

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, a phobail Dé !

I'm grateful to Archbishop Eamonn for inviting me to preach the homily at this Mass which brings together so many of you who give generously of your time, experience, charisms and gifts to serve the mission of the Church here in Ireland, the Church we love.

It's significant that we gather on the eve of the opening of the second session of the Synod of Bishops in Rome. We unite in prayer with Pope Francis, with Bishop Leahy and Bishop McGuckian, and with all who are participating in the Synod, praying that they will discern the voice of the Spirit calling us to be a Church in mission.

It's surely not only significant but also providential that we gather on the Feast of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face – the young Carmelite Sister who, confined in her provincial convent in Lisieux in Normandy, dreamed of embracing in herself all the charisms of the Church – priest, missionary, martyr, teacher, everything! – but who discerned the voice of God in the scriptures calling her to be love at the heart of the Church. She embodies the fire of love that burns at the heart of our Church urging its members, each with their own gift and charism, to go out, to speak, and to offer to the world that is so broken and scarred by pain the message that saves – the message that we are loved, and that God has revealed his love for us in his Son, Jesus Christ, whom he raised from the dead, and whose Spirit is alive and active in the Church.

Since 2021 our Synodal Pathway here in Ireland has been embedded in the universal synod that is now culminating. It has been a time of listening to one another, a time of listening to the voice of the Spirit speaking in the Baptised, a time of discerning where the Spirit is leading us. It has been a time of formation, as we began to learn the skills necessary for being a synodal Church in mission. And we warily, cautiously put our toe into the great ocean of a Church seeking renewal, a Church longing for a new springtime. The longest journey starts with a single step, and the experience of the universal synod has allowed us to take the first step on what will be a long journey of renewal as we discern what it is that God is asking of the Church in Ireland at this time.

As the universal synod now culminates, our focus on our national synodal pathway must now sharpen. It is time to take the next step on our synodal journey together. With the wind of the universal synod in our sails, with all that we have experienced together and learned over these years, and with the confidence that comes from knowing that our dream of a Church whose members put their charisms and ministries at the service of mission in a co-responsible way is a dream shared by the universal Church – we can now put out of port with confidence and hope. And there is a place in the boat for everyone who longs for a new springtime in our Church, and for all who wish for their baptismal identity to flourish and bear fruit.

Conscious that the year 2025 is a Jubilee Year in which Pope Francis has asked us to reflect on our mission to be Pilgrims of Hope, our Bishops have asked us to prepare a synodal process on the theme of Hope which will culminate in a synodal style assembly in October 2025. Over the next twelve months, we will – all of us! – dare to hope! Each of us, in our dioceses, parishes, and faith communities and movements and associations, in our religious orders, in our ministries, and in our commissions, departments, councils, and agencies – we will all dare to hope! But let's not fall into the trap of equating hope with optimism! Let's not think that we can simply point to some things that are working well or some little shoots of new life and renewal and say, "that's hope!" That is merely a search for optimism to comfort us in thinking that what we are doing now is working and might even be enough! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the hope that we are called to live and proclaim is the hope that Pope Francis tells us "is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross" (*Spes non confundit* §3). The hope we proclaim is the hope that love makes possible, and that love is the love of Christ crucified, a self-giving self-sacrificing love. Our synodal journey can only be authentic if it is a journey of love and if we each embrace the mystery of the cross. Our Church has a heart, and we dream of a Church where all the baptised are filled with the love that flows from that heart, because it is the heart of Christ himself.

Pope Francis also invites us to read the signs of the times because these "include the yearning of human hearts in need of God's saving presence, [which] ought to become signs of hope" (*Spes non confundit* §7). Our synodal pathway must embrace the human hearts in need of God's saving presence. We must be able to

sit with and listen to those who echo Job's painful question "Why?" in the first reading: those who ask why our Church failed so terribly to protect children and vulnerable people ... the "why?" of so many of our brothers and sisters who have been made to carry a terrible burden of trauma in our Church ... why so many people believe that they do not belong in the Church ... the "why?" of parents whose children and grandchildren have wandered far from the Church ... the "why?" of faithful generous priests and religious who wonder if their life of ministry has been fruitful ... young people who ask why they cannot find community, friendship, and joy ... women who ask why their contribution to the life of the Church is not valued ...

These are the open wounds in the Body of Christ the Church. But it was from an open wound in the body of Christ on the Cross that love flowed, making it possible for all people to share in the life of Christ and to find hope. It must be from the open wounds in our Church that hope will spring, so that like the Risen Christ, we can show our wounds to the world and testify to the transforming power of God's love. This is the hope we proclaim!

It's natural to ask how our synodal pathway can possibly hope to achieve this transformation. I know what St. Thérèse would say. She would say, "C'est la confiance!" – that wonderful French word which combines trust and confidence. We embrace our synodal journey together with trust and confidence. We trust in the presence of Christ the Head of his Body which is the Church, and we have confidence in the power of the Spirit to guide us and lead us on this journey. And on this journey, let's not fall into the temptation experienced by the Apostles in the Gospel, to call down fire on those who did not receive them. Our synodal pathway will not be forceful, violent, angry, recriminatory – it will be the path of love, because that is the path of Christ, and the only fire falling will be the fire of the Spirit on those who discern his voice.

Dear brothers and sisters in all the various bodies of the Episcopal Conference gathered here this evening, allow me to invite you on this journey over the coming twelve months, and beyond. I invite you to reflect on the hope that Christ is offering the Church now, and to participate in identifying the steps that we can now begin to take to offer that hope as the People of God in mission together. Our synodal-style assembly next October will help us to identify priorities for the Church in Ireland and each of you will be called to discern how

your particular role in the Church can serve those priorities. Perhaps, in your own commissions, agencies, bodies, you could have a synodal discernment around Hope. Or you could participate in the synodal conversations in your faith communities and bring your experience and vision of the Church to those local conversations.

Above all, I invite you to walk together on this pathway. The Lord is preparing something new. Let us walk this path together – following the example of St. Thérèse – in trust, confidence, and love.