Katholikentag Würzburg
13. – 17. Mai 2026
ZdK

The Sanctuary Cross from the Chapel of the Motherhouse of the Sisters of the Redeemer Julius Maximilians Universität in Würzburg

REPORT ON KILMORE DIOCESAN PARTICIPATION IN THE KATHOLIKENTAG EVENT IN WÜRZBURG – MAY 2026

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Diocesan Delegation: Fr Paul Prior, Leanne Fitz-Ledwith, Bronagh Prunty, and Seán Coll

Introduction

Katholikentag (Catholic Days) are usually held every other year in alternate cities in Germany and are among the largest and most important social events in Germany and Europe. The Catholic Days can be compared to World Youth Days in terms of the festive atmosphere they create. *Katholikentag* has a history going back more than 170 years. They offer an expression of the secular strength and responsibility of the lay people of the Catholic Church in Germany.

The founding moment of the current *Katholikentag* dates back to the "General Assembly of Catholic Associations of Germany," which took place in Mainz in 1848. In that same year, the German Parliament met for the first time in St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt. In a sense, the birth of Catholic Days is thus linked to the beginnings of democracy in Germany.

This festival of faith was initially organized by the “Pious Society for Religious Freedom”, which over the course of history became the “Central Committee of German Catholics”. During the "*Kulturkampf*" under Bismarck at the end of the 19th century, the secular body opposed the government, ensured the survival of the Catholic Church in the German Reich and defended Catholics' ties with Rome against fierce opposition from the regime.

Many of the Catholic Days became important reference points for self-assertion for Catholics in 20th century society as well. It is therefore not surprising that the *Katholikentag* could not be organized during World War I and during the Third Reich.

The *Katholikentag* model also set a precedent, as even now the Protestant Church in Germany regularly organizes a "*Kirchentag*" and recently there have also been ecumenical *Kirchentags*.

Today, the *Katholikentags* are many things in one: a festival of faith, a place for the exchange of ideas and contacts, and a forum for debates that have an impact on German society. Political and religious leaders from Germany and abroad regularly attend the five-day event.

The concept of *Katholikentag* has long served as an important meeting point for Catholics in Germany and further afield seeking to engage faith with contemporary social, cultural and ecclesial questions. This year's programme includes discussions on democracy, peacebuilding, ecology, interreligious dialogue, the future of the Church and the implementation of synodality worldwide.

The Diocese of Würzburg hosted this year's *Katholikentag* and extended an invitation to the Diocese of Kilmore to attend, given the close connection between the two dioceses through St Killian.

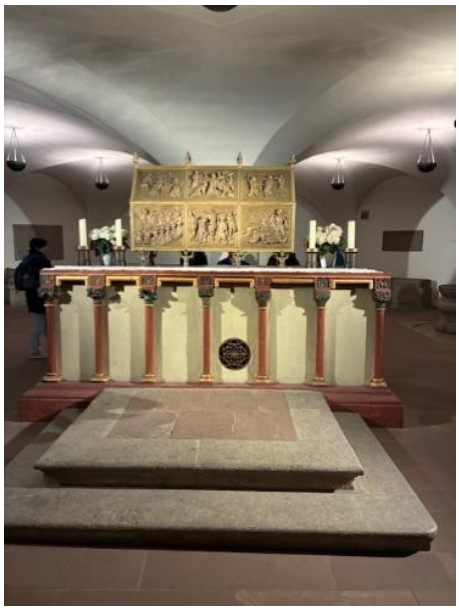
The theme of *Katholikentag 2026* was *HAB MUT, STEH AUF* from Mark 10:49 – "Have Courage … Stand Up" – which was prominently displayed throughout the city, on promotional material and resources, scarves, banners, tabards, and staff/volunteer uniforms.

Wednesday 13 May 2026

Following our early morning flight from Dublin to Frankfurt, we were met at Arrivals by Franz, the driver of the Diocese of Würzburg's Auxiliary Bishop Paul Reder, who drove us to our accommodation at the Burkardus Haus, a diocesan facility immediately adjacent to St Kilian's Cathedral. It was in an ideal location, given its centrality in the city. The accommodation was comfortable and well-maintained. Breakfast was excellent with a good variety of food to choose from.

On arrival there, we were met by Fr Jürgen Vorndran, the Vicar General for the Diocese of Würzburg, and also by Matthias Fleckenstein, a local lay pastoral worker and Chair of the German-Irish Society, who was our guide for the duration of our stay.

