The Eucharist – Our Hope for Renewal
- a reflection on the Road to Emmaus story

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Monsignor Eamon Martin began his reflection with a meditation on the story of the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus from chapter 24 of St Luke’s Gospel. He emphasised that the two were going the wrong direction, away from Jerusalem, immersed in themselves, their eyes downcast, their hopes seemingly destroyed. But their encounter with Word and Sacrament on the road and at the table, changed them utterly. He went on to draw out the significance of this amazing story:

Apparently no-one knows for certain where the village of Emmaus actually was. A few years ago, Pope Benedict said that, for him, the road leading to Emmaus is ‘the path of every Christian, indeed, every human being.’ Because, at some point in our lives, we’ve all walked down that road. Like the two disciples we’ve experienced that sense of losing direction, those feelings of dejection, despair, perhaps even a crisis in our faith. Hopes destroyed. Future bleak.

It’s at those moments of disappointment and failure that we need Jesus as our travel companion, as Pope Benedict has said, to ‘rekindle in our hearts the warmth of faith and hope’. We need Jesus to speak to us in the Scripture, to nourish us with his Body and Blood. That is why in our darkest moments, the Mass can be such a powerful source of strength and consolation. Every time we celebrate Mass we are offered a unique opportunity to meet Christ in Word and in sacrament. Notice how strongly the unfolding of the Emmaus story mirrors the structure of the Mass – as surely as Jesus opened up the scriptures for the two disciples along the road, he does it for us during the liturgy of the word at Mass; just as the two disciples recognised him at the breaking of bread, we too can experience his presence during the liturgy of the eucharist. Pope Benedict went on to describe the road to Emmaus as a ‘path to renewal’ in our faith. (Regina Caeli prayer Apr 6, 2008). Along that path the most powerful force for renewal is the Mass.

These days the Church in Ireland is longing for profound renewal. In recent years with the disturbing revelations about abuse in the Church, we have been wandering down the road to Emmaus. I sometimes think we
are going down the wrong road - heading away off in the wrong direction, away from our spiritual home, away from the Father, immersed in ourselves, going over the story again and again. There’s so much talk about the decline in faith, a crisis in vocations, the Church ‘on the brink’. As we walk this road to Emmaus, it is easy to despair, to continue in our bitterness and hopelessness. But let us never forget those whose road to Emmaus is far more gruelling than ours, those brothers and sisters whose trust was betrayed and whose dignity was violated. If we find it hard to accept sometimes that Jesus walking the road with us, how much more difficult must it be for them? And yet, only Jesus has the right to walk by their side, he who was himself a victim of grave injustice and sin.

Could this road to Emmaus be the path to renewal for the Church in Ireland? Instead of collapse, might our Church be on the verge of something life-giving and new? Remember it was when those two disciples were at their lowest, when the future looked most bleak, that Jesus came and walked beside them, opening the scriptures so that their hearts burned within them, breaking the bread so that they could recognise and believe his resurrection. The Gospel is encouraging us to search for the Lord in Word and in Sacrament. The most powerful source of renewal for the Church in Ireland is right in front of our eyes. The most powerful force for renewal is the Eucharist. The Mass.

I firmly believe that we are being called as individuals and as Church to renew our understanding and love for the Mass. We are being urged to discover once again the power of God’s Word. We are being encouraged to rekindle our devotion to the Eucharist, and to take seriously the mission given to us at the end of every Mass: Go in peace to love and to serve the Lord.

The coming months will bring two significant opportunities for grace in Ireland. The introduction of the revised texts of the Mass next Advent will give us a chance to renew our understanding and love for the Eucharist. And the celebration of the fiftieth International Eucharistic Congress in Ireland next year will provide a golden opportunity to celebrate our communion with Christ and with one another.

