



The Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland

SYNTHESIS REPORT FROM THE DIOCESE OF CLOGHER



May 2022

Clogher Diocese Synthesis Report

Introduction

Context of the Diocese of Clogher

1.1 The Diocese of Clogher, in the metropolitan province of Armagh is one of the oldest dioceses in Ireland, dating back to the time of St Patrick who conferred pastoral charge of the Church in this area to St Macartan (feast day 24 March). Territorially, the diocese stretches from Bundoran on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean in the west, to Killanny and Inniskeen in the east, encompassing all of county Monaghan, virtually all of county Fermanagh as well as portions of counties Tyrone, Donegal, Louth and Cavan. The population of the diocese today is 83,882,¹ scattered across 37 parishes which are today served by 49 priests and 2 deacons. In terms of Religious, there are also three congregations of sisters in the diocese and two of priests in the diocese. The Diocese of Clogher contains the ancient place of pilgrimage known as Lough Derg or the Sanctuary of St Patrick. Located on a small island in the western part of the diocese, it has been a place of Christian pilgrimage and prayer since the 5th century. Faithful to a tradition inspired by Patrick, Lough Derg offers opportunities for deep encounter with self and with God in these changing times. The pilgrimage season runs from early April until mid-October, during which over 10,000 visit the island on retreat/pilgrimage annually.

1.2 Significantly, too, the Diocese of Clogher is one which since the partition of Ireland in 1921 has been divided between two jurisdictions – the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Of the 37 parishes, 20 are in the Republic of Ireland, 15 are in Northern Ireland and 2 others are divided between both jurisdictions. Therefore, political, cultural and economic developments have a particular resonance here.

1.3 Drawing from the long history of faith in these parts, and despite the advancing aggressive secularism of recent decades in Ireland, the people of the Diocese of Clogher still have a strong connection to their faith. This is especially true at the local community level and also in terms of moments of personal need. However, in common with other places, there are cultural and structural changes in our society which challenge us. That is why we welcome the synodal pathway as an opportunity to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to us today and how we can together build communion and participation that will lead to a renewed sense of mission in the years ahead. Our hope is that such a journey will help all Catholics across this diocese to

¹ Irish Catholic Directory 2022, p. 318.

rediscover their share in the holy people of God, ‘in the prophetic role of Christ when it renders to him a living witness, especially through a life of faith and charity, and when it offers to God, a sacrifice of praise...’ (Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 12).

Background to Listening Process

1.4 Prior to the process introduced by the Synod of Bishops, Clogher Diocese had, at the instigation of Bishop Lawrence Duffy, already commenced a listening exercise, *Clogher Diocese in Dialogue*. The purpose of ‘Clogher in Dialogue’ was to consider how we as a Church continue to sustain living parishes now and going into the future. Although the term ‘Synodality’ was not used in any official capacity throughout the Clogher in Dialogue process, it is evident from the responses of people to this process that Synodality is very much alive in our diocese and our vibrant parishes.

1.5 The Clogher in Dialogue process began in the late autumn of 2019 when Bishop Lawrence Duffy invited fourteen people (ten laypeople and four clergy) from across the diocese to come together to lead a series of meetings about the future of the Church here. With the help of a facilitator, the group engaged in a series of workshops to establish the key topics that needed to be considered and the approach to be taken. The initial plan and vision may have been for just a series of consultative meetings, but, over time, the need for deeper reflection and a more long-term vision became obvious.

1.6 A total of seven meetings took place across the diocese, one in each of the combined seven pastoral areas, between 2nd March and 11th March 2020. The numbers in attendance showed that there was a positive reaction to the Bishop’s invitation to dialogue, with over 800 people participating. However, with some exceptions, there was a noticeable absence of younger participants in most of the meetings. Hence the effort to engage with young people in an educational setting was identified as being imperative.

Those attending each meeting discussed three questions:

1. Expectations: What do you want to take away from this meeting?
2. Essentials: What are the essential things that happen in living parishes and who does them?

3. Doing Differently: In light of what you have learned here tonight what would you do differently in your parish?

In some gatherings there was a secondary question of what would happen if the bishop were forced, through shortages of clergy, to leave a parish without a priest or deacon?

