

CENTENARY OF ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH, LONG TOWER, DERRY

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN SPECIAL ENVOY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

TUESDAY 9TH JUNE 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It was indeed with very great joy that I received a message dated 2nd May 2009 from Pope Benedict XVI in Rome indicating that he had appointed me as his Special Envoy to the centenary celebrations of St Columba's Church, Long Tower, with these celebrations taking place on Tuesday 9th June 2009, the Feast of St Columba.

I am indeed very happy to be with you for this occasion as the Special Envoy of Pope Benedict XVI – myself being a son of Ireland, born in Ballycastle, Co Antrim, and one of those many thousands of Irish priests who have lived out their vocation to the Priesthood in Scotland.

Our celebrations at this time are an invaluable part of the “great river of Christianity” of which the late Pope John Paul II spoke in the Year of Columba 1997. That river of Christianity began with the birth of Jesus Christ; it has continued through the centuries with the ministry of men like St Columba in Ireland and Scotland; and continues right up to our own time as we commemorate the centenary of this church, beloved in history and dedicated to St Columba, the Long Tower church here in the City of Derry.

LIFE OF ST COLUMBA:

The life of St Columba is known to you all – and consequently I simply remind you of some major events.

Columba of Gartan, born in 521, had his life very fully described by Adomnan, his biographer and ninth successor as Abbot of Iona. Adomnan writes that Columba was a descendent of the royal line of the O'Neills, that he was educated by Cruithnechan, a Priest of Kilmacrenan, that he trained for the Priesthood under St Finian of Clonard and studied under St Mobhi at Glasnevin.

It was very moving earlier today visiting his birth place as also the place reputed to have been the area where Columba received the Sacrament of Baptism.

St Columba himself founded various monasteries beginning with Derry; and in 563 travelled to Scotland with twelve companions where initially he landed at the southern tip of the Kintyre Peninsula before moving further north up the West Coast and in **563 was granted land on the Island of Iona** to become the centre of his evangelising mission to the Picts. The reputation of Columba as a holy man soon spread; he played a major role in the politics of his country; and we are told that he spent his last hours copying a book of the psalms ending with the words: “They who seek the Lord lack nothing that is good”.

HISTORY OF LONG TOWER CHURCH:

The history of this magnificent Long Tower church is as ancient as the history of St Columba itself. It is firmly believed that in **546 St Columba established his monastery and church here** in this area of your city of Derry. The **Black Church (Dubh Regles)** was the monastic church of St Columba and the building survived well down the centuries since then.

It was in the year **1164** that the ‘**Teampall Mór**’ was built. This gives its name to the present city parish and was built close to the site of the present Long Tower church.

It was not until **1784** that **Father John Lynch** started the building of the present Long Tower church with fundraising for the church being assisted by both Catholics and Protestants alike. It is very moving reading the beautiful commemorative stone outside which bears the inscription:

“Here grew the hawthorn tree under whose shade during every lull of the persecutions, Mass was frequently offered from 1585 to 1784. The last Penal Mass was celebrated here in 1784 by Father John Lynch, who partly rebuilt the Long Tower and who lies buried beneath. He died 20th December 1786”.

Bishop John Keys O’Doherty a native of Derry and closely linked with the Long Tower throughout his life and even in his death had a particular devotion to this church and had plans to replace the old church but died before seeing it completed. This task was left to **Bishop Charles McHugh** who was Bishop of Derry but two years when the new Long Tower Church was completed and dedicated in 1909. He himself had laid the foundation stone of the new St Columba’s church at Long Tower having a great personal devotion to St Columba. While High Mass was being celebrated in the new church another distinguished priest of the Derry Diocese **Monsignor Philip O’Doherty** celebrated Mass in the open at the Altar near the hawthorn tree where Penal Day Masses were offered – thus linking with the past what was happening in the new.

Many people still regard the Long Tower church as the home of Catholicism in Derry – even though the **construction of St Eugene’s Cathedral in 1873** took place. A sense of history, a sense of belonging, a sense of being linked with the “holy dead of Derry” and the “Saints of Derry”; a sense of association with St Columba himself – has continued down through the centuries with the Long Tower church being the focal point of that love and affection and historical sense.

OUR FAITH TODAY:

However at this time we are not simply asked to look back with great nostalgia to the opening of this magnificent church 100 years ago; or even to look back further to 1164 when the Teampall Mór was built; or indeed to 546 when St Columba established his monastery here on this site.

Of course we do look back with nostalgia and with a very great sense of our faith and our own place in the history of this area of Derry, of Ireland. But we are asked to do more and **Pope Benedict XVI** has asked me to stress this to you. He wrote in that very moving letter of appointment to me when appointing me his Special Envoy:

“This celebration provides the possibility and the opportunity not only to recall the actual event but also, by applying those early teachings to modern challenges, to encourage people to livelier devotion, firmer faith and stronger resolution”.

And that is what I do at this time. I ask you gathered here in and around Long Church to practice that livelier devotion, be ever firm in your faith, and go forward with stronger resolution.

ANSWERING THE POPE'S CALL:

In the **Acts of the Apostles**, Jesus calls on those first Apostles of his to “be my witnesses, not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judea and Samaria and indeed to the ends of the earth”. Some 27 years ago on his pastoral visit to Scotland, Pope John Paul II indicated that: “We find it harder to follow Christ today than appears to have been the case before. Witnessing to him in modern life means a daily contest. As believers we are constantly exposed to pressures by modern society, which would compel us to conform to the standards of this secular age, substitute new priorities, restrict our aspirations at the risk of compromising our Christian conscience”.

I am aware that throughout the past 2000 years Christians throughout the world and especially the Catholics of Ireland have witnessed to Christ in an outstanding way despite, as we sing, “Dungeon, Fire and Sword”, despite difficulties and persecution. **Something of that same strength of witness is asked of you today in a different world with different pressures and with different demands being made upon you.** You must be that people of prayer and Christian action, dedicated to Mass, the Sacraments and devotions, with your prayer inspiring you to live Christ-like lives in the world of today. As Columba was a monk who found his vocation strengthened in prayer – so too must you with the examples of your priests and sisters and those Friars of the Renewal, soon to join you in your Christian apostolate in this parish.

Perhaps we can all take heart from those words of our present **Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical letter in 2007** when he stated: “The first and fundamental mission that we receive from the Sacred Mysteries we celebrate is that of **bearing witness by our lives**. The wonder we experience that the gift God has made to us in Christ gives new impulse to our lives and commits us to becoming witnesses of his love”.

Here in Derry, you are the proud inheritors of a **magnificent building**. However, rather more important than the building itself is the **faith which has been handed on to you** – that faith which calls you to profess your belief in Jesus and in his Church, that faith which calls upon you to be witnesses of Christ here in our own City, but also throughout the world.

CONCLUSION:

May that same St Columba, who lived his faith here in this City and witnessed to that faith in Iona and throughout Scotland, inspire us in the challenges which face us at this present time as Columba faced the challenges confronting him in his life almost 1,500 years ago.

At the end of this Mass, I will be privileged to hand on to you, at his request, the Apostolic Blessing of Our Holy Father the Pope. As we ask God's blessing on ourselves, so too let us ask that same blessing on Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, who has sent me here to you to be his Special Envoy.