We then visited St Kilian's Cathedral where relics of Kilian, Totnan and Kolonat are enshrined in the main altar before we went to the nearby Neumünster Church, the site where the three Irish missionaries were martyred.



After lunch, Fr Jürgen and Matthias brought us on a walking tour of the city to allow us familiarise ourselves with our new surroundings and we had an opportunity to learn more about how the diocese is structured, the role and ministry of lay pastoral workers and the plans to relocate the Diocesan Curia Offices to a building nearer the Cathedral on the Kiliansplatz (as part of a larger redevelopment project) which is scheduled for completion by the end of 2027.

Following dinner, we then attended the first formal event of *Katholikentag 2026,* the Official Opening, which took place on the Residenzplatz. It was there that we were introduced to the catchy anthem of *Katholikentag 2026,* based on its theme of *HAB MUT, STEH AUF (Have Courage … Stand Up).*

Despite the somewhat thundery weather, there were at least 10,000 people in attendance at this lively and musical event during which there were many speeches in German, including ones from the local Bishop, Dr Franz Jüng, and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Once the Official Opening was over, we attended so-called “Evenings of Encounter” at the Oberer Markt and Am Burkardushaus which ended with a period of prayer and reflection. It was at the Oberer Markt event that the Kilmore Delegation met with Bishop Jüng and his Episcopal Advisor, Mr Kilian Martin.

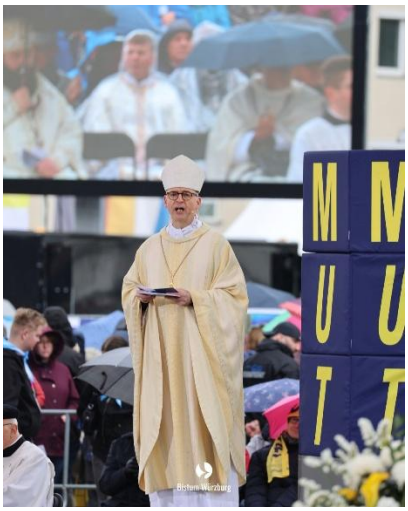
So ended the first day of our visit to Würzburg.

Thursday 14 May 2026 – Ascension Thursday

An estimated 11,000 people celebrated Mass on the Residenzplatz with Bishop Jüng this morning - to mark the Ascension of Christ – a holy day of obligation and, curiously, with many businesses etc closed for the day.

Fr Paul was one of the principal concelebrants of this Mass alongside representatives from Würzburg's partner dioceses of Mbinga in Tanzania and Obidos in Brazil. Other bishops from Germany and further afield also concelebrated.

In his homily, Bishop Jüng called for courage, commitment, and spiritual renewal at the opening service of the 104th German Catholic Congress in Würzburg. He interpreted the Solemnity of the Ascension of Christ as a source of encouragement and a mission for the Church and its faithful. He called Christ an "anchor of hope" to which one can cling when one's life becomes unbalanced. Bishop Jüng encouraged us not to waste the time until Christ's return, but to use it wisely. The Church must also address open questions, such as the role of women, synodality, and how to deal with abuse of power. "Let us not forget: all these problems only came to light because people courageously stood up and shared their stories within the Church. And because others, thankfully, had the courage to listen to these stories and stand up in respect for these people." The bishop referred to the Eucharist as a source of strength for the journey. Like the prophet Elijah of old, the Church needs the bread from heaven to continue on its way and to change the world. Even now, when the faithful grow weary, God calls out to them: "So take heart, get up and eat!"



The service was broadcast live nationwide on national television.

President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Interior Minister, Alexander Dobrindt, led the political contingent. The Protestant Church was well represented at the Mass.

The Mass was very meaningful and engaging (even though we knew no German) with lots of singing and music, lay participation and liturgical gestures carried out in a wonderfully choreographed and precise manner. In fact, the Alleluia was sung to a version composed by Fintan O'Carroll. Though we were visitors in a foreign land, we felt welcomed and part of the celebration. The Mass was also partially impacted by rain, but the sun eventually came out, and the weather did not dampen the wonderful atmosphere. It is fair to say enthusiasm, interest, and genuine participation were very palpable.