This last question followed a presentation to those assembled on the crisis facing the diocese at present in terms of the numbers and age profile of priests. It was highlighted that of the 56 priests then active in parish ministry, 55% of them were over the age of 65, with 32% being over the age of 75. It was highlighted too that it would be at least five years before there would be another ordination for the diocese. Generally, there was surprise at the gravity of the current situation. This highlighted the greater need for a diocesan-wide awareness, rather than just the most local perspective. Indeed, a result of Covid, this situation has become even more acute.

1.8 As a result of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Clogher in Dialogue process was put on hold. Despite this, the Steering Group was anxious to continue the dialogue process and therefore organised a series of online Lenten talks during Lent 2021. The topics addressed were influenced by the findings of the initial listening process of the previous year, with particular emphasis on awakening people to their baptismal calling through various forms of ministry and in deepening their faith.

1.9 Following the call by Pope Francis of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Bishop Duffy appointed Fr. Pat McHugh as Director of the Synodal process for Clogher. A task group was set up and met regularly to discuss and plan how Clogher might advance on the Synodal pathway. The Clogher in Dialogue Steering group was disbanded and following a period of discernment a new Steering Group for the Synodal process was gathered; this new group consisted of clergy, religious and laity, from various walks of life; care was taken to ensure gender and age balance. The Steering Group felt that to transition from the Clogher in Dialogue process to the Synodal process, according to the *Vademecum*, the findings from the Clogher in Dialogue process needed to be respected and were therefore deemed invaluable and would form part of our Diocesan Synthesis. However, it was also deemed necessary, particularly considering both Covid and the passage of time, to gather further information from online and written submissions, as well as from face-to-face meetings with young people within the Diocese.

Section 2 - Body of the Synthesis

The responses that emerged from the Clogher in Dialogue process and the 2022 submissions were varied but, nonetheless, had much in common. Outlined below are the key elements that emerged. It was apparent from the listening process that there is much obvious journeying together already happening in local parishes across the diocese.



2.1 *Journeying Together*

1. Sacramental Life – mostly carried out and led by the priests or deacon (Clogher Diocese currently has two permanent deacons) but with help from lay ministries in some parishes.
 - The lay involvement included Ministers of the Word, Ministers of Holy Communion, Music ministry, sacristans, other volunteers, but also those involved in bible study groups which help people appreciate the Word of God as sacramental.
 - Laity who lead the Prayer of the Church.
 - Preparation of the liturgies (where there are liturgy committees).
 - Preparation for the Sacraments is shared between priests, teachers, parents and other lay people where there are pre-sacramental groups.
2. Prayer Life – Personal prayer, Eucharistic Adoration, Rosary, Lectio Divina, Prayer Groups.
3. Education – Boards of Management are almost all made up exclusively of lay people; Chaplaincy – some schools have lay chaplains.
4. Pastoral Care – Visiting of the Sick (priests); Visiting the bereaved (priests, deacons and sometimes by members of bereavement groups where they exist); Safeguarding Committees (laity and priests/deacons); Helping people in need; Communications (increasingly laity – parish secretaries); pastoral care to schools; being a presence in the community. Inter-Church relations and initiatives (laity and clergy). Knights of Columbanus and St Vincent DePaul Society are both very active in our diocese.
5. Administration – where present, the Parish Office is a big addition to parish life; Finance Committees, Property Committees, Financial Planning, Communications,

Maintaining and caring for our sacred spaces, ensuring compliance with charities legislation.

There were many positive comments – some said that, alongside daily Mass, lay-led liturgies in the parish are a good thing; other good things included the John Paul II Awards, Children’s Liturgy, and many of the essential things mentioned above.

2.2 Permanent Diaconate

The role of Deacons was mentioned in several of the meetings, including the exploration of the possibility of having women as deacons (not currently a diocesan function). Where there is a deacon at present, the ministry is greatly welcomed and valued and has shown how things can be done differently and enable faith communities adapt to different circumstances.

