**Mass of Chrism 2022 – St Muredach’s Cathedral**

This evening is a truly historic and unique evening in this Cathedral. I know of no other diocese in which the priests of the diocese and myself will renew our commitment to priesthood in the presence of representatives of every Parish Pastoral Council in this diocese, who will also make their commitment to Christ and to his Gospel this evening. I am most grateful, therefore, to everyone gathered here for your generosity and for the hope which your faith inspires. This is truly a very significant expression of placing hope in faith for the future.

Pope Francis has opened up a new horizon for us and has asked us to commit ourselves to the synodal pathway for the next number of years, in order to transform the face of the Church in our modern world. If we can help make his vision become a reality then I believe that this will be the rebirth of the Second Vatican Council, some sixty years after it took place.

Everyone starting out on a journey is full of hope and of fear; hope for journey’s end and fear for what may be encountered on the way. And this synodal journey is no exception. For me, our journey will be on a surface which is much more like the ordinary roads which we travel each day than the motorways that links our major cities today. And let me be honest; fear is very alive, even in this diocese which, in many ways, has been a leader in this whole process. And let me name some of the fears. For priests, who are already heavily burdened from the ageing process and the increasing demands of accountability, data protection and safeguarding, the new emphasis on the common priesthood of all the baptized is a challenge for us and for our commitment to the ministerial priesthood over a lifetime. For lay people, who firmly believe in the common priesthood of all the baptized, the great fear is that the lack of recognition of this in the past may continue into the future. And yet the challenges posed by secularization, where a whole generation of our people is in danger of relegating faith to the past, is common to us all. And the basic question we all face is this; how do we make faith in Jesus Christ real in the secular Ireland of the 21st century?

The recent letter from the Vatican on the Synod invited us priests ‘to look at your (our) communities with that contemplative gaze of which Pope Francis speaks to us in Evangelli Gaudium (no.71) so as to discover the many examples of participation and sharing that are already taking root in our communities.’ And then it goes on to say;’ We are certain that there are many more of these experiences than what might appear at first glance, perhaps even informal and spontaneous.’ The contemplative gaze which the Pope invites us priests to have is to focus on and serve what is eternal, spiritual and at the heart of the Gospel, namely the formation of faith in our time. This is what we were ordained for. This never changes. What changes are, as Cardinal Grech noted, the many examples of participation and sharing already taking place and which we are now invited to recognize and support. And the Cardinal concludes that by acquiring this contemplative focus, ‘the special charism of ordained ministers to serve, sanctify and animate the People of God can and should also come to the fore in a new way’. Where we priests are concerned, therefore, as we recognize, welcome and share in the common priesthood of all the baptized, our priestly ministry is also recognized and once again refocused on what it has always been, to serve, sanctify and animate the People of God.

This evening marks the beginning of a new journey for the Parish Pastoral Councils of our diocese. Since Councils were established in this diocese over forty or fifty years ago, they have given sterling service in many of our parishes, especially in the area of bricks, mortar and money. For this, I am truly grateful. Our recent process of consultation, wisely, distinguished between issues over which we could take action and others, over which we could not, so that we could be free to focus on what we can change and achieve. These so called ‘hot button’ issues are not being ignored. As promised, they are being forwarded to Maynooth and Rome. There they will join a chorus of similar cries from all over the world.

At parish and diocesan level, Parish Pastoral Councils will be a key element in the creation of the synodal church in our diocese, which Pope Francis invites us to form. For that reason, a priority for us in this first year of our synodal journey will be the training and formation – or the renewal – of effective Parish Pastoral Councils. The Synod invites our new Councils to broaden our vision from bricks, mortar and money. The Preparatory Document from the Vatican notes; ‘We recall that the purpose of the Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents but 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, and give strength to our hands.’ This vision may be quite different from the experience of councils in the past but it is not a pipe dream. This is the reality each council, with priests and people working together, is called on to follow. If in the years to come our young people and many of our older, disillusioned friends were to find in their parishes places where dreams were planted, hope was allowed to flourish, trust was restored, wounds were healed, minds enlightened and hearts warmed, our parish faith communities could find themselves in a very different place to that in which we now find ourselves.

And so, as we set out this evening on a new pathway in our diocese, which is synodal, let me give the last word to Albert Camus: Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead. Don’t walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.” This is my prayer for the journey we begin together this evening in this Cathedral.