Following Mass, Fr Paul was interviewed by Matthias Fleckenstein as part of a short panel presentation. Fr Paul commented on the very strong connection between the Kilmore Diocese and the parish of Mullagh, in particular, with Würzburg in the person of St Kilian. He referenced the visit of the relics of Saints Kilian, Totnan and Kolonat to Mullagh and the diocese two years ago which reawakened an interest in our native saints and their missionary contribution. The possibility of further collaboration between Würzburg and Kilmore was also mentioned with openness expressed to pursue this further.

We then walked the short distance from the Residenzplatz to the Kiliansplatz beside St Kilian's Cathedral where the bellringers put on a concert of extraordinary sounds – solemn, playful, and powerful – to the delight of those present.

After that, there was an opportunity to walk down the so-called "Church Mile" where there were displays by a sizeable number of organisations and was also an opportunity of encounter.

After lunch, Fr Jürgen hosted an informal reception for the Kilmore delegation at the Würzburg diocesan stand in the centre of the city where we were presented with one of the limited Play-Mobil sets themed on Saints Kilian, Totnan and Kolonat.

In the evening, we enjoyed the warm hospitality of Matthias and Michaela Fleckenstein and their family in their home suburb around Frobelstraße during which time we discussed the role of lay pastoral workers especially in the context of celebrating liturgies as well as looking at ways in which the bonds between Würzburg and Kilmore could be further developed in the years ahead. We also visited the Fleckenstein's home parish church of St Alfons which recently reverted back to the Würzburg diocese after being a Redemptorist community for many years.

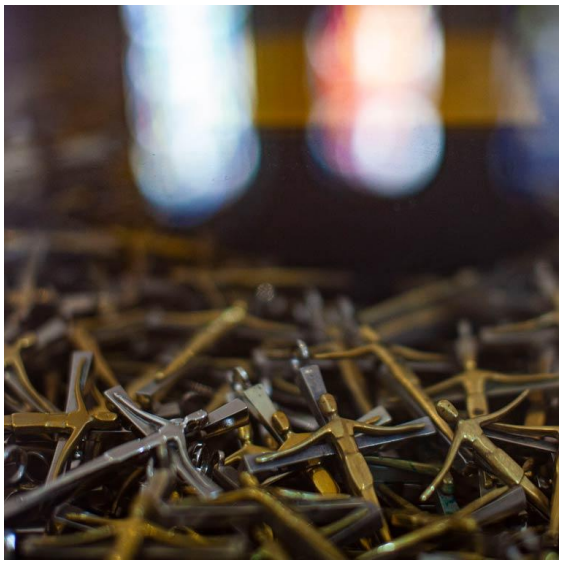
Returning to our accommodation in the Burkhardus Haus that evening after an incredible day, we bade farewell to Fr Paul who was returning to Ireland on the early flight from Frankfurt the following morning as he had First Holy Communion in Mullagh on the subsequent Saturday.

Friday 15 May 2026

Today, the Kilmore delegation availed of some free time in the morning to revisit St Kilian's Cathedral and the Neumünster Church, places of deep significance for our diocese through their connection with St Kilian, one of the great missionary saints of the region and a native of the parish of Mullagh.

In the afternoon, we visited one of the campuses of the Julius Maximilians Universität in Würzburg, just across the street from our accommodation on Domerschulstraße.

The delegation attended a simple but beautiful lay-led liturgy – rich in symbolism – in the Chapel of the Motherhouse of the Sisters of the Redeemer, situated within the grounds of the campus. These religious sisters focus on hospital ministry, refugee ministry, working in kindergartens, providing faith formation opportunities for children and adults, serving in soup kitchens, and providing spiritual companionship.



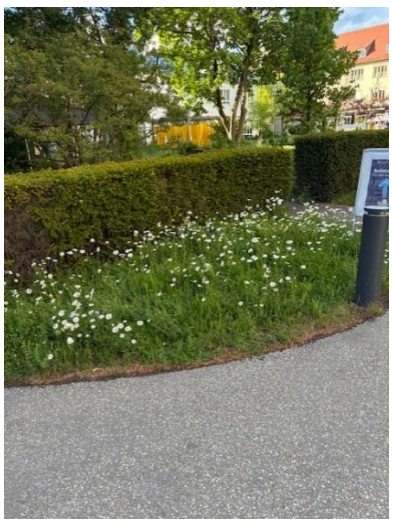
The Chapel was tastefully, simply but very effectively redesigned in 2023 so that the altar stands at the centre of the building with the ambo and presider's chair in an axis from the top to the end of the building and chairs for the congregation to right and to left.