2.3 Voice of the Youth

From the meetings with post-primary students, it was noted that young people have faith in God and practice their faith, although not necessarily in the Church forum. They expressed how Church provides comfort especially in times of grief. There is a yearning among young people to bring up their own children in the faith that was passed on to them by their own parents/families. Sacramental preparation was highlighted by young people as providing a sound basis for their faith in Jesus Christ. The report from one gathering mentioned the excellent contributions made by younger people who were involved in Clogher don Óige, (the Youth Ministry in our Diocese). The involvement of youth in the faith, liturgical and social life of the parish was highlighted everywhere. It was noted in areas for consideration that work needs to be done to actively engage with young people today in terms of faith and linking faith with justice and the environment (see 2.10 and 2.11 below). It was also suggested that likeminded young people should be offered opportunities to meet often to deepen and nourish their Christian faith.

2.4 Developing Family Ministry

This helps to build the parish into a family of families. Programmes such as ‘Do This in Memory’ can contribute to this, even if new ways may have to be found in the future to deliver it in every parish on the set dates (due to reduced numbers of priests for Sunday Masses). Due to the shortage of priests, the capacity of priests to meet with families other than at times of pastoral necessity (baptisms, funerals, weddings, sickness etc) is extremely limited. Therefore, new ways of outreach will have to be developed through the parish structures.

2.5 Declining Vocations

Currently, Clogher has one seminarian in priestly formation. With the ageing profile of priests the need for vocations is critical. While as a People of God we can pray for Vocations, it was acknowledged celibacy, although not the only factor, has a negative impact on vocations. It was expressed by young people that the choice between family life and Church life should not have to be made by priests and for young people this was a sacrifice that they were unwilling to make or even to contemplate.

2.6 The Role of Women

It was strongly stated that women very often are the strength of parishes, and yet there are limited opportunities for them to access leadership roles within their Church/Parish. Additionally, the exclusion of women from ordained ministries impacts on both a male and female perspective of a Church which teaches inclusivity.

Several areas for development were identified by the process:

2.7 Developing Capacity among Lay People

Specific training for lay people was identified as being essential to equip them to become involved in and to lead various forms of ministry at Parish level. This will therefore require the training of catechists which will in turn lead to the development of various forms of ministry within the diocese and in turn to greater co-operation between clergy and laity in the preparation and celebration of the liturgical and sacramental life of a parish.

With the declining numbers of active priests and with the possibility of some parishes not having a resident priest the formation of teams within parishes or across a pastoral area needs immediate consideration. The pandemic has made this situation more acute, resulting in several parishes now organising pastoral ministry and administration at a multi-parish level. Involvement of lay people will be central to the success of such new approaches. However, such an approach must have a faith-based and faith-development focus, so as to ensure that the families, schools and individuals may grow in knowledge and love of the Lord and his Church.

Lay-Led Liturgies would alleviate the total dependence on priests for the prayer life of the parish. It would also allow for small Catholic communities to maintain a presence in a church and area. Once again, sound catechesis will be critical for this to be successful and life-giving. While many parishes have Baptism teams, Funeral Teams, Pastoral Planning teams etc. formation and ongoing support is key here if this is to be developed consistently across the diocese. Investment in people rather buildings needs to be prioritised.

It is also to be noted that many parishes do not have the levels of structures for pastoral planning and faith development that are needed. Such structures could be established to operate at a multi-parish level. This would build on another of the key suggestions that emerged from the consultations - that parishes should working more together, instead of each parish doing things on their own and replicating what is happening in adjoining ones, e.g. pre-sacramental preparation or some aspects of liturgy. This is also an aspect which needs to be taken into account in the revision of Mass times, in order to give people more options and to ease burdens on priests. Parishes working together can also help to improve best practice.

2.8 *Outreach to the marginalised*

Two groups in particular, were identified for inclusion and outreach. Young people felt that the Church should be more accepting of LGBTQI+ relationships. These relationships should not be stigmatised by the Church. Love is a gift from God and the Church should have no interference in the classification of love between two people. The issue of same-sex marriage was also discussed.

Also discussed was the question of abuse perpetrated in the past by clergy. Outreach to those affected was also a priority for many. It was pointed out too that organisations such as Towards Healing and Towards Peace, together the work of Safeguarding in the Catholic Church, is contributing towards a different environment in Church today.

