



Christmas Message 2023

My dear brothers and sisters,

This Christmas, it is poignant to remember a pilgrimage I made earlier this year to the Holy Land. Walking in the footsteps of Jesus, we visited the sacred sites of Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem, recalling and contemplating the birth of the Messiah, his Galilean ministry of healing and reconciliation, his passion, death and resurrection and his entrusting of his mission to his Apostles and disciples. Christmas celebrates how God became one like us, entered into our human history, and lived in the reality of our human experience. He walked the paths of our world so that we might share in the reality of his divine nature.

It is very moving to kneel at the site of his birth within the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, reflecting on the precarious circumstances in which the Christ-child was born. Jesus knew the never-ending reality of how conflict, violence and war threaten, endanger and overshadow our beautiful world. Despite – or perhaps because of - our highly developed technologies the world continues to be a precarious place for children to be born. This Christmas, many families will live in the rubble of destruction, or in the chill of destitution and homelessness. So many families carry the grief and loss of loved ones who have died. As we kneel in prayer before the crib this Christmas, we are accompanied by our brothers and sisters who continue to suffer throughout this world. We ask God to listen to the cries of his children.

It was into this reality that God entered and where Emmanuel, God with us, continues to be present. The Christmas message of hope and joy is to be found in this abiding presence of God precisely in the reality of our lives, in spite of this reality of pain and suffering. This Christmas, we are all called to walk in the footsteps of Christ, to carry on his mission and ministry of reconciliation and healing, not only in the Holy Land of his birth but in the holiness of our daily lives.

This year, we also marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The difficult and challenging path of reconciliation and peacebuilding is ongoing. Addressing the trauma and pain of the past needs to continue. Across this land children of a new season of peace will celebrate Christmas with expectation, hope and the light of a new future- but tinged with the clouds of violence and uncertainty. We owe it to these children of the season of peace to continue the journey together towards reconciliation, learning to live, work and govern together.

As we approach Christmas, I commend all of those who have engaged with the diocesan consultation as part of the *Pathways to the Future* initiative. In recent months, significant numbers have attended the regional information sessions to voice their expectations, hopes and concerns as the diocese continues to reflect together on how to meet the future sacramental and pastoral needs of all parishioners and of our wider community. This diocesan consultation will continue into the new year with ongoing reflection at the parish and vicariate level to enable the Diocese to discern the most effective way for families of parishes to work together.

May God bestow his blessing upon all of you this Christmas and into the new year, as you continue to walk in the footsteps of Christ and to be missionaries of his peace in the world.

+Donal McKeown

Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Down and Connor