The altar contains the relics of many saints, including Saint Kilian, as well as 1,500+ crosses of deceased sisters. In this way, the deceased sisters of the Order called home by the Lord remain permanently present in the midst of their community.

The theme of the liturgy itself was based on the concept of welcoming and the care of creation.

We had a chance opportunity to speak to some young people from the Archdiocese of Bamberg about their "Paddle and Pray" programme, involving water sports and faith formation for young people. In this programme, participants explore the unique river or lake landscapes they find themselves in and also explore their relationship with God and the diversity of Christian forms of prayer: petition, thanksgiving, praise, intercession, adoration, examination of conscience, contemplation, spoken prayer, and personal prayer. During the exchange, the young people also shared, if they so wished, their personal experiences with prayer.

As we were soon to begin Laudato Si' Week on the following Sunday, we had a unique opportunity to see how the Sisters of the Redeemer in Würzburg were playing their part in caring for creation by allowing wildflowers grow and not mowing grassy areas.



We then had an opportunity to meet Professor Martin Stuflesser, a priest of the German diocese of Mainz and Chair of Liturgical Studies in the Faculty of Catholic Theology in the Julius Maximilians Universität in Würzburg and his colleague and Liturgical Studies Assistant Research Lecturer, New Zealander priest Dr. Joseph Grayland, in their faculty offices on Bibrastraße. Over coffee, we discussed such issues as church music, lay-led liturgies, developments within the German Church on its synodal journey, and also the impact that recent abuse cases have had in terms of ever-reducing numbers now enrolling for theology courses in the University.

Fr Stuflesser was President of *Societas Liturgica* (an international and ecumenical body of liturgical scholars, educators and practitioners that promotes the study and development of liturgy and worship) from 2015 to 2017 and is a friend of our own Monsignor Enda Murphy, Head of Office in the Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments at The Vatican.

Fr Grayland, prior to his transfer to Germany in 2024, was New Zealand's only liturgically trained theologian, and is recognised for his expertise in liturgy and sacramental theology. His role at Würzburg includes teaching, research and pastoral responsibilities at the faculty church in the centre of the city. He is an internationally published author known for his work on the Covid-19 "liturgical lockdown" and navigating Catholicism in a secular country. Fr Grayland has been appointed to an international group writing a continental commentary on *Sacrosanctum Concilium, [The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy],* one of the constitutions of the Second Vatican Council. He was an expert witness at the Australian Royal Commission into the abuse of minors, where he authored a briefing paper on the theology of reconciliation, and has also contributed to the German Bishops Conference's international discussions on synodal theology.

Liturgie
UNIVERSITÄT
WÜRZBURG

Professor Martin Stuflesser……Dr Joseph Grayland

Julius-Maximilians-
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liturgie
Bistum Würzburg

That evening, we attended a concert showcasing young people's contemporary musical talents in a cellar venue before returning to the Residenzplatz for the end of another open-air concert and the Evening Blessing before heading back to our accommodation.

And so ended day three.

Saturday 16 May 2026

Today, members of the delegation split us to attend different events. Bronagh and Leanne attended an engaging, experiential and interactive session on meditation and prayer in the Ursulinenkloster on Augustinerstraße which was based on the theme of "Come as you are … Bring what you have … Take what you need".

In the meantime, Seán took the tram out to the Congress Centrum on Pleichertorstraße on the outskirts of the city to attend a lively panel discussion on "Synodality as a Structural Principle of the Church and Initiatives from Local Churches in Dialogue". The purpose of the discussion was to explore how synodality is being implemented in different parts of the global Church and how local Churches are responding to Pope Francis' call for deeper participation, communion and mission.

The panel featured an opening reflection from Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops in Rome with responses from

- Sister Birgit Weiler, a German-native member of the Medical Missionaries of Mary who is a theologian and a member of the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon in Peru;
- Julieann Moran, General Secretary of the Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland;
- Cardinal László Német SVD, Archbishop of Belgrade in Serbia, and
- Finja Miriam Weber, a young German theology student.

This session was examined practical experiences of synodal structures, participation of lay people, and the ongoing challenge of embedding synodality into the everyday life and governance of the Church.