Reaching out to families and individuals who have lapsed in the practice of the faith has to be a priority for any diocesan plan. How this is done may vary from parish to parish and cannot be dependent on the clergy alone. Nonetheless, faith programmes and parish activities need to always be configured in such a way that the invitation to be part of the faith community is always to the forefront. It was also suggested that each parish might consider the possibility of a welcome committee, to welcome parishioners and to reach out to those who are new to the

area, to those who wish to rekindle their relationship with the local parish. It would help to build a sense of community if some social events could be organised after Mass or other liturgies, from time to time.

2.9 *Media/ Communications/Public Relations*

Young people highlighted negative press coverage and prejudice around Church and Catholicism. They pointed out that there are very few positive media stories. They contend that Church should not hide away from past mistakes and prove that it is trying to change/reform itself. The Church needs to find its voice and not be apologetic. The relationship between Church and various media outlets needs to be re-evaluated. Perhaps acknowledgement of the role of the media in highlighting the various scandals should perhaps be acknowledged as this has forced the Church to face its past. Perhaps this healing will be an ongoing process for the foreseeable future.

Improved communications at all levels within parishes (including schools, primary and post-primary), between parishes and within the diocese is an area for development. Parishes and the Diocese should continue to develop new ways of communicating and outreach, e.g. each Parish should be active on social media platforms and install a webcam. Much was learned about the use of these communications during the COVID-19 lockdown and restrictions. A review of present methods would be useful. Communications, accompanied by best practice, has great potential to play an important part in faith formation through online means and social media, as well as outreach to the lapsed.

2.10 *Social Justice*

An issue raised by the youth of the diocese is the area of social justice. In doing so, they have highlighted for us one of the great treasures of the Church – Catholic Social Teaching.

Catholic Social Teaching, with its emphasis on the dignity of the human person, the pursuit of the common good, the emphasis on solidarity and subsidiarity and the preferential option for the poor, enables the Church at every level teach and act in a way that is relevant in today's world in terms of the plight of the most vulnerable in society i.e. the homeless, migrants, those suffering from poor mental health, addicts, victims of domestic violence, those experiencing poverty, older people experiencing isolation and loneliness, those living with sensory, mental, and behavioural disabilities. At the local and national level, the Church needs to be more visible as an advocate for the most vulnerable in society. At the same time, it is noteworthy

that many people of all ages in our Church and wider community are engaged in the work of social justice. However, particularly among young people, they may not readily connect it to their baptismal calling, to their Catholic faith and to the Church's proclamation of the Gospel. The call of the Gospel for us all to bear witness in Christ's name to the demands of justice and peace needs to be made more vocal.²

2.11 Youth Involvement

The absence in many of our parishes of activities or liturgies specifically for teenagers and those in their 20s was also a concern. So too is the absence of young people from the sacramental life of many parishes. Engagement with young people noted they find it difficult to identify with or to find a role/place within the Church/Parish life. COVID has negatively impacted Church attendance among young people, and many have not returned post-lockdown. For many they felt that their role in the Church came to an end as altar servers and that teenagers felt that they had no role or that the Church had nothing to offer them. In effect, they indicated that the Church is out of touch with the younger generation. It was suggested that there is a role for technology and social media in terms of outreach to young people. They posed the question: 'How is it that so many of them contribute so generously to sports organisations but don't feel as welcome in the parish?' What do we need to do differently at parish level? Is there merit in a more concerted diocesan or even national approach to this question? The need for greater provision for children's liturgies was highlighted at some of the meetings. Such an approach may instill a sense of belonging, which ideally may continue into the teenage years. In doing this, provision will have to be made for lay-led approaches and child safeguarding.

Once again, the questions that young people put forward and which were absent from the consultations with parishes, also have a relevance here too. Questions around social justice and especially concerning climate change and equality in society and in the Church are pertinent for them. Social justice and climate change together with the protection of life at all stages could provide a platform for a real and challenging engagement with younger people on the wider questions around what is described as 'integral ecology' or, as Pope Francis, puts it: countering the throwaway culture'.³ The interconnectedness of these complex questions could

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2419; see also, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 63.

³ Pope Francis, October 2020, [Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants at the Meeting "New Ways towards Integral Ecology: Five Years after Laudato Si'" \(23 October 2020\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)

provide a basis for debate and discussion through the synodal pathway so as to broaden the focus; to link ethical behaviour in life and the world around us to the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ and the living out of that life in the parish and in the wider community.

