



‘Baptised and Sent’

Pastoral Letter from Bishop Alan McGuckian SJ

February 2026

The Season of Lent as a Journey in Renewing our Sense of Baptismal Identity

When Angelo Roncalli was elected Pope John XXIII in 1958, someone congratulated him: "This is surely the greatest day of your life!" His response was immediate. Nothing in his life, he said, could equal the day his parents carried him as a baby to be baptised in the village church of *Sotto il Monte*. That is how it is with all of us. Our baptism makes each of us a child of God—a reality so exalted we "scarce can take it in."



The season of Lent invites us to rediscover this truth. Over forty days, the Church asks us to remember who we are as God's children and how we can live out this identity. We do this as we prepare to renew our baptismal promises at the Easter Vigil.

Pope John XXIII never forgot what baptism meant. He called the Second Vatican Council to help the whole Church remember that we, the baptised, are the People of God. It recognised the laity as co-responsible with clergy in Christ's mission. It opened the liturgy as an encounter with God for all the baptised. Roncalli's legacy remains this: the beauty of our baptismal calling.

As part of the Synodal Pathway of the Irish church, we are asked to reclaim the power and importance of our baptism. After much listening in recent years, our synodal pathway has identified seven priorities to be considered in light of our baptism. During this Lenten season, we will explore the first three priorities together, preparing our hearts for Easter.

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When we gather at Easter to renew our baptismal promises, I pray that all of us, throughout the diocese, will do so with hearts on fire. The world needs our witness. It needs each one of us to live out the call of our Baptism. Our Christian witness — lived authentically and joyfully — is the gift the world is waiting for.

Belonging and Inclusion

Through our Baptism we are Children of God. When we know to whom we belong, we understand who we truly are. We belong to God. We are loved by God. God has given us the great gift of the Church, a community of believers that will care for us and support us in being a disciple of Jesus. Belonging to the Church is about our contribution to the community of believers.

People might think about belonging to the parish as simply where they go to get Sunday Mass. For many of my generation, going to Mass became routine rather than relational. We attended faithfully each Sunday—an injection of grace, like filling the tank at a petrol station or doing the weekly shop. The spirituality was sincere: we valued the Mass and wanted to receive its graces. But it was individualistic. We preferred quiet Masses where we could participate with minimal interruption from other people.

I say this somewhat provocatively, but there is a serious point. If going to Sunday Mass is just part of a routine, then it's easy to see how Mass attendance has had such a sudden drop. Who would continue to go to Mass if they had doubts about faith and didn't find a sense of community and people who genuinely cared for them?

Some years ago, a friend moved north from elsewhere in Ireland. A practising Catholic, she found her nearest church—in our diocese—and faithfully attended Sunday Mass. The liturgy was reverent. The choir sang beautifully. The priest always gave a well-prepared homily. But it was six months before anybody asked her who she was or how she was settling in.

In a community shaped by the love of Jesus, who should feel welcome? Everyone. But this welcome begins with us — the regular, faithful Catholics. Each of us must want to feel genuinely welcomed at Mass. Only when we understand our own longing to be noticed and valued do we become attentive to those around us. A simple gesture can make all the difference: "It's lovely to see you here. How are you?" "Do you want to join us in the Parish Centre for coffee?" "Are you coming on the Parish Pilgrimage to Knock?"

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I will never reveal which parish this was. But could it possibly have been yours?

Newcomers must feel genuinely welcome. In recent years, many people born overseas have come to live and work amongst us. Our parish communities have been wonderfully blessed by their presence, their culture, and their witness to faith.

‘Newcomers are a tremendous gift of the Universal Church.’

They are a tremendous gift of the Universal Church, and we are called to integrate them truly into our parish life. As people move homes through marriage, with work or moving into retirement, it is my hope that when they arrive to a new parish they are welcomed and that their gifts and charisms are used for the good of the community.

Those facing challenges must know they belong. Some members of our parishes find participation in community events difficult. All our buildings and events must be accessible. Even more importantly, our hearts must be open. People must know they are seen, valued, and cared for. We need to think creatively about what additional opportunities we could create in our parishes to reach out to specific groups—families with young children, those who are housebound, people working irregular hours, or those caring for elderly relatives—ensuring that everyone has a pathway to participate in the life of our community.

Those who feel marginalised must encounter Christ's love. Many in our midst long to feel included but fear their life situations place them on the margins—whether due to relationships, family circumstances, past experiences, or aspects of their identity. Following the example of Christ who reached out to the marginalised, no one should encounter harsh judgements in our communities.

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The Church remains faithful to the teachings entrusted by God. Yet we are also called to walk alongside one another with compassion, modelling the ministry of Jesus himself. He calls us all to high standards from which we often fall short. We are "wounded healers" supporting one another as we struggle to heed Christ's call—recognising it as a gift even when demanding.