Each of the five speakers gave a short presentation on their thoughts and experience of synodality and what it means to be a synodal Church.

We then regrouped and met up for a meal which was hosted by Fr Jürgen Vorndran, the Vicar General of the Würzburg Diocese, where we were joined by Julieann Moran, General Secretary of the National Synodal Pathway of the Catholic Church in Ireland, and also by Collette Hermann, a native of Ballyhaise, and now resident near Würzburg.

The evening concluded with a return to the Residenzplatz for the end of another open-air event and the Evening Blessing where we were joined by Emma Phelan from the English Language Department at Wurzburg University. We then headed back to the Burkardus Haus and start packing suitcases for our return home the following day.

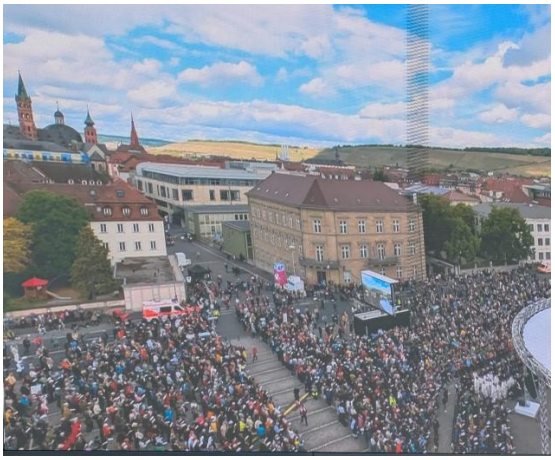
Sunday 17 May 2026

And so, we arrived at the final day of *Katholikentag 2026* and of the Kilmore delegation's stay in Würzburg. Having checked out of our accommodation and put our luggage in storage, we made our way for the last time to the Residenzplatz for the final Mass.

Before Mass began, Cardinal Mario Grech addressed the congregation present and conveyed the best wishes of Pope Leo XIV.

The principal celebrant of the Mass was Bishop Heiner Wilmer of Hildesheim, recently appointed to the Diocese of Münster by Pope Leo XIV, and President of the German Bishops Conference along with Cardinal Grech, Bishop Franz Jüng, and others.

As with the Mass on Ascension Thursday, the celebration of the Eucharist was very meaningful and engaging with lots of singing and music (as we had come to expect), lay participation, ecumenical input, and liturgical movements carried out in a wonderfully composed, defined and typically German manner.



In his homily, Bishop Wilmer appealed for a greater commitment to peace and justice. He said, *"The world is burning! Christians must not be idle in the face of wars and humanitarian disasters … You can't extinguish a fire by standing by and watching. Christian faith is not a retreat from the world, but a call to action … Hope is both a gift and a responsibility … Those who hope see reality and want to change it. Christians are called to make peace and to take responsibility for the world … The Church must not be afraid of the challenges of our time … Don't be afraid of being a battered Church … A Church that goes out and addresses people's needs may be attacked and misunderstood, but it will shine."*

He called on those present "*to carry the momentum of the past few days into [their] daily lives. Have courage, stand up! The Church and the world constantly need new beginnings … Würzburg has shown that we are on a shared journey, each and every one of us*

contributing our own charism. The bridges over the River Main are symbolic of our ecclesial path. We must build bridges to reach others. Therefore, it is good that this Katholikentag has made strong political statements and an unequivocal commitment to democracy. We as a Church will continue to protect the freedom and democracy we have won on a foundation of Christian values, against all slogans that promise us otherwise. Have courage, stand up! This is an encouragement for each of us, including myself. From Würzburg, I go into the future with confidence and trust in God.

Again, the Mass was broadcast live on national television.

Before the final blessing, representatives of the Evangelical and Protestant Churches in Germany extended an invitation to the 40th German Protestant Church Assembly, to be held in Düsseldorf next May. Its motto is "You are precious".

Archbishop Udo Bentz of Paderborn and Nadine Mersch, Chairwoman of the Paderborn Diocesan Committee, extended an invitation to the 105th German Catholic Congress, which will be celebrated from May 24th to 28th, 2028 in city of Paderborn.

