

BISHOP SEAMUS FREEMAN, CHAIR OF THE COUNCIL FOR PASTORAL RENEWAL & ADULT FAITH DEVELOPMENT, REFLECTS AND RESPONDS

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write to each one of you to thank you and to express sincere appreciation for taking the time to share your deep concerns for the Church at this time. In particular I welcome your reflections in light of the Ferns, Ryan and Murphy Reports, and in response to the *Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland*.

At the outset, it is clear that you who wrote letters to the Bishops are committed to the task of renewal and of justice. The steps you proposed were wide-ranging. These included both spiritual and structural renewal.

You expressed firm belief in the importance of the renewal of prayer, of a return to our roots, particularly in Scripture and Tradition, and of faith-formation. I agree wholeheartedly. Throughout history, a renewal of prayer and faith has always been central in guaranteeing fidelity and creativity of the ongoing witness and mission of the Church. Prayer has been called “the infallible means” by many of the Saints.

You also called for all-round appraisal of the sources of dysfunction, including Church structures, procedures and culture, at all levels. In my view a very significant instrument in the examination and re-animation of our structures and practices will be the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of God (*Verbum domini*, available at www.vatican.va).

Many of you seek a serious response to the lack of inclusion of women in the Church. This is an issue of vital importance and urgency. We must develop ways whereby women can have a greater role, sharing life and mission.

You clearly desire a new style of relationship between hierarchy and faithful which expresses the sharing of responsibility for mission in keeping with our diverse vocations. Many of you asked for the use of titles, exclusive language and insignia to be lessened. Yes; a critical look at our structures is always necessary and it is essential right now in light of our present challenges. However, we need to work from what we have towards what is best for mission in our time.

You widely reject the view, wherever it is put forward, that secularisation was a major cause of abuse and cover-up. In addition, you do not agree that the whole Church was culpable for the sins of some of its members. I understand these responses. They provide a basis for important on-going exploration. We are constantly challenged to understand ourselves as Church in a secular environment. And, as we take part in these reflections, it is clear that we all share concern for and some part in the woundedness of our Church which is constantly in need of reform.

In the Pope’s letter we read: “A new vision is needed, to inspire present and future generations to treasure the gift of our common faith. By treading the path marked out by the Gospel, by observing the commandments and by conforming your lives ever more closely to the figure of Jesus Christ, you will surely experience the profound renewal that is so urgently needed at this time. I invite you all to persevere along this path” (see Letter n. 12).

As a response to this, the Bishops intend to promote the renewal of our acquaintance, primarily, with the Word of God. Throughout the Liturgical Year of 2011 it is hoped that the Gospel of St. Matthew will be the vehicle of a renewed faith in the person and message of Jesus Christ. For Saint Matthew, Jesus Christ is Emmanuel (God with us, Matt 1:23) who both calls and enables the disciples to follow him in a confused and conflicted world.

In the Pope's letter we read: "Earlier in my pontificate, in my concern to address this matter, I asked the Bishops of Ireland, to establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected, and above all, to bring healing to the victims and to all those affected by these egregious crimes" (see Letter n. 5).

These words were addressed to the Bishops on the 28th October 2006. By way of response, much has been achieved. The National Board for the Safeguarding of Children is up and running. The document of the Board, *Safeguarding Children - Standards and Guidance Document for the Catholic Church in Ireland*, is now operative in all of Ireland. However, much vigilance must continue into the future and will be successful to the extent we are being spiritually renewed at the same time. Our faith renewal must always accompany our commitment to vigilant safeguarding of our children.

In two years time we will commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. Such general councils are called to re-focus in their time the clarity of the message and the Word of God. Regarding the Lay Faithful the Council had this to say: "The Holy Spirit...apportions his gifts "to each individually as he wills" (1 Cor.12:11) and among the faithful of every rank he distributes special graces by which he renders them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which help the renewal and building up of the Church" (*Lumen Gentium* 12). Pope Benedict's "Letter" applies this doctrine of St. Paul and Vatican II to our present situation. He writes: "The lay faithful, too, should be encouraged to play their proper part in the life of the Church. See to it that they are formed in such a way that they can offer an articulate and convincing account of the Gospel in the midst of modern society (see 1Pet 3:15) and cooperate more fully in the Church's life and mission" (see Letter n. 11). In their meeting of the 14 December, the Bishops received an overview of your reflections and are committed to work with you towards the inclusive and mission-oriented Church, which we are called to be by St. Paul, Vatican II and Pope Benedict, and which you so clearly desire.

In thanking you all for your reflections and suggestions, I hope that this brief reply can be the beginning of a dialogue at every level especially on the more urgent questions that need to be addressed at this time. I would like to ask for your ongoing prayers. Let us pray together that our reflections and actions will help the Church to be the fullness of "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (see John 14:6) of our Lord Jesus Christ.

With every best wish and blessing,
Yours in Christ the Lord,

+*Séamus Freeman, SAC*