Many are waiting for the parish to extend a hand of welcome. We must reflect carefully on how to reach out more effectively. At the same time, belonging is always a two-way grace. Each of us is invited to take a step towards our parish family and ask: Where might I contribute? How can I play my part? A vibrant parish grows when all its members discover and offer the gifts God has placed within them.

Yet here is a challenging truth we must face: many of us belong to the Church in a sacramental way, but have never made a conscious, personal decision to follow Jesus Christ as his disciples. We have been baptised, received First Communion, been confirmed—but somewhere along the way, we may have missed the essential first step: a personal encounter with Jesus and a deliberate choice to entrust our lives to him.

Each one of us is called to be an intentional disciple. Each Easter when we renew our Baptismal Vows we are making a conscious commitment to follow Jesus and to contribute meaningfully to the life and mission of the Church.



Co-Responsibility and Shared Leadership

Since most of us are baptised as infants, it is easy to miss the fact that each one of us is a missionary. With the eyes of faith we can see that the newly baptised baby already has a share in the New Life in Christ which will last forever. But the missionary vocation has to be learnt over time. The mission is different from individual to individual, shaped by our gifts, our circumstances, and the various stages of our lives but the call is extended to all and is constant.

‘Baptism not only bestows dignity and a sense of belonging; it also entrusts a mission.’

Growing in baptismal identity means stepping forward to serve, to support, to lead, and to build up the Body of Christ. When this happens, a parish becomes not just a place where we attend Mass, but a family in which each member has a purpose and contributes to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus. Our parishes need to be places where parishioners can live out their baptismal calling in various ministries. We are not merely recipients of ministry but active agents. When we realise this, we begin to take ownership of our own formation and develop a sense of co-responsibility for the Church's mission.

Across the Diocese, dedicated efforts are under way to form and build up Parish Pastoral Councils. These bodies are not simply organisational structures, they are places where clergy and lay faithful discern and work together in shared responsibility for the life and mission of the Church.

Through training, prayer, and ongoing formation, parishioners are discovering confidence in their gifts and growing in the skills needed for collaborative leadership. We are also seeing people learn and use the skills of discernment. Discernment is the art of attentively listening in the Holy Spirit to one another and to the needs of the local community. Many parish groups are beginning to discover that decisions made prayerfully, patiently, and communally bear fruit far beyond what simple planning or administration could achieve.

New Ministries Taking Root

It has been deeply encouraging to see many lay women and men stepping forward in ministry. Lay Funeral Ministry and the Ministry of Consolation (formerly Bethany Ministry) embody the tenderness of Christ as they accompany the bereaved with dignity and care. Parish readers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, musicians, youth ministers, catechists, baptismal preparation teams, and those involved in parish administration and safeguarding all contribute vital service.

Groups like the Legion of Mary and St Vincent de Paul Society have worked amongst us with energy and creativity for decades. New forms of ministry are emerging as well, particularly in pastoral accompaniment and outreach to those on the margins. We must be attentive to the gifts already present in our communities and discerning about where the Holy Spirit is prompting new ministries to grow.

A renewed energy in lay ministry highlights an essential truth: the laity have a proper and irreplaceable role in the Church's mission. Greater lay involvement is not a response to declining numbers of priests but a sign of maturity within the Church as a whole. A vibrant church where everyone plays their part is the best way to foster all vocations.

The Front Line of Mission

The primary setting of lay ministry is not only within parish walls but in family life, in workplaces, in public service, in schools, in local communities, in the world of culture, politics, and social care. The everyday commitments of lay faithful are not distractions from their vocation—they are the very place where their vocation unfolds.

We want our lay people to know and cherish this truth: your home, your workplace, and your relationships are the front line of your mission. You don't need permission to be a missionary disciple in your daily life. You need only to recognise that God has already placed you exactly where he wants you to bear witness to his love.

Discovering and Using Our Charisms

Every baptised person has been given spiritual gifts—charisms—by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the Church and the good of the world. These are not just for priests and religious, but for every member of the Body of Christ.

A charism is a gift freely given by the Holy Spirit that enables a Christian to serve others and build up the Church in a particular way. Some common charisms include: teaching, encouragement, mercy, administration, evangelisation, hospitality, giving, healing, and many others.

Many Catholics have never been helped to identify their charisms or understand how to use them in service of the Gospel. We need to become communities where people are helped to discover their gifts, are formed in how to use them, and are given opportunities to exercise them fruitfully.

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Faith Formation, Catechesis and Religious Education

Every time Irish Catholics are surveyed about the state of the Church today, one theme emerges almost as the first priority: “We are not well formed in our faith. We are ignorant of the Scriptures. We love our Church, but we do not know and understand its teachings well.”

This honest admission does not arise from hostility but from deep affection for the Church and a longing to understand the faith more fully. It reflects a desire to move beyond inherited practices and towards a mature, living discipleship grounded in knowledge, conviction, and love.

