

Archdiocese of Dublin

Archbishop Dermot Farrell's Reflections at the launch of the Diocesan Phase of the Synod

—Communion, Participation, Mission—

St Mary's Pro-Cathedral

17th October 2021

Life is alive! When we reflect on our lives, we see that human life is characterised by change: that which does not change has either never been alive, or is no longer alive. Stones do not change, and unfortunately, life can become like that: life can become fossilized—very beautiful, but no longer alive, a stunning relic of another age, but no longer alive: “dry bones,” (Ezekiel 37:1-14) to use Ezekiel’s powerful image. The way the Church lives out its mission—the way *we* live out *our* mission continually needs revitalisation; just as the dry bones in Ezekiel’s valley of death need to be invigorated. As proclaimed by the prophet Ezekiel, Israel’s restoration is not meant to be a mere political change, but an occasion of profound spiritual renewal, requiring a new heart and a new spirit.

In order to revitalise the dynamics of governance of the Church, Pope Francis has invited all baptised Christians throughout the world to examine the way the work and mission of the Church is carried forward. This way forward is, in the Holy Father’s own words, a time “*to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands, and inspire in [all people] a vision of the future filled with the joy [and hope] of the Gospel*” (Pope Francis Address at the *Opening of the Synod on Young People*, 3rd August, 2018). The invitation to embark on this journey is to *all the baptised*, because *all* the baptised are in the boat together. As we heard in the Gospel a number of Sundays ago, “Anyone who is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40). Our Lord is a Lord who gathers all, who welcomes all.

The synodal process is not something new in the Church (Acts of the Apostles 15:1-21). When the apostles were faced with the first grave question that divided them, namely, whether new non-Jewish followers of Jesus had to follow Jewish practice and customs in the way the apostles did, the apostles gathered together. They faced

a choice—one where much was at stake both for them and those who had come to know the Lord through their preaching. However, they did not resolve this matter by taking a vote, as one would do in the Roman senate, or in the citizens' assembly of the Greek cities of the time. No. They brought from their heritage another way: a way encounter, listening and discernment before declaring "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28) not to impose on non-Jewish Christians the regulations of Jewish law. This is the synodal way, a way of meeting each other, listening to each other and discerning with each other. That is what the Holy Father puts before us.

There is an old story told about a famous sculptor and a child. Day after day the child came into the sculptor's workshop and watched the master at work. One day he arrived and on the plinth was a lion. "Where did the lion come from?" asked the child. "From the stone!" was the reply.

Oh! Said the child, how did that happen?

Oh, said the sculptor ... I knew he was in there, I just had to chip away and let him out!"

God who has brought his people to life ... knows what's in the Church, and God chips away, year after year, century after century letting out the life he knows is among us ...

Could it be that our way of looking at the Church—and seeing only what's on the outside, that God's vision for us, this way of walking together has been obscured—his way ever since he brought Abraham on his journey of faith and brought his people out of Egypt?

Or does journeying together threaten us? The apostles listened to each other, shared with each other and prayed together and called on the Holy Spirit throughout their deliberations. This was not a matter of a few hours. Theirs was a long process. Yet, in this manner they discerned the way forward. They did not have a pre-determined answer or jump to the conclusion before they started to engage, listen and discern. There is a dynamism involved in this process.

"What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?" (Rev 2:7). We are asked to trust the Holy Spirit to lead us together in discerning the changes that are necessary for renewal and reform. What part of the Church requires new energy, renewed efforts, some fresh vitality, in order to bring the message of Jesus Christ to the contemporary world? How do we begin? We begin at a local level in the parish by listening to each another. When we gather, Pope Francis asks "us not to soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties. So often our certainties and make us closed. Let us listen to one another" (Homily, 11th October 2021).

Now is the time to face whatever needs renewal in the Church. We are now called into service of God's way of bringing the Church to new life. Let us discover the same confidence that Ezekiel had in the valley of the dry bones. Remember it was the movement of God's Spirit that came upon the dry bones and restored flesh to them. So, too, with what awaits enlivening in our Church. We cannot renew the Church by surveys or questionnaires. The voice of God must always reframe questions about how the Church fulfils its vision and mission, since the Church is something God makes. Ultimately it is the Spirit of God who will energise the dead bones of our Church and restore its vitality. This is an opportunity for us to listen to the Holy Spirit and discern what God wants from the Church in the Archdiocese of Dublin, from the Church in Ireland and the Universal Church.

"We have worked all night long and caught nothing"(Luke 5:5). There are at least two responses to this situation.

Understandably, some people might say cut your losses, it's useless to continue, give up and move on! The fact that you have worked hard and caught nothing is a sign that you are fishing in the wrong place, investing in the wrong thing. It is natural that cynicism would take over; after all, only fools fail to learn from experience.

The way of Jesus when faced with no catch is another. Jesus has a different experience, another vision: we can put out into the deep. We can journey into more difficult places—into the desert, as it were, where we will come face to face with what is important. What our Church needs today—what we need today—is renewal. This can only be carried out by encounter, mutual listening, free of ideology and predetermined agendas. Renewal requires a radical openness to each other and to *our* future. "Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal...it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter" (*Fratelli Tutti* § 30). It is reaching out towards the other, listening to the other, listening *with* the other, meeting the other, serving the other.

Discernment is needed to know how we can find creative ways to rebalance our internal dynamics as church, to promote deeper communion, fuller participation, and a more fruitful mission. That discernment can only properly take place within a spiritual setting; it is a spiritual process which overcomes the polarisation that arises from the demand for simplistic "yes-no binaries." Life is not either-or, true life is both-and. The dialogue with others does not mean diluting the radical nature of the Gospel or manipulating it by restricting its reach. In the end, Synod is not an event, but a style and way of being Church. The synod itself is only a beginning, but it is an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

"Church and Synod are synonymous" (St John Chrysostom). A synodal church, Francis says, is a church that listens, "in which everyone has something to learn...all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit in order to know what he

says to the churches.” What is called for is a heart-to-heart mutual listening to discern how the way of life that, puts flesh on the Gospel and the living Tradition can be discerned afresh (anew) and lived out in the contemporary world. Sometimes we hear calls for a new church; but what we need is not a “new” church, but a church which lives in new ways. [“There is no need to create another church, but to create a different church,” to quote the words of that great father of the Council, Yves Congar OP (Francis on 9th October 2021)].

Simply put, don’t take refuge in the usual excuses: “it’s a waste of time” or “we’ve always done it this way.” “If everything remains as it was, if we spend our days content that ‘this is the way things have always been,’ then [God’s] gift vanishes, smothered by the ashes of fear, and by the anxiety of defending the *status quo*” (Pope Francis, *Homily at Opening of the Amazon Synod*, October 6, 2019). We need to accept the responsibility of mission as we experience it now. Walking together is the way for the Church in our time. We walk with each other and we walk with our Lord. We need his presence and his word “in order to know what the Spirit, the ‘Spirit of Truth’ (John 14:17), ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).”

Do not give up any expectation of a change. Faith in a real way is that surrender to God and radical trust in God. Let us listen to each other and to the Lord. Here is our ‘both-and’—both the other *and* the Lord. Ask yourself the question: “What does God want from the Church in Dublin at this time? This is how we are asked to respond to the Second Vatican Council’s vision of the church as the people of God.

The synodal way is a way of discernment. The Spirit is the driving force of the life of the Church and of every Christian who seeks to discern what God is saying to the Church. It is not just reading the signs of the times on the surface of life, but in life’s depth. “Put out into the deep!” Let us be attentive to the voice of Christ. May his Spirit guide us as we seek his way: a way with each other, the Lord and the world.

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