

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2021

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O'Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Vocation of all Christians

The Fourth Sunday of Easter each year is known as known as Vocations Sunday. The Gospel is about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calling his flock, leading them to pasture and protecting them. We are encouraged to pray for vocations this Sunday. I have to admit that in more than fifty years preaching on this Sunday, my focus was predominantly on vocation to the priesthood, to a lesser extent on the consecrated life and in third place, on the vocation of the lay Christian.

Most of us grew up in a Church dominated by the clergy. It came as a great pain to admit that this clerical Church was not as holy as we thought. When abuses by Church personnel came to light, many treated it as an anti-church conspiracy on television, radio and press. There was a reluctance by many Church authorities to co-operate with complainants. It took ages to admit that clericalism was at the root of covering up abuse. We were the untouchables.

A new way of being Church

The Church of tomorrow will not be the same as the Church of the past. Whether we like it or not there will have to be a new way of being Church. Change can be very hard to face but refusal to face reality is to die. Clerical power will be greatly reduced by the serious reduction in the number of priests, at least here in Europe. The majority of priests would have to retire because of age if we were in any other profession. Even with a sudden flood of aspirants to the priesthood, it would take several years to train them for ordination. People will have to get used to clustering of parishes and a reduction in the number of Masses.



We continue to pray for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life but very few new faces arrive. Is it that God is no longer calling young men and women? Or is it that people are being called but are not responding? We do not know. But it does seem clear that God is calling the Church to recognise the vocation of all baptised Christians to be missionary. More than

thirty years ago, St. John Paul II issued a document on the vocation and mission of the laity. His stated purpose was to stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both as a group and as individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church.

Issues to be faced

There are many serious issues to be discussed. Must it be obligatory for a priest to be celibate? Is it possible to have parttime priests available for Mass at weekends? And the really hot potato ... might there be women priests? These are a few of the divisive issues which might easily fester into a deep split or schism in the Church. Today's Gospel tells us that the Good Shepherd desires one flock and one shepherd. These particular issues are important but the overriding questions ask what do we mean by Church and how do we utilize the baptismal charisms of the laity.

A Synod means walking together.

The method favoured by Pope Francis is to gather people in a synod, a method going back to the days of the apostles. A synod literally means walking together. He says that a synod is not so much to forge agreement as to recognise, honour and reconcile differences on a higher plane where the best of each can be retained. The key is in mutual, respectful listening. Every journey begins in small steps and there will have to be little gatherings of people expanding into ever larger groups, parochial, diocesan and national. The reaction of many people is that this way is fraught with danger. I would like to suggest two ideas from today's Mass readings to guide us.

The rejected stone became the keystone.

The first inspiration is the identification of Jesus as the stone rejected by the builders but later recognised as the perfect fit as the keystone to hold all of life together.

When the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were walking in the wrong direction, the Risen Lord formed a little synod with them, walking, listening and sharing the light of scripture with them. He did not change the fact that Jesus was crucified on Calvary. What he did change was their way of understanding his death. For many people today the Church is irrelevant so they have walked away in another direction. My hope is that a renewed Church, closer to the ideals of the Gospel, will attract people to see in Jesus the keystone of life. There is an emptiness in the jigsaw of the heart that only God can fill. I once read that GK Chesterton said that there were five times when the Church went to the dogs ... but it was the dogs who died!

Trust in the Holy Spirit

The second inspiration is to trust in the Holy Spirit who has been poured into us through the sacrament of Baptism. "Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God's children. We are already the children of God but what we are to be in the future has not yet been revealed" (1 John 3:1). Trust in the Holy Spirit who transformed the confused apostles into zealous missionaries. I repeat this little prayer many times every day: "Come, Holy Spirit, renew the heart of the Church, renew the face of the earth."

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Good Shepherd, leading us, feeding us and protecting us. At the restful waters of prayer, you revive our drooping spirits. You guide us along the right path. At the banquet of the Eucharist, you restore our energy. When we walk through the valley of darkness you are there beside us. Our vocation is to hear you and follow you, Good Shepherd. Then surely, goodness and kindness will surround us all the days of our life.