**Homily at Annual Diocesan Jubilee Mass**

**St Muredach’s Cathedral - June 15th, 2023**

Today we mark the years of service given to God and to his Church by our jubilarians of fifty and forty years. Looking back on those years and forward to the future, I think it may be true to say that they and we might not have chosen this time to be priests, if the choice were given to us.  But we have been chosen for this time. In order to meet the challenges and opportunities facing us courageously, I believe that what we need is a solid spirituality and sense of identity that will enable us to serve effectively as ordained ministers in a synodal Church. This will mean an end to a much of what we did in our ministry in the past and a move towards greater collaboration with brother priests, religious and with our lay brothers and sisters, as we move towards the future. So, what is that spirituality that we priests need to embrace and that will sustain us going forward? What does it look like?

Jubilees mark the passing of time. As we get older, decline in numbers and as the Church contracts, it is easier to identify ways in which there is a dying rather than a rising. At first glance it can seem as if there have been many losses and few obvious gains in the Church over the past fifty years. But we need to take the long view. We must remember that our lives are lived as a part of the whole Church, as she makes her way through salvation history. Therefore, with our faith firmly based on the resurrection, we trust that despite the worst thing that have happened and can happen, God will bring new life, somehow, someway to our world and our time. The fruits of the resurrection might be a little obscure for much of the time, but they are none the less real. And so is the reassurance of Jesus; ‘Behold, I make all things new.’

The synodal journey, on which Pope Francis is leading us, has many signs of things new. For me, a hallmark of this is the recognition, almost belatedly, that it is the Holy Spirit who is always present and guiding the Church. At this time he is leading us into a new chapter in the long journey of the salvation of the world. Openness to this is what we are called to. Surprises there will be but hope will emerge from them.  One positive sign, already with us, is that with the greater involvement of lay people, we are freed up to minister as the priests we were ordained to be. The life and ministry of the Apostles, as defined in Acts Chapter 6, can become a greater reality for us nowadays as we are freed up to concentrate on preaching, teaching, prayer and pastoral care.

Celebration of the Eucharist is the centre point and the still point of our priestly ministry. Leaving Latin behind and turning to face those who join in our celebration has offered us the opportunity to deepen our own personal awareness of the God whom we listen to in his Word and worship in his Sacrament. While, for us priests, our celebration is an act of public worship it must also nourish our own personal relationship with the Lord. Pope Francis says, “Many crises in the priesthood originate precisely in a poor life of prayer and a lack of intimacy with the Lord, and the reduction of our spiritual life to religious practices.” With the decline in our numbers comes the danger of an ever increasing demand for celebrations of the Eucharist. But we must always remember that the Eucharist also nourishes our spiritual lives and therefore we must not reduce our celebration to a religious practice. Indeed, the spirituality of the diocesan priest is founded on the celebration of the Eucharist.

I firmly believe that God is doing something new at present –replacing, as it were, old wineskins with new skins to unleash the power of the Gospel with new energy and power for a new age. So let us embrace a spirituality where there is always dying to self and to old ways in order to rise to a new self and new ways, new mentalities and new possibilities to become a renewed Church.

I also believe that an important step which we may still need to take is to convince ourselves that we have something worthwhile to offer to the Ireland of today and tomorrow. Many voices and much in our world would have us believe otherwise, that our place is in the past. But unless we firmly believe that we have an important contribution to make today and tomorrow, our ministry will be less effective than it should be. Pope Francis in The Joy of the Gospel put his finger on what this is. He said; ‘We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach’ (The Joy of the Gospel, 265). And whether it is recognised or not nowadays, all of us, people as well as priests, are searching for that treasure of life and love which reaches that part of you and me which nothing else can reach. Our faith gives meaning to life, a purpose in life, a spirituality and ultimately an awareness and the experience of a God towards whom we are journeying together in faith and with hope.

During his celebration of the Eucharist at the funeral of the first of the Cresslough victims some month ago, Fr John Joe Duffy said to the people, “I am part of you, part of this community, and it is together that we will make the journey.” In those terrible days for the people of Cresslough, a light shone in the darkness with the leadership shown by the Church. It prompted an article in The Irish Times by the journalist Justine McCarthy. Paying tribute to the Church’s role, she put her finger of the central role which the Church in Ireland plays nowadays and can play in the future. She said, “In the face of appalling suffering, secularism fades away and we turn toward a humble, loving church for comfort…For many cradle Catholics, this is the church etched on the native DNA” (Irish Times, 14th Oct. 2022).

Being a priest in a synodal Church requires that we have a strong sense of our priestly identity as people configured to Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church. It will require that we know God and have the desire to make Christ known and loved. It demands that we enable the laity to enter fully into a living relationship with God, with the Church and with us. A synodal Church needs priests who face the challenges of today with a deep faith and whose faith touches and confirms the deepest faith instincts of the people around us.  Therefore, let me end by repeating the words of Justine McCarthy; “In the face of appalling suffering, secularism fades away and we turn toward a humble, loving church for comfort.”   We have been chosen for this challenge and this ministry at this time.