



Homily of Bishop Dermot Farrell

Chrism Mass 2019

I welcome all who have gathered as God's people from around the Diocese this evening to celebrate the unity of priesthood and the sacrifice of Christ by blessing and consecrating the Sacred Chrism and Holy Oils for the Diocese in the coming year. While not the same, the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of all the faithful, by the anointing with Oil of Chrism at Baptism and Confirmation, we all share in the one and unique priesthood of Jesus Christ.

The readings and the psalm of our Mass this evening speak of God's "anointed ones": the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, King David, and Jesus our Lord. All three have this in common: the anointing that they receive is meant in turn to anoint God's faithful people, whose servants they are; they are anointed for the poor, for prisoners, for the oppressed, for the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone. People are anointed when the gospel we preach touches their daily lives, when it brings light to times of darkness.

I greet especially the priests, who, like myself, today recall the day of our Ordination. A unique element in this Liturgy is the renewing of our solemn promises by those who were anointed at our Ordination with the Oil of Chrism. The renewal of the priests' commitment to our priesthood is accompanied by an invitation to the whole community of faith, represented by everyone who has gathered here in the Cathedral this evening, to pray for the priests of our Diocese that we will be faithful to our calling.

During the last six weeks I visited fourteen Pastoral Areas discerning with members of the Pastoral and Finance councils a new model to sustain a viable and vibrant shape for the parishes of our Diocese. The meetings were very positive with many people contributing to the discernment. I thank all those who took part in those sessions. We are rethinking our mission as Church and our life together as disciples of Christ. This mission belongs to the entire church, and not just to the bishop and priests. The full measure of the success of this mission rests in God and we have to find our place in God's story. We believe that God's hand is in the current reality facing us. Sometimes the difficult situation in which the Church finds itself is painted as something forced on the Church from the outside. However, the person of faith sees things differently: God's will is in this situation. The Spirit of God is nudging us towards this new sense of interdependence. Ultimately a church that is in denial cannot fulfil its mission to direct people to the Good News that we have been changed and transformed by God's grace.

Following on from those Pastoral Area meetings I can say with confidence that "the parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the priest and the community... If it proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptability, it continues to be 'the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters'" (*Evangelii*

Gaudium, 28). Our parishes will still exist with their own structure and identity after the changes, but there is a need for increased cooperation between them, for a sharing of resources, for people getting to work with each other and support each other across parish boundaries.

The focus of the meetings was not on clergy, but on the sharing of resources and skills with more lay involvement for a more vibrant parish life to serve the needs of the Church today. To confine the mission only to the clergy limits the horizon and even worse, stifles the initiatives the Holy Spirit may be awakening in our midst. By your participation you have wagered that it is “worth the effort to hold onto the boat of the Church which, despite the world’s cruel storms, continues to offer shelter and hospitality to everyone; worth the effort to listen to one another; worth the effort to swim against the tide and be bound by lofty values: family, fidelity, love, faith, sacrifice, service, eternal life” (Pope Francis, *Address At The Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young people, The Faith and Vocation Discernment*. 3 October 2018).

The Church believes that “the Lord cannot fail in his promise to provide the Church with shepherds, for without them she would not be able to live and carry out her mission.” (*Christus vivit*, 275) Yet, when vocations fall sharply, when scandals break in the media, when wounds inflicted by abuse and neglect emerge - wounds that wreak such harm in the lives of victims and in the life of the Church - when the numbers at the celebration of the Eucharist decrease and the young people vote with their feet, we priests feel responsible. I think the important thing to remember is that we travel under God. Just as the Israelites in the desert were in constant contact with God, and Yahweh spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (*Exod 33:11*), so are we. Even though the Israelites defied God at the Red Sea and later made a golden calf and worshipped it, God never abandoned them. God remained faithful to the covenant he had made with them. God remained and remains faithful. God is always faithful. God remains faithful to his people; God is faithful to us. The one constant in the turbulent story is that Moses was never out of contact with God, and that God remained faithful to his covenant with his people.

