

*President's Address, Maynooth Union Father Corbett* Maynooth - June, 2018

Archbishops, Bishops, fellow priests, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you all to this celebratory dinner of the Maynooth Union of 2018.

Failte Roimh Cách don ocaid specialtá agus luchairéach seo I gColaiste Phadraig, Ma Nuat; go mbainimid go leir taitheamh as ár gcomhludard inniu. I welcome all the classes and priests, old & young, strong and weak who have honoured this occasion. I welcome the classes who are celebrating over 50 years of priesthood and thank the many members of diamond jubilee class for their presence and for their great service and long years as priests of Ireland. As the Nuncio said recently, priests in the parishes are the unsung heroes of the Irish Church and we certainly sing in your honour here. Of course I welcome with special warmth the 50 year class; I hesitate to g their fifty years; it might make them feel old; May I assure them they look like men who have borne the heat of the day and are bearing it still with the grit and strength and joys of a Maynooth formation. I do look back with gladness of heart at the companionships and friendships of our Maynooth days and thank you for it. I welcome the younger men; you are ploughing the furrow, to use a phrase; you are learning to till the field of the Church, sometimes lovely and fertile, and sometimes rocky and uncomfortable, with the loving care and dedication you can see in many of us older folk! I welcome our new bishops, and wish them every blessing. But as I welcome you to this joyful occasion I sadly note a great absence; Ronan Drury, Maynooth priest, preacher, editor and joker has been called from us. Ronan we miss you; pray for us you leave behind agus ar dheis De go raibh tu le saol na saol!

Looming over my house in Roscrea is a huge imposing building which fills the skyline. It is what is left derelict of a vibrant Sacred Heart School which has gone. The school, and what it contributed to countless lives, is gone, but the building is preserved under the watchful eye of the OPW for future generations.

By contrast, the Ireland that so carefully preserves buildings unchanged, is changing itself into a very different place and the culture which supported the building and the Sisters, who witnessed to a faith and way of living, is now radically critiqued and questioned.

Faith is no longer accepted and unquestioned. Doubt and puzzlement are part of life. Bishops are no longer potentates; priests no longer able to unseat politicians, the church is no longer an all-encompassing moral authority, Maynooth no longer has over 500 seminarians – I look back to when this hall seated hundreds of hungry young men – and people who are still happy to call themselves Catholic are so much more centred on person and conscious of their own gifts of intelligence, understanding and freedom. But reports of the imminent death of Catholic faith and practice are premature. To quote a recent volume, perhaps people have “exchanged a life of faith, diversified by doubt, for one of doubt diversified by faith.”

And priests and people are enduring the pain and sometimes the powerlessness that Saint Paul speaks about :

“When I am weak, I am strong”. I confess that Christians like myself have been enabled to enter that world because Saint Paul was there and Jesus died powerless on a cross and we are still here!

So the resilience of faith and the complexity of the Irish heart must never be forgotten. Many of will join the crowds to be with Pope Francis in August because of the role of the Pope in the history of Irish life and faith. Did the faith he represented help empower powerlessness or imprison people in a troubling morality? Which view do you think predominated over the centuries and which should inspire our mission now?

You may have heard this story of the Parish Priest who began his sermon: “My dear people, I have good news and bad news for you today. The good news is this parish has more than enough money to pay its bills; the bad news; it’s still in your pocket and you have a lot to offer!”

Priests of the Maynooth union you still have a mighty lot to offer! The priest is still a welcomed and very helpful presence in the lives of Irish people. Sometimes it seems what he stands for is rebuffed; but the streams of love, service, generosity and energy that still flow strongly in the activities of

parishes and church groups bear witness to a reality that must be analysed and ever worked for; the flock may be getting smaller, the Christian understanding may still have to find its feet in a world of rapid change, but men and women still want to find a helpful truth in the Gospel and want a home in the Church. The priest still plays a central role in preaching the gospel, making salvation real in Eucharist and Sacrament and reaching out to all who are searching for something better in a sometimes puzzling and overpowering world. Here the priest can be pulled in painfully different directions depending on his experience and personality. This room contains an enormous reservoir of priestly experience gained perhaps joyfully in welcomed service of people and personal situations in life; or painfully in the struggles with conscience people and self – who am I. And there is evidence that priestly experience may be difficult to assess because we wish to remain private about our own joys, our pains and our struggles. As priests we have experienced celibacy, obedience and service in different ways and we continue to have different languages and life styles to try to identify who we are as Catholics? Some find a balance and develop in faith and priesthood; others may become disillusioned and leave. Some again may reach out and be happy with their service; others may reach out and fall over unless sustained and helped. But the calling continues;” I came that they may have life and have it more abundantly.” Vocations to the priesthood are sadly falling; Maynooth seminary cannot remain the large expanse and great institution it was in different times. This decrease will lead to an ever increasing role for the baptised in the day to day life of the parish and diocese as catholic communities continue to preach and practice the faith in word, deed and sacrament. More and more thought will need to be given to cultivate vocations to the priesthood; more imagination (and resources) will have to be given to integrate more people in the ministries of pastoral and administrative formerly performed by the clergy. And can one be excused for attempting to imagine what the future may bring? Women already play a huge role in the life of the faithful; God’s love is more intensely understood as caring and life enhancing; a love that calls for the gifts of all. The understanding of ministry and the role of Our Lady in the mystery of salvation may lead to further insights about who can celebrate God’s Eucharistic love in a world caring for care and hoping for something to be thankful in life. The future is not known to us but who can plumb the providence of God?

But our calling remains insistent; to preach and practice the gospel of God’s saving love as best we can within history and with the Lord’s unfailing grace,

which sustains God's people in times of weakness and in strength. The catholic church and priesthood rejoices in the promise of the ever present Lord. May that hope and that life always inspire and uphold us!

May I finish by thanking the Maynooth administration, staff and students for the great service you give to the church and congratulate you on the high quality of the vast majority of the priests ordained in this great college? I welcome Michael Mullaney as the new President and wish him every blessing, Thank s too to Michael Collins and Tracey for their unstinting work for this day. And of course, a huge thank you to the Catering Department for the lovely meal and occasion this evening! Raise your glasses to toast St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.