2.12 – *Ecumenism and Inter-Church Dialogue*

Given the location, political circumstances and the demographic of this diocese - with a sizeable number of people coming from other Christian denominations - the role of ecumenical dialogue is very important. There is already a good degree of engagement ecumenically locally. However, this is mostly at leadership level in parishes or at diocesan level and is often dependent on personal relationships. There is a recognition of the need for such dialogue to move more into the sphere of lay people as well as into dealing with wider societal questions. In addition, given the more synodal manner in which many of the other Churches govern themselves and address issues, there may well be a benefit to us in learning from some of their practices, in keeping always with the great tradition of the Church. Also, there is a great need for young people to be invited to greater levels of involvement in ecumenical activities and dialogue.

2.13 – *Care of Priests*

Care of the clergy was mentioned at several of the gatherings. Whatever new arrangements are put in place will have to take account of the numbers and age profile of our priests and respect their lack of capacity to take on new tasks.

Conclusion

The Church in the Diocese of Clogher warmly welcomes and embraces the opportunity offered to us by Pope Francis to engage in a synodal way in discerning what God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, wants of us now and into the years ahead. This is something to be celebrated as we walk together across the diocese and also with others across the country and the wider Church, including those of other Christian Churches and communities.



One obvious conclusion from the initial phase of listening is that the overwhelming majority of people across our diocese love their local Church community and want to see it at its best. Even though there may be disappointment, fear and apprehension regarding the challenges facing us, there is a faith-filled enthusiasm that should be recognised and honoured. Upon such enthusiasm a new direction can be taken; one that leads to a deepening of faith in Jesus Christ and in the living out of his message and proclamation in our daily lives.

Many issues and questions have been identified in this first listening phase of the synodal pathway. It is abundantly clear that the model of Church we have is changing fast and that it will depend on active lay participation in its leadership in each parish and community into the future. This will also include the leadership of liturgical celebrations, seeing new ministries – ordained and non-ordained – being introduced. Women are the strength of parishes, and yet they have few opportunities to play a more active part. Alongside all of this, there will have to be a much greater emphasis on catechesis at all levels. The role of young people, their potential, their empathy and their concern for the earth and for social justice places before us both a challenge and a tremendous opportunity. For the Church locally to be a voice for the vulnerable and to advocate for the dignity of all and the common good is something that lies at the heart of the Gospel. Being that voice into the future is a great challenge. Catholic Social Teaching is a great strength, a hidden treasure, which could engage many who are indifferent or marginalised. Also, engagement with other Christian churches at a more localised level and beyond just Church leadership, can offer real possibilities for renewal and reconciliation.

Reading ‘the signs of the times’ is a critical part of the journey ahead. New ways will become clear to us as we journey together, with Christ and his Holy Spirit as our guide.

The synodal pathway is and will be challenging. But, as a people rooted in the Christian faith in this place for almost 2,000 years, we are again called into a communion of happiness on this journey. For this, we again thank Pope Francis; for his vision, courage and perseverance.

On this journey too, we will be called too to be like St Macartan – strong people who are willing and able to carry others on the way – learning and discerning what God has in store for us. We pray that we may be open to new ways, to surprises, as we build participation, communion and a renewed sense and understanding of mission in this historic and beautiful place.

In that spirit and with hope in the Lord we conclude with the words of Pope Francis himself: ‘The Lord always surprises us: this is the beauty of the encounter with Jesus. May Our Lady, model of humility and willingness, show us the way to welcome Jesus.’ (Pope Francis, Angelus address, 30 January 2022).



