

THE DIOCESE OF DERRY – MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER IN CHANGING TIMES

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Donal McKeown
Diocese of Derry
30th November 2025



Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Advent is a season of expectation. It invites us to wait in joyful hope for the coming of Christ once again into our lives at Christmas. Isaiah, John the Baptist and Mary each listened, discerned and responded, even when the path ahead was unclear. Their hope was grounded in God's promise, and their witness speaks to us now. Times of change can unsettle us, but they can also purify and strengthen our faith.

We live in a time of great change. Families face pressures unknown a generation ago. Communities carry the wounds of addiction, isolation, anxiety and conflict. Many are unsure about the future of the Church. Yet, Advent reassures us that God is close. God walks with us in the desert and brings new life from barren soil.

A Time of Listening and Prayerful Discernment

Our society and our Church have changed so much that we cannot expect parish life to remain the same. This should not be seen as a failure, but as an invitation from the Holy Spirit to embrace the opportunity that change presents. Now we are called to respond with faith, courage, and renewed imagination.

The Lord is calling us to rediscover the skills of developing our prayer life and to deepen our ability to discern His voice. Without prayerful listening, our decisions risk becoming merely managerial rather than Spirit-led. True renewal begins when we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us — not when we simply repeat or long for the patterns of the past.

The Church needs people who can listen to God, listen to one another, and discern together. This is the work of every parish and of every baptised person.

Pastoral Areas and Parish Collaboration: A Shared Mission

In the years ahead, *pastoral areas and parish collaboration will become increasingly important* in how we work together and plan sustainably. The goal is not centralisation, but shared responsibility. Each parish is invited to see itself as part of a wider missionary community.

This will involve continuing conversations about what is realistic. Mass schedules, times of community prayer and pastoral activity benefit most when pastoral areas reflect together, avoid unnecessary overlap, and consider what best serves the people as a whole. In these days of easy travel, neighbouring parishes holding Masses at the same time may not meet the needs of the wider community.

Decisions must grow out of discernment — rooted in prayer, listening, consultation, and openness to God's leading. They are not instructions from the bishop but responsibilities entrusted to parishes and pastoral areas, supported by the diocese.

Signs of Hope

Despite challenges, there are real signs of new life across the diocese.

People gather quietly for prayer, Eucharistic Adoration and reflection. Families remain committed to supporting their children in preparing for the sacraments. Parish leadership teams / Pastoral Councils have been established in many parishes, developing the various aspects of parish life. *Many adults are engaging in parish-led faith development programmes, Scripture reflection, and simple forms of prayer* that deepen their relationship with God. In a society that often appears very material and secular, the steady witness of our communities offers a different story. People are touched by authenticity, mercy and hope — and they notice when the Church lives these well.

In moments of tragedy and heartbreak, our parishes and priests have stood beside families with quiet strength. Likewise, in moments of joy there is a shared experience of hope. The faith-filled community presence, prayer and compassion reveal the heart of the Gospel and show our wider community that faith is not an idea but a lived accompaniment.

There is renewed energy around youth and young adult ministry. Young people seek belonging, purpose and hope. They respond generously when they are welcomed, listened to and accompanied. Every parish — or group of parishes — needs to make pastoral care for young people a priority.

We are also seeing new paid and volunteer roles supporting faith development and sacramental preparation in parishes and schools. These ministries help ensure that our communities are formed in faith and supported pastorally and practically. The diocese is committed to encouraging and resourcing this work.

A Welcoming Church

Our parishes are enriched by people from many countries and backgrounds joining us in our churches for liturgical celebrations. They bring strong faith, joy and energy. We are called to welcome all with warmth, creating space for an intercultural Church that reflects the Church of the nations.

Women and men, young and old, contribute greatly through volunteering, catechesis, Pastoral Councils, music, liturgy, youth ministry, hospitality and care for the vulnerable and our planet. Their gifts are essential. A renewed Church depends on everyone recognising their vocation and offering their gifts generously.

We need a new culture of service — simple, joyful, grounded in prayer, with good communication and shared responsibility.

A School of Prayer

St John Paul II said that every parish must become a “school of prayer”. Without prayer, renewal collapses. Without listening to the Holy Spirit, decisions lose their heart.

Across the diocese, people are rediscovering forms of prayer that sustain and guide:

- quiet time before the Blessed Sacrament
- the Rosary and other devotional prayer
- Scripture-based prayer
- the Prayer of the Church in parishes
- prayer in the home

Prayer gives us courage. Prayer gives us clarity. Prayer protects us from fear and bitterness. Prayer gives us hope. And prayer opens the door to Christ and true renewal.

Hope for What Lies Ahead

The Church in this diocese has weathered many storms throughout history, yet Christ has never abandoned us. He continues to lead, to invite, to encourage, and to strengthen us. This is a time for courage and for listening — a time for shared responsibility and renewed trust in the Holy Spirit.

Today, we begin a new Church Year and we enter the holy season of Advent: a season of expectation and hope. Looking ahead, I wish to share my intention that our ongoing discussions about forming pastoral areas — bringing parishes together in shared mission — will be concluded before Easter 2026. My prayer is that these deliberations will be guided by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, so that the decisions we make will serve God’s people faithfully for many years to come.

During this liturgical year, our hearts turn to the Gospel of St. Matthew. In all that we do together, let us hold fast to the Lord's promise:

"And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20b)

These words are our anchor and our assurance as we navigate change with faith and hope.

I thank you sincerely for your patience, encouragement, and prayers. I am deeply grateful to our priests for their generous service, especially as their responsibilities grow heavier. Please join me in praying for an increase in vocations to the diocesan priesthood.

May the Lord bless our shared journey in the year ahead and fill us with renewed faith, hope, peace, and joy.

✠ Donal
Bishop of Derry
30th November 2025