

NEW YEAR MESSAGE

At the beginning of this New Year I wish all the people of our diocese, at home and abroad, a very happy and peaceful New Year and every blessing in the year 2015.

There is a long-standing tradition that the Holy Father gives a message to mark New Year's Day, the World Day of Peace. This year, in his message, Pope Francis has focussed on the issue of slavery. He notes that even though slavery has been recognised internationally as a crime against humanity and has been formally abolished throughout the world, nevertheless slavery is still widespread and more difficult than ever to combat. He reflects on the different forms that modern slavery takes: men, women and even children subjected to slave labour where they enjoy no protection and no rights and work for a pittance; migrants who are exploited because of their insecure status; people forced into prostitution and being reduced to sex slaves; and many more.

We might like to think that these are things that happen only in distant, undeveloped countries. In fact they also happen in many developed countries, including our own. They happen in cities, towns and in the country and they are probably happening in our own diocese now. A similar issue that has attracted some attention and a lot of concern in recent months in our own country is the direct provision system for refugees. These are injustices which we cannot ignore and cannot pretend to be unaware of. Pope Francis challenges all of us to be more aware of the ordinary ways in which we benefit from modern slavery - for example, cheap consumer goods - and take steps to change.

The Pope pays tribute to the many people who work to combat modern forms of slavery. He singles out for special mention one group who have not received much recognition in recent times. He says, "I would like to mention the enormous and often silent efforts which have been made for many years by the religious congregations, especially women's congregations, to provide support to victims."

In this year, which has been designated by Pope Francis as A Year of Consecrated Life, this is a timely and appropriate acknowledgement. I would like also as we begin this year to acknowledge the work of the

religious congregations in our own diocese in the areas of healthcare, education, social justice and a variety of pastoral works. As we celebrate the Year of Consecrated Life, I wish all the members of religious congregations in our diocese God's choicest blessings in the year ahead.

**+Leo O'Reilly,
Bishop of Kilmore,
January 2015.**