Following the Mass, we walked to the Haus der Ausbildung on Domerschulstraße which is the Diocesan House of Education and also serves as the Diocesan Seminary. There, we joined up again with Julieann Moran from the Irish Synodal Pathway Office in Maynooth. It was at this location that Bishop Franz Jüng hosted a most enjoyable Garden Party. We were introduced to Martin Heilig of The Green Party and current Mayor of Würzburg. Some of us met with Cardinal Grech and we all had an opportunity to express our sincere thanks to Bishop Jüng, Bishop Reder, Kilian Martin, Matthias Fleckenstein, and to all who made us feel welcome during the course of our stay in Würzburg for *Katholikentag 2026.*

And so, it was time to say goodbye to *Katholikentag 2026* and to our new friends in Würzburg. Franz, our driver from Wednesday, picked us up again from and dropped us off at Frankfurt Airport's Terminal 2 for our late-evening return flight to Dublin, certainly tired but definitely exhilarated and enthused by our experience of *Katholikentag 2026*.

SOME COMMENTS, REFLECTIONS & LASTING IMPRESSIONS in no particular order

- First of all, the members of the Kilmore Diocesan Delegation to the Diocese of Würzburg for *Katholikentag 2026* are deeply appreciative to Bishop Martin Hayes for inviting them to attend the event in the first place, for his support and that of the diocese.

- Thank God, all went well during the visit and that everyone returned home safe and sound, albeit somewhat tired!!!
- It was the largest *Katholikentag* since 2018 with around 70,000 participants over the course of the five days.
- The spiritual opportunities and liturgical celebrations were truly memorable.
- The personal encounters with others – planned and accidental – were rich and meaningful. We were all struck by the kindliness of the people we met and their willingness to share their time, experience, knowledge and expertise with us.
- It was fascinating to learn more about the structures, activities and roles of the German Church and to see how they can be replicated back home in Kilmore in some shape or form.
- These were five days filled with prayer and encounter.
- The warmth of the welcome received, the level of guidance and support offered by our hosts, the depth of their hospitality and their generosity were humbling, to say the least.
- The camaraderie between the members of the delegation was there right from the beginning when we all met up at the airport and each looked out for the other.
- The influence of St Kilian on the city of Würzburg is very evident and is something that the local people are more than proud of.
- There were plenty of opportunities to enjoy the cultural programme that was part of *Katholikentag 2026* between impromptu street performances and organised events in churches and public spaces.
- The organisation of *Katholikentag 2026* far exceeded anything that the members of the Kilmore delegation ever experienced before.
- There was a very relaxed atmosphere in Würzburg for *Katholikentag 2026*. This was evident, for instance, in the range of events which offered a wide range of styles: booming music, meditative silence, serious sermons, and lighthearted playfulness. The members of the Kilmore delegation might not have always understood what was being said or sung, but we absorbed the atmosphere from those around us.
- The city itself felt safe to us.
- The motto, 'Have courage, stand up!' clearly and certainly struck a chord. The anthem for *Katholikentag 2026* was very catchy and memorable. It was hard to get it out of our heads.
- On a broader note, it was evident to us that there is a very strong link between the political and the ecclesiastical worlds in Germany as evidenced by the number of politicians present, including the President and the Chancellor, and their ease in the company of bishops, clergy and lay faithful.
- The close ties between the Catholic Church, other Christian faiths, and the local Jewish Community were also very evident.
- From what we could gather, we were the only delegation from Ireland apart from a sole representative from *We Are Church Ireland.*

TO WHERE FROM HERE?

1. There is certainly an appetite on the part of the Würzburg Diocese to develop closer ties with the Diocese of Kilmore beyond what is there already and in a synodal fashion, involving deeper participation, communion and mission.
2. Potential areas for exploration include:
    a. Youth and Young Adult Ministry
    b. Lay Pastoral Workers and their Ministry
    c. Partnerships between Post-Primary Schools in Würzburg and Kilmore
    d. Liturgy and Worship:
        i. Church Music – Choirs, Organists and Instrumentalists;
        ii. Developing a better sense of liturgy and of the sacred
        iii. Lay-Led Liturgies
    e. Continuous Professional Development for Clergy and Those in Pastoral Ministry in areas such as liturgy and worship etc
    f. The structure of Pastoral Areas
    g. Exploring the possibility of replicating some of the liturgies celebrated each July as part of the annual Kiliani-Volksfest event in Würzburg such as
        i. Themed Masses
        ii. Youth Days
        iii. Guest Lectures
3. A formal report on our participation in Katholikentag 2026 has been submitted to Bishop Martin and he will meet the delegation later this month to see how things can be progressed.