

Sermon for the Mass of the Oils 2000

When he took up his new responsibilities at Westminster, Archbishop Cormac – “Pilgrim Cormac” as he described himself – was immediately confronted by commentators demanding that he address the seeming decline of the Catholic community. There are, they said, fewer priests, fewer vocations to religious life and congregations diminishing in size and commitment. He replied with words of spirit and optimism that cheered all who heard him. “I do not believe”, he said in his inaugural sermon, “these are gloomy times for the Catholic Church in our country. When the skies are dark, the light shines more brightly.”

I deeply share those sentiments. This Mass is one of those occasions, which fuels my optimism, lifts my heart and my spirit and gives me renewed hope. Because of what we celebrate here today, and because of the spirit that fills this place, I feel strengthened to accept those challenges that we face.

Nevertheless, - and let's be honest - we *are* part of a Church with diminishing congregations; we *are* experiencing a drift away from regular practice; we *do* have fewer priests than we had before. We *are* living in a culture that regards religious faith as simply a private and somewhat eccentric enthusiasm. We *can* look at all these things and feel that everything is going wrong and that all is lost. But if we do so we make a profound mistake and we forget that “the spirit of the Lord has been given us.”

Among other things, that “Spirit of the Lord” constantly nudges us to remember the crucially important part played by priests and deacons in the life of our Church. Make them irrelevant and the battle is lost. This is why it is important that our celebration today has priesthood and ministry as one of its main focuses. Our current situation demands that we look a little more closely at the realities that we face.

Today, we have 114 parishes in the diocese served by 139 priests, 30% of whom are religious. The last time we had a similar profile was in 1946. Then, we had 74 parishes served by 134 priests. However, the difference is that, whereas just over 50 years ago we had an average of two priests per parish, now we have very few parishes with more than one priest, though we are now blessed with the ministry of 20 permanent deacons.

We flourished in those post-war years and I believe we will flourish again but we have to live honestly in the real world. As far as priests are concerned, we cannot continue to cover parishes and Masses as we have done in the recent past. I have already had to ask a number of parishes to share a priest and this is a trend that will continue. If we fail to see beyond our increasing inability to provide a priest for each of our existing parishes, we can only face disappointment and despondency. We will be in crisis.

Everything that we have been doing over the last few years encourages us to look in new and exciting directions. In fostering *communion* and *mission* as the watchwords of our pastoral policy, we have committed ourselves to an increasing involvement of the whole community, both lay and clerical, in the life and work of the Church. By concentrating on baptism as being *the* radical call to discipleship, we are immediately beginning to say that we are no longer merely a Church of the clergy. We are on the way to becoming a Church in which the gifts and dignities of all are engaged. We are learning to work together in respect and love and as we do so, we are beginning to recognise with joy all the great things that the Lord is doing in each one of us.

In parishes, this leads to a greater understanding and generosity. It involves seeking a fuller appreciation of what it means to be able to gather together as a worshipping community rather than splintering off, as we often do, into small groups, each intent on having *their* Mass at precisely the time that *they* want. The pastoral care of the community and its common good becomes the concern and responsibility of all. According to their different gifts, everyone is prepared to play their part in bringing and being the Good News for the world. The faith is taught and learned because it is seen and experienced in our way of life. It is part of the air we breathe; it gives light to our world.

Being a priest in this sort of Church is different from being a priest in 1946. I hesitate to call it a new model of priesthood because it is still essentially a sharing in the priesthood of Christ, but we are being called to work in a very different way. In the post-war days, the life of the church very much revolved around the priest who largely did, or at least controlled, everything – it was *his* parish. It isn't quite like that now and sometimes we can feel lost. But I want to say – and I can't emphasise it too strongly - that the priest is more crucial to the life of the community than ever.

Our Catholic communities cannot exist without the strong and confident leadership of the priest and the deacon. Without them, we have no Word and Sacrament to sustain us. Without the priest, we have no one to gather us together for the Eucharist and we cannot be fed on the Bread of Life.

As priests, we are challenged to a *new* vision of our ministry – but by no means to a *lesser* vision. We now find ourselves both encouraged and enabled to concentrate on those things for which we were ordained. We are to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously. We are to preach the Gospel and explain the faith. We are to consecrate ourselves to God for the service of his people. We are to model our lives on the mystery of the Lord's cross – and all these things are to be done in communion with the Bishop who, I hope, can be a brother and a friend. We are primarily to be ministers of Word and Sacrament, not jacks of all trades. We are pastors, not executives.

But we find ourselves increasingly burdened by administrative demands. We live in an increasingly complex world of 'isms and 'ologies. We know that we want and need to pray and read to be more faithful to our task of preaching, and yet, the urgent and the trivial so often oppress us. I want us to be free to be the good shepherds *the Lord* calls us to be rather than being entangled in the web of the secular world and all *its* priorities.

One of the most fruitful exercises that I have initiated in my time as Bishop – fruitful for me, that is – has been the series of personal conversations with each of you individually. It takes time but it is proving to be a source of great enrichment for me as you share your understanding of the demands of the call from the Lord. I am beginning to appreciate better the pressures that tire and frustrate us and leave us all prey to weakness and failure.

In his Maundy Thursday letter to all priests, the Holy Father says that we know only too well how our human frailty has made it hard for people to see in us the face of Christ. But Pope John Paul goes on to say that when He chose us, Christ was under no illusions and He set the seal of his sacramental presence upon our human weakness. He has trusted us and so have you, my dear people. For the many times I, personally, have betrayed that trust, I ask pardon and forgiveness from the Lord and from you, dear brothers and sisters – and I sure that I speak on behalf of all my brother priests and deacons here today. We are aware of our shortcomings but we know that we are loved. That's what gives us the hope and strength we need to journey on,

and more deeply, into the mystery, which is Christ and into the community of his brothers and sisters, which is the Church.

In a couple of minutes, we come to a key moment as we take again the opportunity to rejoice in the call we have received and renew our commitment to the Lord's service. When I renew that commitment that flows from the priesthood, which I love, I do so with a full heart. I rejoice in the call; I thank God for the gift and I rededicate myself wholeheartedly to that love and service to which I so optimistically and hopefully pledged myself when I was ordained.

Dear friends, I am sure that I speak for all of us who are called to ministry when I ask you to pray particularly that we may be all free enough and disposed enough to respond to the prompting of the Spirit. Pray that we may be given the courage and the hope to welcome and explore the challenges that face the Church today.

To face them, we have been given the Good News. It is a gift which brings with it promise of freedom and relief from burdens. There is promise of new sight to see again with joy the beauty of Christ. The Lord enriches us with the experience of living in this year of His favour and we rejoice, above all, that the Spirit of the Lord has been given us.

It is because of these gifts that we have confidence to rededicate and recommit our lives to the Lord's service – lives, we know, which are lived in the shadow of the Cross, but lived also always with the promised light of Easter beckoning us into hope and new life.