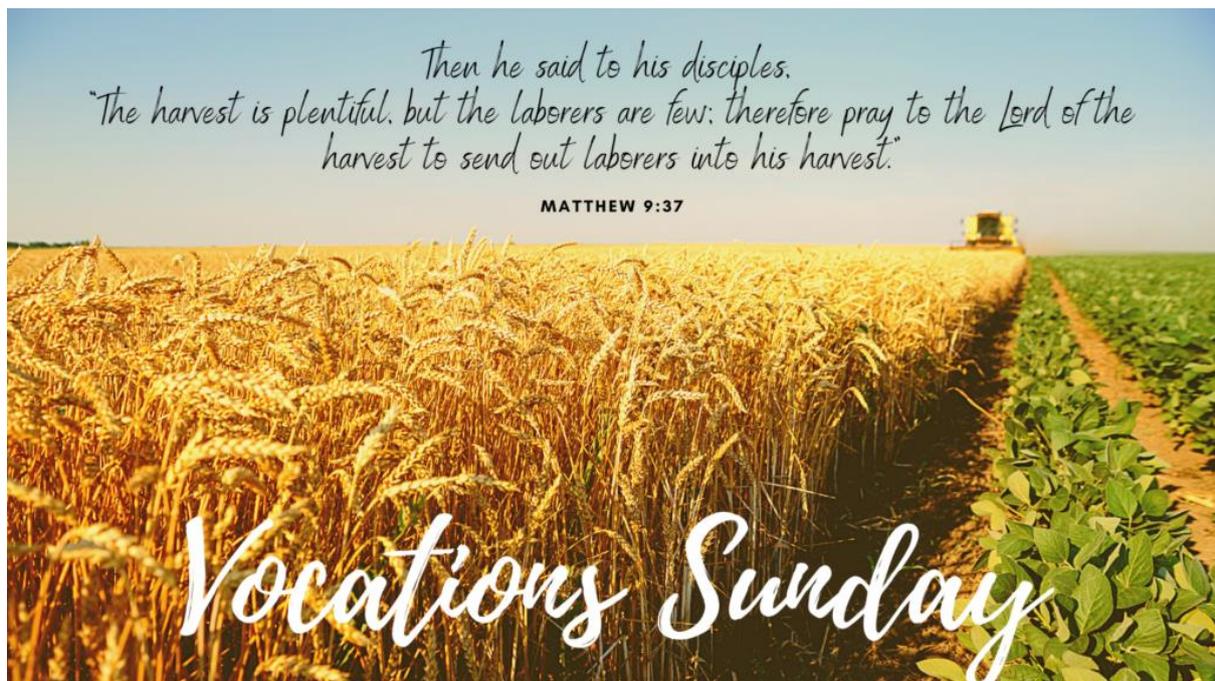


## HOMILY OF ARCHBISHOP DERMOT FARRELL FOR VOCATIONS SUNDAY



### Church of the Good Shepherd, Churchtown, 25 April 2021

During almost 41 years of priesthood, many priests have inspired me. Let me share with you a brief picture of three of them. The first could be described as good company, bright and socially aware. Before the State provided such services he organised meals-on-wheels, day care for senior citizens, schools for children with special needs. Schools were visited each week. He visited the sick—especially in hospital, even if that meant travelling to Dublin by bus. A Credit Union was established locally at his request. Churches were re-ordered for Liturgy. He was a person of remarkable vision.

The second one knew no one by name, but recognised everyone by face. Congregations listened to him for the evident deeper dimension of his words. People would say a man of God. His duties were carried out with diligence. His primary aim was to empower the laity. He began prayer groups, and pastoral councils when neither was understood or welcomed by neighbouring parishes. Charles de Foucauld was his inspiration. He was dedicated to his daily holy hour and a simple lifestyle. All done to enable the faithful.

Of a younger vintage, the life direction of the third man within the ministry is to enable the disadvantaged young people to be the best they can be. In one setting he built a social centre for the parish and for the activities of youth. He makes every effort to permit liturgy connect, with much lay involvement. Again, prayer is at the heart of everything with retreats and pilgrimages and dramatization of Scripture. Not isolated from the drug scene, he has had many traumatic scenes and not a few suicides. God give him strength. One of the great blessings of Pope Francis' ministry has been a renewed appreciation of the role of laity in continuing the mission of Jesus, the one who was prepared to "lay down his life for [the] sheep", as today's Gospel so beautifully expresses it. In our parishes

2/4

today, through those involved in Parish Councils, Finance Committees, Liturgy groups, ministers of Word and Sacrament, and those in so many voluntary roles, the Holy Spirit continues to pour out gifts for the arrival of God's Kingdom, inspiring people to accept the calling they received through Baptism to live as "beloved children of God." In all this, the challenge is to live out our Baptism, to appeal to younger generations, rather than exhausting ourselves in the attempt to preserve structures inherited from another time, which no longer meet the needs of faith communities today.

