Pastoral Letter: Discerning Together God's Path for our Diocese

Diocese of Argyll and the Isles

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I love the Church! I love the Universal Church, spread across the world, and I love our Local Church which is the Diocese of Argyll and the Isles!

1. The Need for our Diocese to Discern God's Will

As your bishop I write to you about a deep conviction that is in my heart. As a diocese we need to discern together God's Will. I invite us all to prayerfully listen to the Holy Spirit so that in the Highlands and Islands of contemporary Scotland we may be the Church God wants us to be, especially asking how does God want Argyll and the Isles to become more missionary?

I have lived among you and been your shepherd for almost seven years. I have travelled across our diocese praying, listening and sharing with you. I rejoice in and give thanks for the great goodness and deep faith in clergy and laity throughout our diocese. I am also aware that we face serious challenges. Prayerful reflection has confirmed my long-held conviction that disciples must listen to the Master's voice.[1] I ask you what is best: for us to do the good deeds *we* consider are necessary or to ask God what *he* wants us to be?

In this Pastoral Letter I will reflect on the beauty of the Church and its calling, the reality of the problems we face, why I am full of hope and propose how we can together discern God's Will. I take personal leadership of this discernment process as a sign of the importance I place upon it.

2. Value of the Church

There is no one and nothing greater than Jesus Christ. He is God and he alone is our Redeemer. The Good News of Jesus Christ is a precious treasure intended for each human being and everyone has the right to hear it.

The Church is of divine origin and, as the Body of Christ, is beautiful. Jesus entrusted to the Church the mission of spreading the Good News in each generation. Therefore, the Church's core calling is to be missionary. The Church - both our local diocese and universal throughout the world - is of tremendous value to humanity.

Argyll and the Isles has a rich missionary history: St Columba and the Celtic missionaries who first brought the Faith; their disciples whose witness and learning renewed Europe; those laity and priests who courageously kept the flame of faith alive during the penal times and more recently the diaspora from our Highlands and Islands who strengthened the Faith in other parts of Scotland or brought it to new lands throughout the world. Today, throughout our extensive diocese, families and parishes still enrich local communities with Gospel values. As we re-emerge from the pandemic our contribution as disciples remains as necessary as ever.

3. Challenges Facing Argyll and the Isles

We live in challenging times and no one is untouched including the Church. Some of the difficulties facing our diocese are:

- Depopulation. Like rural communities throughout the world we experience depopulation. We know that many young people must move away for higher education and employment opportunities. It remains difficult for families to find locally both affordable housing and work. In many areas the demographics is a challenge.
- Reduction in Church attendance. We are also painfully aware that, for various reasons, less people regularly practice their faith.

[1] c.f. Isaiah 50:4—5; John 12:26; John 13:16

- Clergy. The number of priests in active ministry has also fallen. We have no seminarians.
- Finance. Both the diocese and approximately one third of our parishes have cash flow problems. Both our priests and the diocese are extremely careful with money but small communities with multiple properties to maintain inevitably results in higher costs being met by fewer people.
- Scandals. Although some of our difficulties may be beyond the Church's immediate control it is also true that others have been self-inflicted, such as various scandals.
- COVID-19. Our challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic and the present cost of living crisis.

4. Hope

Without denying the reality of the difficulties we face I am most certainly full of hope. I echo St Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians *"We are only the earthenware jars that hold this treasure, to make it clear that such an overwhelming power comes from God and not from us…..we see no answer to our problems, but never despair"*.[2] I certainly do not have all the answers to our challenges but I do know that the Church is God's and that he is faithful.

I also draw inspiration from one of the prophet Ezekiel's visions.[3] Israel seemed dead but God breathed life into them. The renewal was God's work but Ezekiel had to play his part too. No matter the problems God is greater and he is always with the Church but we also need to cooperate.

Yes, as human beings we have our limitations and at times may cause weakness within the Church but, when transformed by the Holy Spirit, we are also a source of great goodness. Our long diocesan history testifies to this truth - the Celtic monks, the Norse era martyrs, fidelity during the Penal Times, the Clearances, political suspicion and poverty. No matter the challenge our Church was never extinguished but re-emerged, frequently with new mindsets and structures, but always purified and renewed. Yes, both laity and clergy offered heroic effort but God was always the principle agent. And that is the key - God does most of the work but we must learn to work with him.

5. Planning for Future

For me, living as we do, in changing times our most important questions as a diocese are: *What is God's Will for us today? How can we become more effective missionaries? How can our witness to Christ grow?*
Our central aim must be to discern God's Will and not our own. It is God's Church and he knows how he wants us to develop as his missionaries in today's Highlands and Islands.

I am inviting our diocese to embark on a journey of genuine discernment. This will not be easy but I am convinced that seeking God's Will for us is essential. True discernment demands prayer, reflection, humility, openness, generosity and effort. However, it is the true path for serious disciples.

I have appointed a Working Group of ten members (6 laity and 4 clergy) to organise the discernment process. Fuller details will be communicated regularly but it will be useful to provide a brief oversight now.

After the publication of this Pastoral Letter we will immediately enter a two month period of prayerful preparation. Opening our minds and hearts to the Spirit is essential. Before February I will also visit every parish to meet with you explaining further my rationale as well as listening to you.

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[2] 2 Corinthians 4:7-12
[3] Ezekiel 37:1-14

In February we will then move to the consultative stage which will consist of three separate phases, shaped around three progressive questions:

Phase 1. *What kind of Church is God calling us to be in Argyll and the Isles today/How can we be more missionary?*

Phase 2. *What are our resources as a diocese?*

Phase 3. *How can we best fulfil our mission with our resources?*

The method will be synodal. By this I mean we will journey together prayerfully in an open, listening and reflective manner. This approach has been recommended by Pope Francis and it is my personal conviction that it is the correct one. Consultations will be held at parish level, Council of Priests and in several other ways. Reports from each phase will be fed back to the Working Group for collation which will inform subsequent rounds of consultation. Discernment demands openness and courage. I will be open to all suggestions except any which would be contrary to Church teaching. My constant requirement of any proposal will be: *Will this make us more missionary?* I expect the process to last about 18 months. Although final decisions will ultimately be taken by myself as bishop, such decisions will not be taken in isolation from top down but informed through prayerful reflection and sincere dialogue with you.

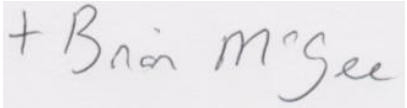
6. Conclusion and Appeal

God calls the Church to work with him for the good of all. Most of the work is God's and we cannot thrive apart from him. This very cooperation between God and disciple, principally through God's grace, is an occasion for joy and wonder. We have seen this in the past, we can see it in the present and so it will be in the future.

It is my deep conviction that our diocese must always seek how to best live in accordance with God's Will.[4] Therefore, sisters and brothers, I urge each one of you to engage prayerfully and actively in this process of discernment. Through baptism we are all Temples of the Spirit and each person is an instrument of divinely inspired insight.
The discernment process I am initiating may bring change of structures but it will also certainly demand a change in mindset and behaviour. This may be difficult, even painful, but if it is God's Will for us then it is for the best.

I commend our shared journey of faith to our Blessed Mother who *constantly pondered in her heart*[5] and, no matter the trial, was faithful in her 'Yes' to God's Will. I also seek the guidance of St Columba, our spiritual father, whose discerning and missionary spirit continues to inspire us today.

Yours in Christ,



Right Reverend Brian McGee
Bishop of Argyll and the Isles

First Sunday in Advent 2022

[4] c.f. Psalm 127:1-2
[5] Luke 2:19