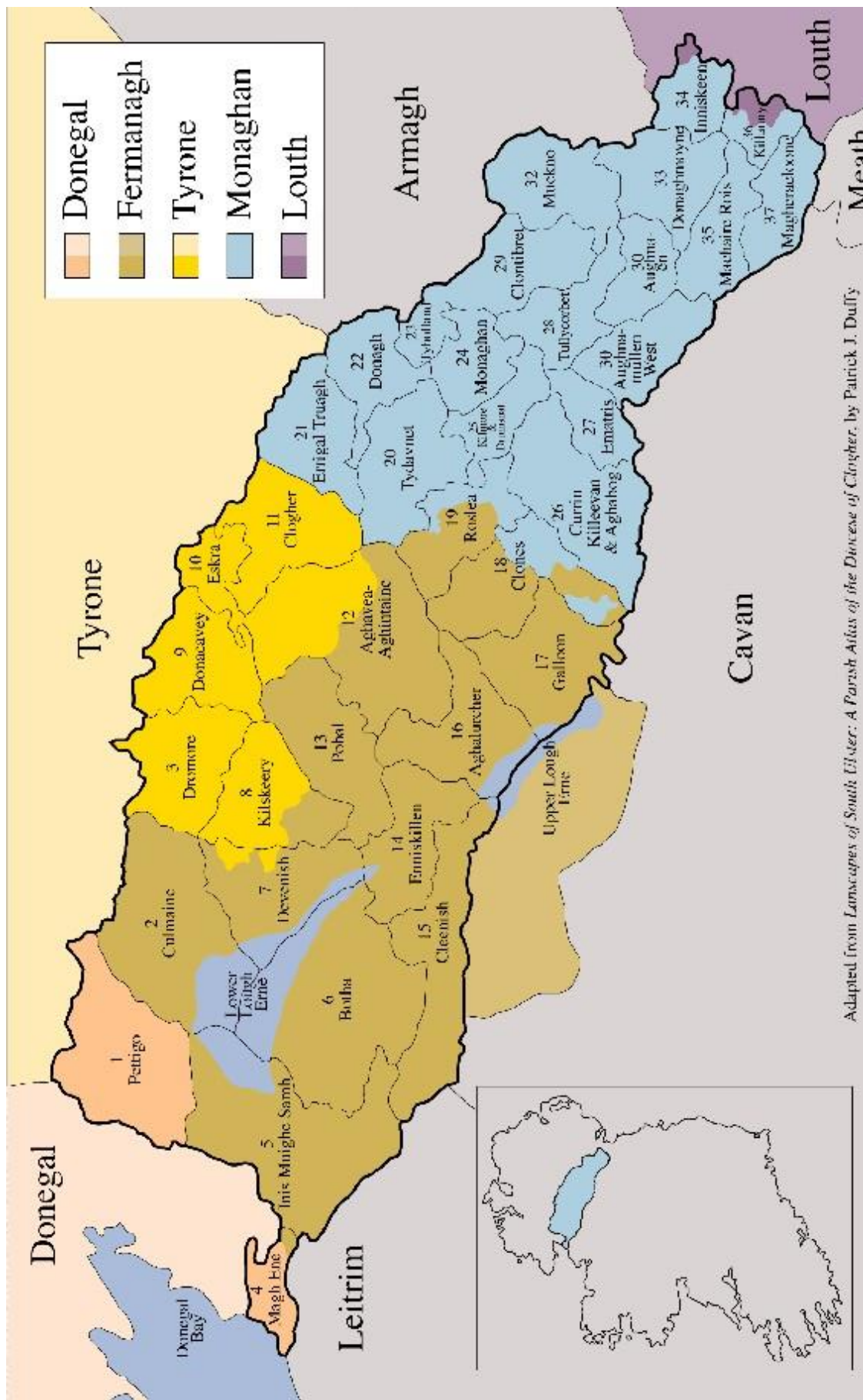


Fr Pat McHugh RIP

Having endured ill health for a number of years, Fr Pat, our Diocesan Director of the Synodal Pathway was called back to the Lord on Wednesday 27th April 2022. Fr Pat's commitment to the Church and its ongoing renewal was total. This he manifested until the end; only last September when his health allowed it, he

answered the call to service to take on the role of Diocesan Director of the Synodal Pathway here in Clogher. He did this with great enthusiasm and courage; he was excited at the prospect of a synodal church becoming a reality. The Clogher Diocesan Synodal Steering Group will greatly miss his leadership, his commitment and his friendship.

Ar dheis De go raibh a anam.



Adapted from *Landscape of South Ulster: A Parish Atlas of the Diocese of Clogher*, by Patrick J. Duffy