At the heart of this formation is the kerygma—the proclamation of the basic Good News: that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and offers us new life in him. Our parishes must become centres of evangelisation where the kerygma is proclaimed with joy, clarity, and confidence.

Reclaiming Our Confidence

The Catholic Faith is a precious gift, handed down to us from the Apostles. Yet in recent decades, our confidence has been shaken. The sins of clergy and religious, exposed so publicly, have wounded us deeply. At the same time, the culture around us often dismisses faith as outdated or irrelevant, valuing material success and personal pleasure above all else.

But here is the truth we must hold onto: the core teachings of our faith remain as true and life-giving today as they have always been. The noise of our contemporary world may be loud, but it does not make our faith less real or less necessary. In fact, in times like these, growing in faith requires serious effort. It is a gift we must nurture through prayer, through listening to Scripture, and through learning what the Church teaches and why it matters.

A Formation Emergency

Last September, Pope Leo, addressing some pastoral leaders, lay and clerical, in his own diocese of Rome said:

“I want to recommend formation at all levels. We are living through a ‘formation emergency’ and we must not delude ourselves that it is enough to carry on with a few traditional activities to maintain the vitality of our Christian communities. They must become generative; they must be a womb that initiates into the faith and a heart that seeks out those who have abandoned it.”¹



These words capture something essential. Faith formation must become part of the life-blood of our parishes shaping how we pray, how we discern, how we welcome, how we serve, and how we witness.

Signs of Hope—and a Challenge

Across our diocese, good catechetical work is already taking place. Scripture study groups, adult faith sharing circles, sacramental preparation teams, RCIA accompaniment, Lectio Divina prayer groups, Alpha programmes, and parish-based courses in Catholic teaching and spirituality are all bearing fruit. But we must be honest. Many of these groups are small in number. Some are ageing, with the same faithful few carrying the load year after year. The question we face is not whether good things are happening—they are. The question is: how do we invite more people in? How do we make these groups so captivating, so life-giving, and so attractive that others want to join?

¹ Address of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV, Liturgy of the Word on the Occasion of the Beginning of the New Pastoral Year in the Diocese of Rome, 19 September 2025.

The answer begins with hospitality, warmth, and genuine welcome. It continues with vibrant content that speaks to real life and real questions. And it deepens when participants experience authentic community—a place where they are known, valued, and growing in their love of Jesus alongside others.

Conclusion

I invite you to use this Lent to prepare yourself: Deepen your personal relationship with Jesus through daily prayer and Scripture reading. Discover or rediscover the spiritual gifts God has given you, and begin to use them in service. Ask yourself honestly: Am I growing as a disciple? Am I contributing to a parish community that others would find attractive and life-giving?

At the Easter Vigil and on Easter Sunday we will gather across all the parishes in our Diocese to mark the extraordinary fact that Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, has truly risen from the dead. This remarkable love demands a response from each one of us—and the response is captured so wonderfully in the renewal of our Baptismal Promises. It is an invitation to reject sin and to intentionally embrace a life dedicated to the love of God and his people.

I pray that as we stand together this Easter to renew our baptismal promises, we will do so with a desire to become witnesses to the Risen Christ who sends us to love one another as he has loved us.

The Holy Spirit is at work among us. Lives will be changed. People will encounter Jesus. Disciples will be formed. We are baptised and sent.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Alan McGuckian SJ". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the "SJ" at the end being more distinct.

+ Alan McGuckian SJ

Bishop of Down and Connor

Prayer: 'Baptised and Sent'

Loving God,

You call us to renew our baptism
during this season of Lent as we
journey to Easter.

Help us to respond more fully to
Your call and send us out to
proclaim the Gospel by our lives,
Through Christ Our Lord.

Amen.

Seven Priorities of the Catholic Church in Ireland

1. Belonging and Inclusion

We commit to fostering a Church of welcome, inclusion and safety where every person can find a home in community and Christ, especially those who have felt excluded or marginalised.

2. Co-Responsibility and Shared Leadership

We commit to empowering all the baptised, women and men alike, to share responsibility for leadership and mission.

3. Faith Formation, Catechesis and Religious Education

We commit to a lifelong, Christ-centered formation that is experiential and equips people for discipleship in today's world.

4. Family as the Seedbed of Faith

We commit to supporting families, the domestic Church, as the primary place of faith transmission and strengthening their connection with parishes and schools.

5. Healing

We commit to acknowledging and responding to the deep wounds within the Church, especially those caused by abuse, creating safe spaces for survivors and for all who carry pain.

6. Women

We commit to recognising women's gifts, leadership and co-responsibility at every level of Church life.

7. Youth

We commit to engaging young people with authenticity, listening to their hopes and challenges, offering them meaningful roles in leadership and mission, and walking with them in faith.