

The Wilderness Journey of the Church

An extract from the 2024 Chrism Mass homily of
Archbishop of Dublin Dermot Farrell.

To be led by the Spirit is to be brought into the wilderness; to follow Jesus is to negotiate the wilderness with him. Jesus gives us a way through the wilderness. With him, we come though the wilderness, as Thomas Merton put it, ‘with our capacity for feeling expanded and deepened, strengthened against the appeals of falsity, warned against temptation ...’

None of us needs to be told how our Church is going through a wilderness time. Our faith calls us to trust that this is where the Spirit is leading us. Even if many find this paradoxical, our Catholic tradition asks us to see in our engagement with the changing world a foundational part of our Christian calling. Without discerning what God is doing in our own lives, and in the life of the Church, we remain outsiders to the mystery into which we have been called.

Let me reflect with you this morning on some of the fruits of the Spirit out of our common journey with the Lord – in a real sense, our journey together though this time of wilderness.

In that perspective then, I would like to move beyond the temptation of looking only at what we have lost and consider what we have received. Let me reflect with you this morning on some of the fruits of the Spirit out of our common journey with the Lord – in a real sense, our journey together though this time of wilderness.

First of all, I sense that our Church is humbler. This humility enables us better to see ourselves as we truly are. It is the only way to draw close to the Lord ‘who humbled himself, even to accepting death on the cross’, as the hymn from Philippians, which we read on Sunday last, never ceases to proclaim (Phil 2:8). A humbler Church is a more Christ-like Church, a Church with a different presence; it offers a different path to people, another horizon for our living. That can only authentically happen in the power of the Spirit.

A second fruit I see is greater participation of the faithful in the life and ministry of the Church. Priests and people are beginning to work in a more co-responsible way. Together we are embracing more the reality that these parishes and ministries are ours. The ‘chaplain’ who is a mother can minister in a way that complements the ministry of the priest. It is



not either-or; it is both-and. We have a growing sense of reality, a deepening sense of the mystery entrusted to us. Perhaps things are moving slower than we would like.

Yes there are different rates of ownership and participation. This is not an easy journey. But real journeys are rarely straightforward, and they always take time. As Pope Francis said in his interview with Antonio Spadaro SJ, 'discernment takes time ... many think that changes and reforms can take place in a short time, [but] we always need time to lay the foundations for real, effective change'.

A third fruit can be seen in a changing vision of priesthood. In life crises bring people to a sense of reality; in Church life it is no different. The 'vocations crisis' across the developed world has brought into sharp relief that priesthood, while sacramental,

is more than sacramental ministry; priesthood is also about the charism of leadership. The priest is called from among God's people to leadership and service. It is not feasible to have ever larger parishes with fewer and fewer priests. The constraint of numbers is bringing us to see more clearly what lies at the heart of priesthood in our tradition. Is this re-discovery not also a work of the Spirit?

When the Church's horizon is only about itself, our Church has lost its way. The Church becomes most itself when we reach out to all our sisters and brothers. Christ was anointed with the Spirit, not for himself, but to go out, for mission, especially to the poor, the excluded, those isolated, to the sick and migrants, to all those who are invisible to the world but precious to God. This is why the Father sent the Son, and why the Lord sends us.