



Diocesan Centre
Coursington Road
Motherwell
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Rt Rev. Joseph Toal STB KC*HS
Bishop of Motherwell

20th April 2023.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we celebrate the Season of Easter we do feel the freshness of the life of Grace and Faith which the Risen Lord continues to shower upon us through the gift of his Holy Spirit. It may be an appropriate time to bring to your attention thoughts on the future of our Diocese and to ask the Holy Spirit's guidance as we look to where we now are and what decisions we will need to take. As we celebrate this week the 75th Anniversary of the Diocese of Motherwell, let us give thanks to God for all that has been achieved through these years and for all who have made that possible, and ask God to help us embrace the future and its possibilities.

In the earlier decades of the Diocese, a great effort was made in providing new parishes, particularly in housing estates which were being built in the Lanarkshire towns. The number of churches, halls, and chapel houses increased, and a good number of priests came from Ireland to help build up and serve these parishes. We don't have the same number of priests now, nor the same number of people attending the services in our churches. That being the case, it is time to pay attention to the number and state of our buildings as they age, recognising that the cost of maintenance is clearly more difficult with fewer parishioners participating in the Church's life and worship. It is an issue we face with some reluctance but we need to be realistic about the number of buildings we now need to serve our communities and how we will care for them.

This issue has been brought into focus recently in regard to funding essential repairs of certain churches, parish houses, and halls. The cost of materials and labour has risen significantly, so that even parishes that have managed to have savings find it hard to meet the cost of essential repairs, while those without sufficient funds have to borrow money from the Parochial Investment Fund in order to pay for the required works. The money available for borrowing is limited, and it belongs to parishes who will need the money themselves for inevitable repairs. Parishes have benefitted from funding through grant-giving bodies, but the amounts on offer are now smaller and tend to cover smaller projects. When major repairs become necessary new money does have to be found, and in the present economic climate it is difficult to see how this will be achieved. It does seem inevitable that the future of some buildings will have to be assessed and difficult decisions made. Such decisions will require careful consideration of the work required and its cost, as their possible loss, particularly that of a church, will be keenly felt by its parishioners.

Clearly it is right that other considerations, as well as costs, merit attention – these include proximity to other churches, the difficulty for some of travelling further to attend Mass, the loss to the particular community of the Church in their midst, the proximity of the local Primary School to the Church.

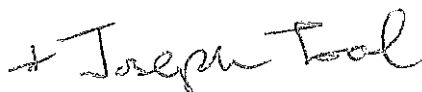
While all these points are valid, it also has to be recognised that the numbers attending Mass and participating in the Sacramental and Devotional Life in our parishes, have been falling over a number of years. Covid has influenced the numbers attending also, and although there are signs greater numbers still like to attend Church for great feasts and special occasions, the struggle to maintain some buildings may be too difficult for those who are fully active members of the parish, whose generosity remains outstanding. It is fair to say that those who most appreciate the Church and get the most benefit from their faith are those most likely to be penalised by taking away a particular church. At the same time you are likely to be the most resilient members of the faithful and most willing to accept change and the additional sacrifice needed to sustain the future presence of the Church in your area. Sometimes we can wish that we could resurrect the past but the reality is that people and situations change and we have to adjust our thinking and practice to present realities and respond positively to the challenges we now face.

I envisage that does mean that the Diocese of Motherwell will consolidate its presence and the celebration of our Catholic Faith in fewer buildings and I ask the faithful to embrace this reality and be ready to adapt to changing times.

Let us renew our efforts to live and celebrate our faith and to be good and faithful witnesses to the Lord in our communities, filled with the presence and love of the Holy Spirit and ready to embrace the future and the challenges it will bring.

With my prayers and best wishes,

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Joseph Toal". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

+ Joseph Toal