In the coming months as we begin to pray together using the revised translation of the Missal, we will be able to learn so much more about the Mass and to delve deeper into its beautiful prayers which have been passed down to us over many centuries. Of course there will be some controversy over some of the language and phrases, but if only we can keep the debate constructive, then it could be a graced moment for
renewal. One of the great improvements in the revised translation is the way it allows the Mass texts to open up the scriptures. Listen for example to the words we will soon be using just before communion. As the priest raises the host he will say: ‘Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb’ and we will reply, ‘Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed’. Notice how the revised translation restores that beautiful phrase ‘Behold the Lamb of God’ from John’s gospel, the expression ‘supper of the Lamb’ from the Book of Revelation, and the humble words of the centurion, ‘Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof’. Instead of quarrelling over the revised translation, might not our hearts burn within us as we rediscover in the Mass the beauty of God’s word?

The celebration of the fiftieth International Eucharistic Congress in Ireland next year can also bring an outpouring of God’s grace – not just at the Congress next June, but in all of our preparations, prayer and adoration at parish level. The Congress could become a springboard for renewal, especially as we gather together to learn more about the Eucharist, perhaps forming Lectio Divina groups to meditate and pray with the Word of God in our parishes, promoting Eucharistic adoration, renewing our pastoral councils and seeking meaningful ways to involve lay people in support of our priests. In his Pastoral Letter last March, Pope Benedict reminded our Bishops to offer every encouragement to the lay faithful in playing their proper part in the life of the Church. What better year to do that than in the year of the fiftieth International Eucharistic Congress held in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council!

Before finishing, I would like to offer a particular challenge to you, members of the St Joseph’s Young Priests’ Society. Everything I have been talking about has been centred on the presence of Christ at the table of the Word, and at the table of the Eucharist. I have presented the story of the Road to Emmaus as a story of renewal and rebirth, centred on the recognition of Christ present in Word and Sacrament. I have explained that this grace of renewal and rebirth is available to all of us in our moments of greatest despair and disappointment, if only we could enter more fully into the celebration of the Mass. And I have expressed my hope that renewal of our celebration of the Eucharist could herald a new dawn for the Catholic Church in Ireland.

And this is where you, the members of St Joseph’s Young Priests Society come in. There can be no new dawn without the Eucharist. There can be
no Eucharist without the priesthood, which St John Vianney once beautifully described as ‘the love of the heart of Jesus’. And we can have no priests unless we pray fervently for vocations, support our seminarians and work for the ongoing renewal and formation of all the clergy. If the kind of Eucharistic renewal that I have been talking about is to happen, we need priests, new young priests to serve the Irish Church. The Holy Eucharist, in which Christ’s sacrifice is made truly present among us, is at the very centre of the life of a priest. The celebration of the Mass is the highlight of a priest’s day. The privilege of celebrating Mass is the greatest gift that God has given to the priesthood. To pray and work for vocations to the priesthood is therefore one the most precious and important gifts that you in the St Joseph’s Young Priests Society can give to the Church.

In preparing for this talk, I considered and prayed about what I might ask you. Forgive me if it seems so simple and obvious, but I ask you: Do what you do best! Do what the members of St Joseph’s Young Priests Society have been doing since Mrs Taffe founded it in 1895 – keep praying for vocations. Ireland needs more young Irish priests to be the instruments of renewal for the future. Your Society can provide the foundation of prayer on which a major drive for vocations in Ireland could be built. The Church in Ireland is not on the brink of collapse. As a young seminarian put it to me last week: the Church in Ireland is on the verge of an explosion of God’s grace which will come about through the dignified celebration of the Mass in every parish in Ireland. I believe this can be supported by encouraging the prayerful reading and study of scripture, regular adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and more opportunities for all of us, priests and people to delve more deeply into the meaning and beauty of the prayers and movements of the Mass. Like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, our hearts can be uplifted at the table of the God’s Word; we can recognise the Lord at the breaking of the Bread, and then we can go out and make a difference in Ireland and in the world.