**Rev Trevor Sargent, National Novena, Cnoc Mhuire, 20th Aug. 2019**

A Athair agus a Dhaoine Uaisle. Táim fíor-bhuíoch as cuireadh labhairt san ionad oilithreachta naofa seo, Cnoc Mhuire.

Father Richard and fellow pilgrims. I am very thankful for the invitation to speak at this special place of pilgrimage, Knock, Cnoc Mhuire.

**Introduction:**

This is my first visit to Knock, but not my first visit to a Marian Shrine. With my wife, Áine, who is a Wexford woman and very active in her local Roman Catholic parish, we moved to Wexford after I lost the 2011 General Election in Dublin North. We moved to Tacumshin very close to Our Lady’s Island in south Wexford.

We got to know there, Fr Brendan Nolan, Fr Jim Cogley and Bishop Denis Brennan. The Church of Ireland Bishop of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory, Rt Rev Michael Burrows spoke at Mass in Our Lady’s Island about the importance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in his own life. His father was Rector of Crumlin in Dublin. Canon Walter Burrows sounds a little like Fr Horan here in Knock. He did not build an airport, but he did build a new church for the Crumlin Protestant community in 1942 and that church is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Back to today. I come here not as a representative of any political party, and not even as a representative of the Church of Ireland. I speak here in a personal capacity, as a sinner, ever thankful to a loving Creator and a believer in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Redeemer of the world.

I have been feeling God’s call to ordained ministry for many years. Finally, I was ordained priest last year by the Bishop of Cashel, Ferns and Ossory, the Rt Rev Michael Burrows. This took place on September 8th, the Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Christ Church Cathedral, Waterford.

My focus now is to be a pastor and serve the community in the four parishes which make up Waterford Union of Tramore, Dunmore East, Annestown and Wateford City. I am the curate and Very Rev Maria Jansson, Dean of Waterford, is my training Rector.

**That’s a Big Change from Politics, I hear you say!**

I am often asked the question, ‘do you miss politics’? The honest to God answer is, ‘I don’t’. I sometime then ask the questioner, ‘would you ask a soldier, does he or she miss a war’?

That being said, I was honoured to have been elected as a councillor in 1991 and TD from 1992 onwards. There was always great satisfaction when political plans came together and results were achieved to improve quality of life for people in need of help and the wider environment. For example, as Minister for Food and Horticulture:

(1) I think of getting every primary school to grow potatoes and five types of fruit and veg in the ‘Incredible Edibles’ programme.

(2) I think of the measures taken to rescue the pig meat sector after the ‘dioxin crisis’.

(3) I think of doubling the number of organic producers to help Irish farmers access a €30 billion annual market in the EU.

There are similarities between parish work and constituency work. Both involve pastoral care to an extent. However the life of a deacon, or a priest is to point people towards Jesus Christ, as our teacher, comforter and redeemer. In contrast, politics and the electoral system we have, requires the Cllr or TD to point people to themselves as candidate and their party.

**Career Path stemmed from knowing that the earth was the Lord’s:**

My faith has always been important to me from as early as I can remember. It developed into a more active faith when I reflected on Psalm 24:1, ‘the earth is the Lords and everything in it’.

The way I see it, our job as people of faith is to take care of what belongs to God. That is in other words, ourselves, our families, our communities, our planet. They all belong to God.

I remember as a school principal, teaching a class of traveller and settled children. There were cultural differences in the way each spoke. The settled children talked about ‘my dog, my Daddy’, whereas the traveller children talked about ‘our Mother, our dog’.

Jesus was more like the travellers in that regard, praying, ‘Our Father…’ Pope Francis likewise has entitled his 2015 encyclical letter, ‘Laudato ‘Si’, ‘on care of OUR common home’. We are all in this together!

**A desire to put my Faith into Action led me to Green politics:**

All Greens would be at one, I think, in subscribing to the native American maxim that *‘we do not inherit the earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children’.*

Judeo-Christian Scripture has that even stronger caution against a presumption that we inherit the earth. As mentioned above, Psalm 24: 1 says the earth is not ours to inherit:

*‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it’.*

The question for me as a Christian is, ‘how lightly do I thread on God’s earth’? If Biblical values were to find clearer expression in general community and public life, not to mention church life, then our hold on land would, I believe, be much less proprietorial. Indeed Biblical values in relation to land are often reverential. Numbers 35.33-34 reads:

*Do not pollute the land where you are... Do not defile the land where you live and where I [God] dwell.*

This seems like the environmentalist's dream verse. Well, actually, the "pollution" and "defilement" refer to ritualistic abuse. In essence, God's people are called to treat the land as holy.

**A word about my time as a TD …**

**God uses an Oireachtas Prayer Group to put Faith into Action:**

Peace is a core principle of my political outlook as well as my faith.

My faith in Jesus Christ also gives me a belief in miracles. The Good Friday Agreement was something of a miracle. A group of Christians from different traditions asked to meet me to pray about the Oireachtas. As a result, we formed the Oireachtas Prayer Group around the time of the IRA 1994 ceasefire, we prayed and met many times with paramilitaries & victims of violence from all sides. The ongoing peace we have today is to me something of a miracle. I believe prayers were, and continue to be answered. Prayer also continues to be needed given the instability created by Brexit and there being no Assembly at Stormont.

**That was Faith in Action which is more needed than ever to secure humanity’s future:**

The fear of violence at that time has given way today to a fear of runaway climate breakdown in the not so distant future, creating extreme weather events, mass refugee movements and food shortages. This fear paralyses rather that empowers.

When I hear the raging wildfire in Gran Canaria described on radio as being ‘unstoppable’, I think, that is a word which will become more common when we talk about such disasters, unless we radically reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.

However, my faith in Jesus Christ takes away my fear about the challenge of climate breakdown. Mind you, I’m not downplaying the challenge. A 2015 study in the scientific journal Nature said that at least 80 percent of the world's known remaining fossil fuel reserves must remain in the ground to prevent runaway climate change. That includes no drilling of Arctic oil and gas and no more fossil fuel exploration.

Science has told us what we need to do to mend our ways. However, science cannot arbitrate. It cannot decide what is right and what is wrong. Science cannot answer moral questions, value questions.

For example, how much do we care about the world’s poor? How much do we care about future generations? Do we see the environment as part of the economy, or the economy as part of the environment?

**Facts are not enough. Counselling is also required to tackle consumption, because it is to many people, an addictive behaviour:**

Faith communities down the centuries have shown how God’s people can live without fossil fuels, without consumerism, at peace with each other and with the wider environment. Our great cathedrals and churches were generally built without power from oil.

The world will not end when we give up burning oil, but it most certainly will end if we continue as we are going.

Once enough of us believe we can overcome our addictive dependency of fossil fuels and enjoy simpler lives, then the momentum will build, just as it did for civil rights under the leadership of the Baptist priest, Revd Dr Martin Luther King.

To paraphrase Jesus in Luke 8: 48, who reassured Jairus that his daughter, who appeared dead, would live again. Let us make these prophetic, prayerful words our own: ‘Don’t be afraid, believe, and she (God’s creation), will be healed’.

**Time has come for a Miraculous Move to Consume Much Less:**

How do we persuade a global economy which is designed around encouraging consumption that there is another and better way to live?

As followers of Jesus Christ, we can do what he did, and lead by example. Jesus lived as simply as he possibly could, ‘the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have next, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’. (Luke 9:58). My electric bike is a start ..!

What is the answer to leaving fossil fuels in the ground?It is to work on our own communities, our own resources so that when the outside world creates shocks, such a Brexit, or extreme weather events, or recession, our community has a built in local resilience.

This idea of local resilience is a hallmark of the Transition Movement. It is a movement well known to the Dominicans in Wicklow, the Columbans in Navan and St Mary’s Cistercian Abbey in Glencairn.

If a few people can share a vision of their community beyond oil, then they have the seed of a transition movement where they live. The essential ingredients for a successful transition group are:

1. Healthy group – where meetings are both enjoyable and practical.
2. Vision – imagine the future we want for your communiy.
3. Community Involvement – relate beyond friends and natural allies.
4. Network and Partnerships – encourage groups to collaborate.
5. Practical Projects - take on defined initiatives, complete & move on.
6. Part of Movement – share ideas / news with other Transition Towns and other faith communities.
7. Reflect & Celebrate – publicise each project & re- evaluate.

Politically, it is also sensitive to force the pace of behavioural change required to even meet the limited measures agreed in the Paris Climate Agreement in December 2015. We’ve a hill to climb. Ireland is ranked second worst in the EU after Poland in terms of failure to protect future generations from climate breakdown.

It is my prayer that a higher standard of political leadership will emerge to persuade the electorate that there are many benefits to taking prudent and well planned courageous actions right now, to put Irish society on a sustainable footing. This is the kind of development all of us should be working for and praying for. Otherwise how can we look our children in the eye?

**How else can People of Faith benefit Community and Public Life?**

What is the Anglican Communion doing? It has over 86 million members, which includes the Episcopal Church in USA, Church of Ireland and the Anglican Church of Canada etc. In the eighties, the laity and clergy summarised our mission in five parts:

**The Five Marks of Mission**:

The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Each of these Marks of Mission has the potential to be ecumenical. The Fifth Mark certainly has huge potential to be a shared mission by all faith traditions as all of our doctrinal positions on this are at one.

**Inter-Faith Projects help us celebrate our oneness in Christ:**

I mentioned and praised earlier Pope Francis’ encyclical *‘Laudato ‘Si’*, urging all Christian traditions to work together, caring for the earth. A good start would be for all parishes to register interest in the multi-denominational Eco-Congregation Ireland at [www.ecocongregationireland.com](http://www.ecocongregationireland.com) .

Meanwhile, I applaud the many parishes countrywide which are reducing their carbon footprints and encouraging biodiversity.

**Building Communities with the Church serving as a Vital Hub. Parish Property can be very important in the wider community as …**

* House of prayer
* Social centre
* Swap shop
* Food growing plots
* Oasis for biodiversity

Pope Francis calls us all to faith in action in paragraph 79 of Laudato Si’. As we recall the miracle of Knock in 1879, the visit of Pope John Paul ll in 1979, His Holiness, Pope Francis, makes us think, pray and act in Paragraph 79:

*‘The work of the Church seeks to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time ‘she must above all protect mankind from self-destruction’.* The Church must act, as well as pray & speak.

**Let us Pray for the Strength to become the Change we need to See:**

We can learn from St Mother Teresa, who said, *“I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.”*

Lord, help us to maintain a reverent attitude towards nature, threatened from all sides today, in such a way that we may restore it completely to the condition of brother/sister and to its role of usefulness to all humankind for the glory of God the Creator. Amen.

National Novena, Cnoc Mhuire (20.8.19) **Seek justice …if willing, you shall eat** Rev Trevor Sargent

Readings: Luke 12: 32-40 Be dressed for action - like those who are waiting for their master.

 : Hebrews 11: 1-3,8-16 By faith Abraham obeyed, not knowing where he was going

 : Isaiah 1: 1,10-20 Even though you make many prayers, seek justice – you shall eat

My theme at the seminar earlier was ‘Faith in Action’ (James 1:22)

My journey to ordination as a priest on September 8th, last year, on the Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Christ Church Cathedral, Waterford, has been quite diverse!

In my childhood, my uncle brought me away to Mayo, especially to Achill. Not being keen on church himself, he would leave me at the nearest church on a Sunday and return for me an hour later. Often the nearest church was Roman Catholic, so I grew up with an ecumenical outlook, although, I especially love the liturgy of the Church of Ireland.

In secondary school in Dublin, I enjoyed being part of a Scripture Union club and a Young Ornithologists club. Art was another interest and I wrote and illustrated a cartoon strip for the Cork, Cloyne and Ross diocesan magazine as a young teacher in Dunmanway in the early eighties.

As a TD in the nineties, a few colleagues and I set up an Oireachtas Prayer Breakfast at a time when the fragile peace process needed prayer and many other forms of help and encouragement. When I lost my Dáil seat in 2011, Áine and myself moved to Wexford, Áine’s home county. My wife is very involved in her family parish of St Margaret’s Roman Catholic Parish in Curracloe and Fr Denis Kelly has made me feel very welcome there, as has Bishop Denis Brennan.

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I’d like to say a word about why putting our faith into action is important, both for ourselves, and for the wider world.

How often have you seen reports about tragic shooting, crashes, or bombs. How often do we hear an interviewed politician, priest or Garda say: *‘Our thoughts & prayers are with the family?’*

In a timeless way, Isaiah give us a warning about using words unaccompanied by actions, (Isaiah 1: 15 – 19), quoting God:

*When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you, even though you make many prayers, I won’t listen …. seek justice … if you are willing … you shall eat … of the land.*

Recent mass shootings in Dayton and El Paso, in the USA brought about oft heard, *‘thoughts and prayers’* responses. Those reported words in themselves became a flashpoint. It is not enough to sympathise with victims’ families in the face of avoidable tragedies. Words are no substitute for actions, in this case, to reform gun law in the USA.

Isaiah made the same point, not about guns, but on issues of justice, food and survival. It is telling that Isaiah’s prophecy about action against injustice is the prophecy which Jesus declared fulfilled, in the temple, (Luke 4: 17-20). Faith in action is a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry and teachings.

So what are the issues that most affect our world today? In many ways, our issues are the same issues which exercised Isaiah, the issues of justice, food and survival in our times?

Climate change is exacerbating today’s injustices, resulting in more wars, famine, mass migration, etc. A World Health Organisation study of 2014 shows that climate change is set to cause 250,000 extra human deaths p.a.. However the New England Journal of Medicine (Jan 2019) says that that prediction is conservative!

So should we pray for those who suffering the effects of climate change? Yes, of course, but also our faith requires that we take actions also!

Practically, all who can should take actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, fly less, eat less meat, plant more trees, etc. Instead of talking about extending out *‘thoughts & prayers’*, perhaps we need to extend our *‘actions & prayers’.*

As we celebrate 140 yrs since the Apparition at Knock in 1879, it is timely that our message for today comes from Para 79 of Laudato ‘Si, from His Holiness, Pope Francis:

*‘The work of the Church seeks to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time ‘she must above all protect mankind from self-destruction’.*

The Church must act, as well as pray & speak out. One way for our parishes to get our environmental houses in order is to register and enter the award schemes run by Eco-Congregation Ireland ([www.econcongregationireland.com](http://www.econcongregationireland.com)).

Protecting mankind is also about healing mankind. It is by healing the earth that mankind can be truly healed. As we gather in this Shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary, a place of deep healing, let us sing a hymn of healing to conclude:

*We cannot measure how you heal
or answer every sufferer’s prayer,
yet we believe your grace responds
where faith and doubt unite to care.
Your hands, though bloodied on the cross,
survive to hold and heal and warn,
to carry all through death to life
and cradle children yet unborn.*

*So some have come who need your help, and some have come to make amends, as hands which shaped and saved the world are present in the touch of friends. Lord, let your Spirit meet us here to mend the body, mind and soul, to disentangle peace from pain and make your broken people whole.*

John L. Bell (b. 1949) and Graham Maule (b. 1958)