

CELEBRATION OF 150 YEARS SERVICE OF OBLATES IN LEITH

HOMILY PREACHED BY FATHER FRANK RYAN OMI

ST MARY'S STAR OF THE SEA LEITH

MONDAY 7TH DECEMBER 2009

The text of today's Mass, the Vigil of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, shows the mystery and awesomeness of God's love. We have Adam blaming Eve for his misfortune, and even blaming God for giving her to him! In the Gospel we have Mary agreeing to provide the facility for the fusion of the Divine and the human. The Epistle of St Paul is a song of joy at the success of it all. Our celebrations today reflect these themes: We seen human brokenness in the history of Leith, repair in the freedom that comes with evangelisation, and celebration when we recognise the achievements of our forbearers.

Our most recent ecclesial beginnings go back more than 150 years in fact – to 1827 when Father Thomas Carlyle took up residence and purchased Balmerino House and built this beautiful church which was consecrated in 1854 by Bishop Gillis. He persuaded the founder of the Oblates, Bishop Eugene de Mazenod to move from Galashiels to Leith. They arrived in 1859 and were led by Father Noble who was to perish in the Water of Leith eight years later.

The founder had a motto "Evangelizare pauperibus misit me" ("To Evangelise the poor he has sent me"). St Eugene knew poverty from his Diocese in the South of France, from the East End of London, and other parts of the world that were crying out for reform. He recognised the dignity of each person, the destructive effects of poverty, and the loss to humanity of the gifts that were suppressed by these conditions. He wanted his followers to work with the most abandoned. Evangelisation was not about bible thumping or seeking all out conversion. Rather it was about bringing spiritual healing to peoples lives, affirming them in their parental aspirations, and in a big way providing education for the children. It was about developing support of organisations like the Catholic Young Men's Society (CYMS). It was also about partnership – and the Oblates were fortunate to be aligned with the Sisters of the Holy Family in our mission.

If you look at the priest's house, set among crowded slums, it must have looked palatial. Bit by bit the notion of evangelisation was making its mark in ecclesial architecture, in spiritual and social development, and in Catholic education. Scotland was not at peace with itself and the influx of Irish post – famine migrant workers did not help. Great bitterness between Catholic and Protestant traditions led to violence, discrimination, and a fracturing of social cohesion. In spite of the dynamic religious revivals going on at the time both in the Catholic and Protestant camps there was no meeting of minds, of theologies, no social meetings, and God forbid there was any romantic meeting. There were barriers that could be built on but not taken down, rivers that dare not be bridged because it was deemed more virtuous to keep people apart. Up to the end of the Second World War parishioners would wait outside the presbytery door to escort the priest (whether he wanted it or not) to wherever he wanted to go and to ensure he would be safe. Some of these "guardians" might not be seen inside the church door – but they were sure prepared to fight for it!

Those were the times when leadership specialised in those things that divided us, and of course they always found reasons to fight. But today when we look at what we have in common, we wonder why there was conflict in the first place.

Evangelisation is the tearing down of barriers, it is the spreading and development of the Kingdom of God, and it brings cohesion and prosperity. As we look back at the last 150 years we marvel at the faith and achievements of those who have gone before us. The buildings are just a token of their generosity. Our people have emigrated and taken a mature faith with them to enrich the Church abroad. Our people have embraced the priestly and religious life. We had Father Gibney, Brother Frank McGourty, Father James Morrison OMI, Father Frank Murray OMI, Father Halloran, Sister Margaret, and of course Cardinal Gordon Joseph Gray. I apologise for those I have left out!

This occasion is not just about the past; it is also about the legacy we leave to future generations. The writings of Charles Dickens possibly best describe the poverty that Eugene de Mazenod witnessed when he visited London. Today we could turn to leaders of the nations at Copenhagen and the climate change summit taking place there for a summary of what poverty is about: A scarcity of clean air, a scarcity of water, and as sea levels rise, a scarcity of land and food. As these global resources diminish the profile of a new kind of conflict emerges. Now is not too late to create this awareness and amend our wasteful habits. In 1850 the big issue in Scotland was how to do away with toll roads – not that they were any good, but they were private and expensive to use. Today we begin to realise how fragile our world is: And how vulnerable we are as human beings to all the forces of nature. Evangelisation takes on a new meaning.

But it is not the big issues that determine life in a parish. It is the regular attendance of the worshipping community gathered around the altar of sacrifice. You hold and transmit the faith, you are God alive in the community. You hold the richness of where we have come, you provide memories for the younger members of community. You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth, and you make the future secure. Your regular presence here, and active participation, is challenged by the call: *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* – to evangelise the poor he has sent me.

That is not a dour mission: It brings out the joy and wholeness of a person. So let me give a few memorable examples from my experience.

I remember in the early 70's going to Spain with a group from the Youth Club and we stopped off at McDonalds in Kings Cross for refreshments. And Sir Tom I want to say "thank you" for helping us get that mini bus – we had so much fun and visited so many places – it was a great educational and social development facility. The youth were very respectful those days and they were saying in a loud mouth kind of way: "Father, when is our next stop"; "Father, have we got time to look around Kings Cross". It was "Father this", "Father that", and "Father the other". I was in civvies and this kind of dialogue fascinated a young McDonalds employee who was cleaning the tables. He asked: "Is he really your father?" – To which one of the smart ones replied: "O yes he is, but we all have different mothers!"

Father O'Driscoll started off his pastoral ministry here in Leith after spending nearly fifty years teaching in North Wales. He had never baptised or married anyone! So he asked Father Bagnall if he could accompany him on the next sick call. A few days later word came in that an elderly lady had collapsed in the cottages near Fort House, so they rushed up to attend the old lady. As they arrived she was being carried out on a stretcher to the ambulance. The bearers stopped to allow a conversation to take place. Father O'Driscoll describes how she looked at him, then Father Bagnall, and then she answered back to him: "Two priests! I must be very bad!"

Tenements around Leith are not places where you might expect to find scholars of Teilhard de Chardin. Some years ago an old lady died and as her family went through her prayer books they found this prayer, which she recited every night before she went to sleep. They were amazed and gave me a copy written in her own handwriting:

“When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more, they touch my mind); when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all, at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the greatest unknown forces that have formed me; in all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is You (provided my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibres of my being, in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within Yourself.....”

Evangelisation gives people the inspiration and ability to live well, it also gives them the ability to surrender themselves at peace to the God who made them.

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate rightly celebrate today 150 years of the dedicated service of our predecessor and colleagues, our partners in the pews, and we celebrate too the supportive leadership of our Bishops, and Diocesan Priests and Religious.

“Laudetur Jesus Christus et Maria Immaculata”
(Let us praise Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate)