

Address on the retirement from Parish Life of Father John Crothers

It is a great honour to be asked to give this address on the occasion of Father John's retirement from St Declan's parish. There are many wonderful people in this parish who are more worthy to give this speech so I hope I can do it justice. Unlike many people here I was not born in the St George area but came here in 1984, I was born in the Hunter Valley and spent most of my youth around a little town called Branxton. It was an unusual town with some unusual people. My dad used to tell the story of a man who pulled up one day and went into the grocery shop in Branxton and asked the proprietor what would be the quickest way to the vineyards. The grocer replied: "Are you in a car or are you on foot?". The traveller said: "I am in a car" whereupon the grocer replied: "Yes that would be the quickest way".

After discussing that little piece of personal history I would point out that tonight is an historic occasion for the parish as there have only been 5 parish priests in St Declan's history. I have only known two of them. The first Fr Paul Jacobs and the other Father John. Many of you will remember Father Paul with great affection. He was a very capable man and an excellent administrator. He was humble, friendly and truly a servant of his parish and yet he had a keen sense of humour.

I remember once at Midnight mass at Christmas he asked me to take up the plate as I had been to the children's mass and was there to listen to my wife Denise sing in Sister Marcia's wonderful choir. He specifically asked me to go to the back of the church in the foyer as "we only got those worshippers once a year" and he thought that they should be given every opportunity to bear witness in every sense of the word. In other words Father Jacobs was a much loved and respected man who had the common touch.

I thought when Father John came how difficult it must be to take over from such a capable man. It has been my experience that it is always better to take over an enterprise that is performing poorly as things can only get better. The reverse is the situation when things are going well.

However much to our collective relief we realized we had a priest who was different and yet the same. John was very different to Father Jacobs as he would play the guitar plus he would come down from the altar and give the sign of peace to many parishioners. As well as that he had a lot more hair than Father Paul. I notice hair a lot these days. Indeed John had his own way but he was inclusive, tolerant, consultative, capable, considered and dedicated to his parish and his parishioners. He embraced the parish with enthusiasm and respect for its spirit and for its people and their endeavours. He added to what was already happening rather than change its direction.

For the last sixteen years John has looked after two large parishes and yet has not combined them. He has allowed them to keep their own identities and their own styles when it would have been so much easier to intertwine them to lessen his own workload.

There have been difficult decisions during his tenure. When Father Chris Toohey left to become a Bishop there were too few priests to staff all the churches in the two parishes and St Anne's had to be closed. This affected many parishioners but it was explained clearly to them so that they knew the decision was not taken lightly.

The school needed to be rebuilt and several surrounding houses were acquired and the school expanded. A parish council was established. The Youth ministry was started as was the Bereavement Group. Many of you would have attended the remembrance mass and if nothing else had been accomplished during Father John's tenure other than this mass then he still would have added a great deal to all our lives and spirits. There are too many other ministries to name that have thrived at St Declan's in the last sixteen years. Each group has been supported, listened to and fostered. No one has been patronized, something I feel you, John, should be very proud of.

However let's move away from the **business** of the parish to the **spirit** of the parish. I have no doubt at all that the spirit in this parish has flourished under your leadership. In your homilies you have asked us

to **think** but you have never told us **what to think**, you have asked us not to judge but be compassionate,, to **include** and **not exclude**.

I will not forget your enthusiasm for your vocation especially on one occasion at the midnight mass on the first Christmas you were here. You stated at the time that it was the very first time that you had celebrated midnight mass in your own parish and how happy that made you feel. Your joy was palpable and it was an inspiration to everyone there to see a priest so dedicated to his faith.

Your words were inspirational also when you stated that whenever you see anyone excluding someone else in the name of Jesus you know they are wrong because **Jesus never excluded anyone**. You also made the point in another homily **that the only thing that is everlasting is love**, a concept that I found **profound and uplifting** and I will always remember your request that we never overlook anyone in our community no matter how invisible they are to others.

Leaders are judged as much by what they don't do than what they do. You have never modernized or renovated the presbytery; instead you have lived in very modest circumstances. You have never criticized the hierarchy of the church no matter how deep your frustrations. You have never asked us for money and yet the parish seems to thrive. You have never forgotten to thank those who assisted in the liturgy by name. You have never come up with trite solutions to the testing issues that so many people in the parish have to face day after day. Instead you have walked with us along life's journey and helped, consoled and encouraged just as a real pastor or shepherd would do to his flock.

This room is filled with people who have deep faith. To them St Declan's church has been a place where they have celebrated the most uplifting, exciting, rewarding, and life changing moments of their lives and yet at other times in that same place they have been at their saddest, their most vulnerable and at their lowest. What unites us all here tonight is the fact that we have a great affection for the church and for you sharing those times with us. You have celebrated the highs and consoled us in the low points.

So now it has come time for you to pursue a different part of your life as a priest not in parish life. I know that you are not retiring from the priesthood, but you are retiring from the 24 hour per day, 7 days a week commitment to parish life. Some people will say why now. Well I for one can understand why. We place our priests on a pedestal and think they can go on forever, but priests are men. Men get older; men get exhausted and need rest. Wise men know when it is time to move on. **John Crothers is a wise man**.

We are blessed that you have been our priest for the last 16 years. We are better people for it, we are a better community for it and you have fostered the skills in this community to make our path as a community both sure and assured.

In typical fashion John asked me to give the exact same speech on the two farewell dinners so that each group of parishioners were treated fairly. You will know that tonight is for those who booked in early for the celebrations and last night was for those who applied later. Therefore to use a biblical reference with respect to my words, I can tell you most solemnly the last have been first to hear them and the first shall be last.

So to conclude on behalf of all the members of our wonderful parish I wish you God's peace, happiness, and fulfillment in your future. It goes without saying that you will always be one with us and you will always have a home with us. Your strength, wisdom and compassion have made you a true servant of Christ in our midst.

Louis McGuigan
28th and 29th October 2016