

Sermon: Marists – Holy Family Parish, Dundalk

On the feast of the Holy Family, December 26th, 2021, Pope Francis said in his Angelus address that *“God chose a humble and simple family by which to come into our midst”*. He said that it was beautiful to see Jesus inserted into the fabric of family life and affections and he reminds us that *“the person we are today was born not so much out of the material goods that we enjoyed, but from the love that we received, from the love in the heart of the family”*. Pope Francis in that address reminded us that affection, love, forgiveness, tenderness, and hope are all found in a family built on the foundation of prayer and adherence to the plan of God. These essential elements in family life also apply to the wider family that we call parish. It is in our parish that we learn to become a Christian and to live with others in community.

This parish, when it was established over 40 years ago on the 6th September 1981 took Holy Family as its name. In doing so it sought the protection of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and it aspired to become a model of that family for the people of this community. It was an aspiration that has become a reality for so many people in this part of Dundalk who have seen this church as a home from home and this community as a family to support their own domestic family.

The foundation of the parish coincided with the rapid growth of population in the suburbs of Dundalk. At the invitation of Cardinal Tomás O’Fiaich the Marist Fathers kindly agreed to minister in this new parish. For 40 years the Marist

Fathers have served the people of Holy Family Parish with great care and dedication. The first Marist Priests to serve in this parish were Fr. Des Hunt as Administrator, and Fr. Vincent Duffy and Fr. Derek Keeleghan as curates and they lived at 13 Mournvale Road, off the Avenue Road. There were 19 different Marist priests who worked here in the parish through the years with the last residents being Fr. Cormac McNamara as Administrator and Fr. Eddie Duffy, Fr. Frank Corry as curates. If I am not mistaken Fr. Cormac was the only one of that 19 to serve two terms of duty here from 1997 to 2001 and more recently from 2017 to 2021. We are delighted to have Fr. Frank and Fr. Eddie here tonight. Unfortunately, Fr. Cormac could not be here.

The Marist fathers have a long tradition here in Dundalk and were first invited in 1861 by Archbishop Michael Kieran to found a school here in the town. Marists, as you know, take the example of Mary the mother of Jesus as their inspiration in religious life. Mary brought God's own Son into the world and was the first to welcome the good news of the gospel. The Marist mission is to be carried out in a determined, yet quiet manner, because that is how Mary carried out her role in the early church. The Marist priests who have worked in this parish over the years have done great work in a quiet and humble way to bring the presence and message of Jesus into the hearts and homes of their parishioners. The Marist spirituality has been described as "simple and modest in its expression, close to the lives of ordinary people, apostolic in character, and marked by spontaneity and joy." This has certainly been the experience of the Marist Fathers here over the past 40 years.

Their presence will continue to be missed in this parish and among its people for that reason and for their ready availability, compassion, and concern.

It was with great sadness that the diocese received the news in November 2020 that the Marists would be moving away from Holy Family Parish in 2021. The dearth in vocations to the priesthood that Ireland is suffering at present had necessitated this move. We are very fortunate to have an interim commitment from the local Redemptorists to administer the parish and to give the diocese the time to make the adjustments and arrangements that will be necessary in this town and region to organise a sustainable pastoral presence into the future.

It is increasingly difficult, as I'm sure you appreciate, to provide the sort of clergy cover that many of us became used to over the years and indeed taken for granted. It is a difficult period of transition that we are going through at the moment in this country, but it is also a wonderful opportunity for all the faithful to realise that they have a crucial role to play. All parishioners are called through their baptism to help keep the faith alive, active, and flourishing here and to ensure that this beautiful Church building will continue to be at the centre of this faith community for as long as it stands.

Today as we mark the contribution of the Marist Fathers to this parish, which will always have their imprint upon it, I wish to thank them sincerely. In their Mission Statement the Marist Fathers outline that they ***“are called to establish the Church where it does not exist and to renew existing communities***

rather than to participate in its activities in places where it is already established with sufficient resources". This they have done admirably in this new parish over 40 years. The structures they have established and the atmosphere they have created here gives us much confidence for the future. As the founder of the Marist Congregation Fr. Jean Claude Colin said back in the early 19th Century *"we must begin a "new Church" over again ... yes a 'new Church' ... which recognises the dignity of each and promotes justice for all"*. That is the challenge for all of us as we face into what is, in human terms, an uncertain future, but a future which we trust is in the hands of God and in the special care of Mary.

The memory of the Marist Fathers dedication and commitment here, will continue to inspire those who were fortunate enough to experience their pastoral care in this place. In this parish named after the Holy Family, I pray that you all may you have the Holy Families unity and courage in this time of loss and uncertainty, and may you all strive to work together as a family to keep alight the flame of faith that has been maintained here over many years.

If you do then the words of this evening's gospel will come true for you **"your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you"**.