**Very Reverend Fr. John Murray**

**‘150 Years from Maintenance to Mission’**

**Closing Mass of Novena**

**Day 9 - March 16th 2022**

From maintenance to mission; that's my song this evening, so ring a bell.

Well, this is the little flyer that we had, to promote our novena that, was passed out in the churches and we tried to get it out into the streets as well. With all the different events that took place over the last nine days, I'm done here! As 150 years of age, from maintenance to mission, we have come to the end of our novena; we have had some wonderful input and many people were able to get to most of the evenings.

Input from the witness of Sisters Elaine and Martina, who are always so refreshing and so full of life; the energy of the Koinonia John the Baptist; and Youth Initiatives. The testimony of our sister church, across on the other hill, with Reverend Henry Hull. In these last three days, we have had the very solid teaching of our own Bishop, Noel Treanor on Sunday; Bishop Paul McLean a couple of nights ago and last night we were honoured to have the Archbishop of Armagh, here present, for the first time; linking the two great Sees of Patrick; Downpatrick and Armagh.

In America, they had a Christian clothing company, with an unusual brand name, I’m not sure if it's still on the market. We are all aware of Gap and Benetton and all the other big designer labels, but WWJD was the Christian clothing company, *what would Jesus do?*

What would Jesus do? Now there's a question! We are all in situations, business, work, leisure and family. You wonder, what would Jesus do in this situation? I want to tweak that brand by asking, WWPD, what would Patrick do?

I offer three points from our gospel this evening; three things that I think Patrick would also do, that I think will challenge us; as we end our novena and look to the present and the future.

Firstly, I think, Patrick like Jesus, would not play safe. You know the story so well, after all, he could have ignored the voice of the Irish; really the voice of God, which came to him, when he had returned to Britain, after his years of slavery here. Why should he return to those people? The Irish, who had so mistreated him; put him into slavery for six years, looking after sheep. Yet, he did respond as we know and landed at Saul.

Jesus said, “*put out into deep waters and lower your nets for a catch”*. Jesus didn't ask the fisherman to take a rod and stand at the side of the lake, in other words, play it safe. He asked them to go into the deep, far from the shore, to the sea of Galilee, the lake of Gennesaret; it has different names and is a very deep freshwater lake.

There are many wonderful beautiful signs of life in our parish dear friends, but our parish is far from healthy; even before COVID, parishioners were drifting.

Are you happy that last Sunday 450 people or so were at mass out of 14,000?

Are you happy that 95% of our first communicants do not come back the following Sunday?

Are you happy that after confirmation, virtually all our young boys and girls do not return to church, until perhaps they are coming for a christening of a baby?

These maybe are challenging questions dear friends, so I want to invite you as a parish community to put out into the deep; to be bold, to be fishers of men and women. Pope Francis said this not so long ago, every Christian is a missionary. Every Christian, that’s what confirmation and baptism mean; to be a missionary. Someone, who invites others to come to Jesus.

The second point of our gospel; now read the little text, part of the text. They signalled to their partners, their friends and the other boat to come and help them. The Church of the future, the future is now, will be a Church of co-responsibility; that's a big word if you like it. Pope Benedict offered it to the church when he was Pope some years ago. Working (walking) together in synodality. That other phrase, that Pope Francis has been offering us in recent years.

I don't know if you were at Mass when Bishop Treanor was telling us night prayed in the prayer of the faithful for the vocations weekend, that there were five young men at that retreat, which was an opportunity for them to discern a call to the priesthood. Five, dear friends; as a former vocation director, I know that of those five thinking about it, maybe one or two might enter the seminary. After six years of training, who knows if even one or two might survive to ordination for parishes in Down and Connor. You can do the math, can't you? Statistically, the diocese has worked out that by 2040, some of us might not be around by 2040, there will only be 25 priests in the diocese for counties Antrim, Down and the whole of Belfast.

It's going to be a different sort of church, isn't it? It's going to be a church which will be very much more lay driven.

My third point is one of prayer; we must become like Peter when he sees the wonderful catch of fish. You can imagine his thoughts, when Jesus told him, *put out into deep water*; Why should a Carpenter tell me, a fisherman, how to fish! Yet, when it happens; Depart from me Lord for I am a sinful man. It's on our knees in prayer that we will hear the Lord; teach us, priest and lay, how to be church in the 2020s and the 2030s; in the decades still to come, just like Patrick.

I love the first line of Patrick's Confession; it begins simply, I, Patrick, a sinner. He uses this word, a very uneducated man; it's a single word in the Latin of which Patrick wrote; I, Patrick, a very simple man. Through the Confession, constantly, is the humility of a man, who knew he was poor. He knew he didn't have the answers and felt overwhelmed by the task. Yet, what a legacy he left; scores and scores of young men and women followed him, as he went up and down the country; preaching, baptising, ordaining and planting the faith in Ireland.

That brings me back to my initial theme; from maintenance to mission. We have to become again a missionary church; to reach out to those, who perhaps have become distanced. Quoting those figures a few moments ago, I wasn't blaming the children or their parents. We need to welcome them, to be constantly welcoming people back to the church, to the body of the faithful. Those, who have been hurt; for those, who feel that maybe the church has nothing to say to them. Here's a challenge dear friends, to each of you. Between now and Christmas, I ask you to invite one person back to Mass. We have about 400 people here tonight or whatever numbers we have, that's not a big deal. If everybody invited one person; then by next Christmas, there would be 800.

Just one person, you might think, who am I going to ask? Don't ask anybody yet, pray about it; the Lord will put into your heart who you need to ask. Then, when he's put that into your heart you pray; pray that the Lord will grace that person, break down the barriers, hardness of heart, cynicism whatever keeps people away. The Lord will water that seed; then when you go in and invite them, don't be surprised when they say, *yes, I've been thinking about coming back.*

So, there's the challenge dear friends, in the spirit of Patrick, invite one person between now and Christmas, OK. Maybe he rolled fresh, the words of Jesus to Peter, *do not be afraid, from now on, it is men and women you will catch*.