We too are in constant contact with God. The Body of Christ makes us participants in the life of the Trinity. As the Apostle Paul asserts: “For our sake God made the sinless one into sin, so that in him we might become the goodness of God” (*2 Cor 5:21*). Our faith calls us to view all the woes and agonies of the present-day Church — the field in which the wheat and darnel grow -- in the light of this relationship. God has wedded himself to humanity forever. This is the source of our hope. We may dwindle at certain stages of the pilgrimage. People may fall away; some of our spiritual leaders may lose their nerve, or prove morally defective. It may be extremely difficult at some periods to recruit spiritual leaders at all. However, the success of the Church is the success of Christ, and it bears the characteristics of Christ. While the Church, like Christ, is first and foremost concerned with the things of God and today it is the very instrument through which God saves us, it is – we are - grounded in the world. We are part of a visible reality, our baptised brothers and sisters. The Church of God persists in the “many people who humbly, believe, suffer and love, in whom the real God, the loving God, shows Himself to us” (Pope Benedict XVI). This visible reality of the Church

cannot be measured. How can we know all the good that is done? Or, measure the efforts to hand on the faith? In this life, we will never know how many people we touched, how often we showed forth the glory of God, not because of any special grace we ourselves possessed, but because God reveals himself through those he has chosen to share in his plan. The Church, for all its human spots and wrinkles, is a mystery; it is God's way of pitching his tent among us, and it is beyond our control because it comes from God. We do our best; we contribute our tuppence worth of effort and ingenuity at this particular juncture of the trek across the desert, but the ultimate responsibility is God's. It is God who has chosen us.

The worst thing Moses ever did was to crack at the waters of Meribah (*Exod 17*). At the beginning of Lent, we heard the account of the Temptation of Christ in the desert; the great temptation was to lose trust in the ways of God, and to opt for the ways of Satan. The worst thing we as priests and people can do is to lose confidence in God. That's worse than pedestrian liturgy, boring homilies or bad catechesis. If we stop trusting in God we are taking on our shoulders an impossible burden. If we try to make ourselves solely responsible for the Church, even the Church in our country, or our Diocese or our parish, we are literally attempting the impossible.

Yet sometimes we try to do it by ourselves. We forget to pray, to cast ourselves on God's mercy every day, and we try to run the Church as though it were a business. We need to ask ourselves what do we rely on? We pray at every Sunday Mass that "I believe in God, I believe in Jesus Christ..." The Creed does not say: "I must do this, that I must do that... No! They are concrete things." This "concreteness of faith" leads to "frankness, to witnessing to the point of martyrdom, which is contrary to compromises or the idealisation of faith." (Pope Francis homily at morning mass, 24 April 2017).

The Church is more than we can see; it is not a multi-national corporation or an earthy kingdom. Corporations look for increased productivity and better financial returns. The Church, however, belongs to God, and economic-criteria are not God's criteria. The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that "he has loved us first" (*1 Jn 4:19*) and that he alone "gives the growth" (*1 Cor 3:7*). God seems, so far as we can tell, to specialise more in death and resurrection, in new beginnings, in green shoots. That's God's rhythm.

God may allow his Church to be slimmed down, but he will not let anyone come and obliterate it (see *John 14:18ff*). God may allow his people to be driven into exile in Babylon, but that will not be the end of it. Always on the horizon there is light, and hope (see *Jer 23:3*). Of course, the exiles could not see the shape of the Temple they would build when they returned home, or what kind of nation they would form. All they knew was, it would be very different from the old one. The parallel with the Church in Ossory is striking. "The specifics of the priesthood's future, like all aspects of the church's life, are unknown (and unknowable). Nonetheless, the God who desires to make all things 'new' (*Rev 21:5*), the God who is 'eternal newness,' empowers the church, through the Spirit, to construct a path to the future" (*Origins*, 27th December 2018, Vol 48, p. 492). We must settle for a different shape of

Church, and having done so, work ceaselessly to ensure that it continues to be a conduit of the divine life to the world, a light to the nations.

Dear friends, in this hour of the renewal of promises, let us to pray to the Lord to make us people of joy and hope. Let us implore him to draw us ever anew into himself – who became foolish to transform our foolishness and who became weak to make us strong (see 1 *Cor* 1: 17-25).