purcell's death
- Why improved funds had not been used to pay off debt?

Fr Jamie explained that at merger the funds would be merged into one account. There were also questions around the justice of two financially healthy parishes taking on debt when Camelon parishioners were willing to pay it off.

Archdiocesan finances were again raised – why we are ‘suddenly’ in a bad financial position. Fr Jamie believed that the Archbishop has been ‘more thorough’ financially, and in that process new issues had come to light, including funds missing to care adequately for Aged and Infirm clergy. There was anger again at the lack of accountability and transparency financially, and a sense of lay people having been ‘pacified’ in the past.

Was the decision a foregone conclusion? Fr Jamie responded that the decision had not been rubber stamped and diocesan accounts were available. He quoted figures showing improved annual surplus as evidence the reason for closure was not financial. Parishioners nonetheless asked for confirmation from the Archbishop that the issue was not finances.

Canon Law

The question arose to whom the parish belongs.

- The parish in Canon Law is seen as a ‘juridical person’, but that refers to the parish as an entity, not to the parishioners themselves
- The debt is owed to the people of the Archdiocese
- Parishioners are seen in Canon Law as those who live within the parish boundaries
- The Archbishop has a duty to provide for people’s spiritual needs with the resources he has

Maintenance

On this subject it was felt that Coia had designed the church to be ‘maintenance free’. All of the parishes faced ongoing maintenance costs. When it was suggested that parishioners could help and were willing, Fr Jamie responded that whilst help had been forthcoming in the past that had changed. There was some rancour here, with some parishioners feeling the closure of the committee which had looked after maintenance had led to bad feeling. Fr Jamie expressed that it had not been his intention for anyone to be hurt and that it was ‘to their credit that so much good work had been done by that committee’.

Outreach

This led to discussion of mission outreach from the parish. The parish was not ‘manned’ Monday to Saturday. Fr Jamie felt he had no one to contact for cases of need or emergency to the local area. There was no St Vincent de Paul, for example, and no lay leadership. There was anger here that available help was not asked for. A parishioner described the help his family had received from the community. Communication was seen as the problem.

Building

To allay ongoing concerns that the decision had not already made Fr Jamie offered as evidence that 'big questions' still existed around what would happen to the building. Parishioners spoke of the:

- High likelihood of damage and vandalism if the church was closed
- Possibility of the church being used as a drug den
- Impact on already impoverished locality and on reputation of the Church
- Historic Scotland requirements not being known
- Possible support from council needing explored

Other Issues/Concerns

- Great concern the message closure would send to the children of the parish
- The loss of the children's liturgy, which was a 'beacon of hope'
- A sense of closure meaning 'you're not good enough'
- In a deprived area some would be prevented financially from travelling to mass
- Better for 'one man to travel' than one hundred parishioners
- Better to 'lose one mass at St Francis Xavier's than a whole community'
- Possibility of transferring the Vigil Mass to Camelon
- Priests' time across diocese being taken up by work which could be done by laity
- Retired clergy/more foreign priests being asked to help
- Foreign dioceses facing similar issues
- Difficulties of legislation making priests coming here on mission very difficult
- Polish and Syro-Malabar communities being asked to integrate
- Pastoral care when it can be weeks before priest sees a congregation again
- Possibility of changing that model – priests presiding a month at a time
- Possibility of Mass every two weeks so 'we could stay together as a community'
- Christ the King, with much smaller attendance, staying open

Parish Priest's support

Parishioners reiterated their decision to refuse the proposal and asked Fr Jamie if he would 'back them'. Fr Jamie said he would, if that was their decision. When asked if parishioners could see the recommendations of the Council of Priests, in order to build their argument, it emerged that Fr Jamie had been part of those deliberations. When asked what his recommendation had been, he said he had recommended closure. He believed it was 'for the good of the whole diocese'. The Archbishop had tasked them to look at provision and resources. He believed it would invigorate the Cluster spiritually and bring more lay

involvement and that was 'still my stance'. Nevertheless he would present a 'no' response, if that was the will of the parish. Fr Jamie was challenged on his chairing the meeting when he had proposed closure and that, since the response would go to the Archbishop who also wanted the parish closed, that this was an injustice. Due to this the parishioners believed they should formulate their own response as 'it should be written by someone who believes in it'.

Merger Challenges

Fr Jamie challenged the community to see the change as an opportunity to 'go forward and take your strengths with you'. He commended the commitment of a small group of parishioners having built the community they had, but the parish was 'not growing'. Building a new community would take time but he challenged any mentality of 'them and us'. When St Francis Xavier's in particular was challenged as being cold he said that by being light to the new community they could help transform it.

Final response from the parishioners

- The parishioners were clear their response to the proposed closure was to reject it.
- No clear decision was made to accept or reject the first part of the proposal, merger, though it was acknowledged at many levels this was already happening
- Parishioners expressed anger that their bishop, as shepherd, was not reaching out to them
- This had damaged their relationship with the Archbishop
- Parishioners asked again for a meeting with him, to work with him to 'solve the problems we both face'
- If the response to that request remained no, there would be a campaign
- A concrete plan should have been put in place before it came to this stage
- Parishioners asked to talk about the options going forward and how they can help
- Parishioners want to see the recommendations of the Council of Priests
- Parishioners want to know the exact criteria for the proposed closure

Next steps

A response will be formulated by the parishioners to be received by the Archbishop by the 18th of June. The Archbishop will then issue a decree, which can be challenged by writing to Rome.