But has this renewed appreciation of the role of the laity perhaps unintentionally rendered the true role of priest invisible? This is a big question for everyone in the Church in the developed world. Forty-two years ago when Pope St John Paul visited Ireland this was not a difficult question. Everyone knew what priesthood was about. Asking the same question during the visit of his successor three years ago admits no easy answer. As bishop, one of the key difficulties I face, is not that of having fewer priests, but that of not having younger clergy who would be catalysts in the proclamation of the gospel. It is not primarily a question of numbers, but it is principally a question of priests with the energy and strength and rooted in today's Dublin who can fulfil their role as leaders of their communities and permitting the voice of the Shepherd to be heard (see

today's Gospel). While it is not only a question of numbers, the fact that we currently have only two students studying for priesthood brings home the gravity of the situation. Today, many of the priests, with evident generosity of spirit, continue to minister despite reaching the age of retirement (already high at 75). They recognise that the Lord's flock still needs to be cared for; their ministry makes sense of their lives. In a real sense, it is their vocation—what their lives are about. As Thomas Merton put it so beautifully, the “voice ‘in here’ [in my heart] calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfil [what was] given to me by God.”

This generosity, dedication, and sense of call, does not remove the challenge to move beyond survival and find a way that all can flourish—both priests and people.

This is not, perhaps, the time and place to go into great detail as to why the numbers presenting for priestly service have declined so steeply in the recent past. They are well rehearsed, and they are not to be swept under the carpet. However, that valid and necessary analysis is not the full story.

There is a difference between analysis and truth. The Lord has always called people to share his mission of service of the gospel. And no one should doubt but that the Lord continues to do so today. At the heart of the Christian vocation is an invitation, the same invitation Jesus extended to the first disciples, to “come, follow me ... [and] I will make you fish for people” (Matt 4:19). The call to priesthood is born out of that invitation, it is an intensification of it. The one called to priestly ministry is the one whose very life is defined by that invitation, who sees their life tied up with the One who came that we “might have life, and have it in abundance” (John 10:10). A true vocation brings life. It is life-giving and healthy. “Every true vocation is born of the gift of oneself, which is the fruit of mature sacrifice...Whatever our vocation, whether to marriage, celibacy or virginity, our gift of self will not come to fulfilment if it stops at sacrifice; were that the case, instead of becoming a sign of the beauty and joy of love, the gift of self would risk

being an expression of unhappiness, sadness and frustration.” (Pope Francis, Message for Vocations Sunday 2021, citing his Apostolic Letter, *Patris Corde* § 7). The call to priesthood is a call to share the excitement and challenge of that mission. I suppose that is what I sensed in the three lives I sketched, at the beginning of this homily. They were all healthy, full of life, and life-giving. It is that which inspired ...and still inspires me.

Will there be challenges? Absolutely! All types of storms—chaos, corruption, foolishness, even scandal—will inevitably arise. For some, there will be the challenge of study and formation: seven or eight years in seminary, discovering a new way of life is no joke! But the faithful have a right to have offered to them more than just a priest’s personal opinions; they have a right to the rich tradition and wisdom of those who have lived out their baptismal calling as Christ’s followers, and whose journey with Christ has been expressed and preserved in the teaching of the Church. For others, at one stage or another, the challenge will be loneliness: but that is hardly reserved to the ordained alone.

In a society as focussed on sexuality as ours can so often appear to be, the sceptic’s fascination with a life of celibacy is not too surprising, I suppose. And God knows, no one can doubt any longer but that priests are as frail as the rest of humanity!

Such is the vocation to priesthood. We “ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest” (Matt 9.38), and he says labourers—we are in this together, people and priests. There are hundreds of members of the St Joseph Young Priests’ Society who, in addition to financial support, daily pray for vocations to priesthood in our diocese, and to them I want to express my deep gratitude and appreciation. But the need to pray for vocations is a call to all of us in the Church. “the Church’s very name –ekklesia—means ‘a community that is called together’; but the Church is not only a called community, it is a community that represents God’s call and invitation to all humanity.” (Rowan Williams, *The Way Ahead* (London: Church House Publishing, 2001), 91) The Church is mission.

Where there is no mission there is no Church.

If you are someone young—or not so young—wondering if this is what the Lord may be

asking you to consider in choosing how to live your life, don't be frightened, but go and speak with a priest or religious you may know—in your parish or beyond, or indeed with the Vocations' staff of our diocese (check out the website for contact details). If you are a parent, sibling or friend of such a person, and they confide in you, encourage them to explore their questioning heart. Parishioners, if in your parish you witness a person of faith, and hope, and love, whose example of service and prayer you have quietly observed and valued, don't be afraid to ask them—gently—if they ever considered offering a life dedicated to the gospel and in service of God's people. Because in truth, if this is where the Lord is calling, then all I can say is that his heart will know no greater joy than in following. The Church in this land needs priests and religious, as greatly as ever before in our history. The Lord will provide (see Gen 22:14)—maybe not in the way we expect or can imagine, but the Lord will provide. "As I lay down my life, in order to take it up again," says Jesus, "the Father loves me" (John 10:17). So, too, for the one who seeks from life more than just living as a "hireling:" in responding as fully as we can to the Lord's invitation, he will know the joy of which Jesus spoke ... and who can ask more of life than this?

