

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

14 November 2021

Welcome

Today is the 14th of November and on this day in 1180 Archbishop Laurence O'Toole died in France. When he was elected archbishop, eighteen years before, he was just 32 years of age. Before that, he had been Abbot of Glendalough and he retained his great affection for that place by returning regularly on retreat. As Abbot of Glendalough, Laurence had been a religious reformer, introducing the Canons of St Augustine to Glendalough. In 1172, he attended the Synod of Cashel, where those gathered wanted to bring the Irish church up to date with the practices of the wider European Catholic Church. As a pastor, Laurence was well known for his service of the poor, which marked his entire time as Abbot and as Archbishop.

Topic

As a diocese, today we celebrate St Laurence, patron of the diocese, a spiritual guide, a pastor and a reformer. We also celebrate ourselves, as a diocese, as a family in the faith.

Steps

As a diocese and as part of the Catholic church in Ireland, the times are critical as never before. Let me name four. Firstly, with all the good will in the world, handing on the faith to the next generation has not "worked" for several decades, for two, if not three generations. Secondly, we carry a history which makes it clear that the church has not always been a force for good. Thirdly, we must take up the challenge of the role of women in the church. We, as organisation, need the participation and voice of women throughout the church. This is a question of justice; more fundamentally, it means fulfilling the Gospel. St Paul puts it well:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

Finally, as we face the imminent collapse of the ordained ministry, the roles and responsibilities of the laity will have to be reviewed and reformed. Taken together, these four issues portray a context critical as never before. You can't beat a good crisis and the opportunity should not be wasted, as Churchill said.

By the grace of God, Pope Francis has initiated a world-wide consultation of all Catholics in a vast process, leading to a national synod in all countries and an international synod in Rome. The word synod comes from two Greek words: *hodos*, a way or road, and *syn*, with. So a synod is a journey we make together. There have always been synods, so in one sense this is quite traditional. However, nothing like this hoped-for participation of all the parishes and all the baptised has ever occurred before. This way of doing synod is *radically* new. What all this means should not be underestimated. The Second Vatican Council proclaimed that the church is first of all the people of God, all the baptised

together. This new synodal process is a re-awakening of Vatican II – in my own mind it is leading really to a kind of Vatican III.

A blunt question can be asked: will this work? Well, first of all, this is new and mistakes will be made and shortcomings will be evident. So far, so normal. Nevertheless, we all learn by doing, as Aristotle said. In Europe, this whole process might seem quite theoretical, even idealistic. But in South America, such a synodal church has operated already for several decades. It is no accident that the present bishop of Rome comes from Argentina – he has lived this synodal church first of all at home.

In South America, they have a wealth of practical experience and expertise on what is involved. Even so, no doubt they also fall short (welcome to the human race, will you be staying long?). But at least there is experience on the ground which shows that a participative church is the only way forward. Also, let us also not forget to place our trust in the Holy Spirit – always ahead of us, always full of surprises.

Conclusion

A final consideration. What can I do now? I think three things. Firstly of all become informed about what is happening. This can be done on the diocesan website. There you will find easy-to-understand presentation called "Simply Synod." Secondly, begin to pray for the synodal process. There is an official prayer, "We stand before you, Holy Spirit," but there will soon be a range of prayers. We should keep this whole adventure in our prayer that the Spirit may indeed guide us and that we might listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Thirdly, when the opportunity arises, especially as parish level, let your voice be heard. Don't hesitate to take part – the synodal pathway will work only if we all take the risk of getting involved.

It is also not forbidden to become excited. Who knows where the Spirit will take us? After a long period of struggle and difficulty, stagnation and disappointment, here at last we have good news – something wonderful is happening. We could permit ourselves to become excited.