

FUNERAL MASS OF MONSIGNOR JOHN JAMES MCMEEL
ST PAUL’S, GLENROTHES
HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O’BRIEN
THURSDAY 2 APRIL 2009

Introduction:

It is indeed a privilege being here with you today as we celebrate this Requiem Mass for the happy repose of the soul of your former parish priest, the much-loved Monsignor John James McMeel.

Here with us this morning we are delighted to have Bishop Donal McKeown, Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Down and Connor, Ireland, a nephew of the late Monsignor John – along with relatives and friends of the McMeel Family, who have travelled from Ireland and who will journey home with the remains of John for interment in the family plot in Moneyglass Cemetery in Toomebridge, Co Antrim.

I take this opportunity also of thanking most sincerely Bishop Vincent Logan, the Bishop of Dunkeld, along with the parish priest of Cupar in Fife, Canon Pat McNally, and his people, who took the late Monsignor John to their hearts when he retired to Cupar when he completed his most fruitful ministry in our own Archdiocese.

Learning about Priests:

When we bring the mortal remains of a priest for burial, inevitably we think in general of the teaching of the Church on priesthood.

Of course, the first and most important source of our knowledge is **Sacred Scripture** itself. Our Blessed Lord, knowing that he was not going to be on earth in bodily form for ever, called that group of men around him to be ministers, both of word and of sacraments. Jesus himself called them, he prayed with them, he instructed them and he formed them. They were the ones who were to go and teach all nations; they were the ones who were to baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; they were to hand on God’s mercy, forgiveness and healing; and they were to re-enact the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper when he said “Do this in memory of me”. And, of course, the specially chosen readings for today’s Mass again teach us something of God’s relationship with man – initially through that Covenant with Abraham and then Jesus himself teaching that “Before Abraham was, I am”. Jesus continues his work on earth through the apostolate of his priests. As St Paul reminds us in that very beautiful second reading from St Paul’s Letter to the Romans, there is that emphasis that when we are baptised we are baptised into the death of Jesus Christ – as was John McMeel those 88 years ago in Ireland – baptised into the death of Jesus, so that now he can rise into the glory of Jesus, following on his life of service as a priest on earth.

We also learn of the priesthood from the **teaching of the church** where it is stated that the priest is a **Minister of God’s Word**: “It is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men”; the priest is to be a **Minister of the Sacraments**: “God, who alone is the holy one and sanctifier, has willed to take men as allies and helpers to become humble servants in his work of sanctification”; and the priest is one who is to exercise the role as a **ruler of God’s people** – he is to be “urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching”.

And in recent days we have learned about the importance on which our present Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI holds the person and the apostolate of priests. About the time the late Monsignor John entered hospital for the last time, Pope Benedict XVI named a special ‘Year for Priests’ from mid-June 2009 until mid-June 2010 and indicated that the famous Curé d’Ars, St Jean-Marie Vianney was to be the patron saint of all priests. The Pope stated that priests must be “present, identifiable and recognisable – for their judgement of faith, personal virtues and attire – in the fields of culture and of charity, which have always been at the heart of the Church’s mission”.

And in declaring the Curé d’Ars as the patron saint of all priests, the Pope indicated that ‘Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of priests’ is the theme of the year for priests announced by the Holy Father.

Life and Apostolate of Monsignor McMeel:

These thoughts on the priesthood and on the declaration of Pope Benedict XVI were before me when I thought of the life and the priestly apostolate of Monsignor McMeel. A man of some 88 years of age when he died, he heard the call to the priesthood in his native Ireland and volunteered to work in Scotland in the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh. He is indeed one of the last links with that wonderful group of priestly men who came from Ireland to minister here in Scotland.

His life was very simply based on that of Jesus Christ himself, as indicated in the Scripture readings and the teaching of the Church, which I have indicated – but perhaps especially based on the life and the ministry of that patron saint of all priests, the Curé d’Ars .

Father John was initially assistant in a number of parishes of our Archdiocese: in St Andrew’s, Ravelston, St Patrick’s, Edinburgh, and in Musselburgh. He was then appointed as parish priest to Duns and Eyemouth, where he served from 1965 until 1969 and then appointed to St Paul’s, Glenrothes from 1969 until his retirement in 1997. His life was one long ministry of service of God and of his people. Many priests have spoken to me of the priestly example which he gave to them and I myself, then a young man in St Columba’s Parish in Edinburgh, remember going to St Patrick’s nearby to learn from something of the priestly example of John McMeel.

His love of people was shown through his ministry when he was appointed parish priest – whether in Duns or in Glenrothes here in Fife, where his memory is still so very much alive. His love was extended not only to his Scottish parishioners, but to all who came within the boundaries of his parish and even to many outwith those boundaries. Himself an exile from Ireland, he appreciated those other exiles who came to Scotland’s shores over the years. A special love and support was extended to the Polish Community, especially during the ‘Solidarity’ years, who looked on him as a second father in much the same way as the peoples of the world looked to Pope John Paul II

I remember observing him in action on quite a number of occasions when I was visiting Glenrothes. His love and care for his people was obvious in the way in which he celebrated the liturgy; and his love for children was clear as he would give each child brought to him at the end of Mass, whether a babe in arms or a toddler to receive his special priestly blessing.

He himself did not worry in any way about his physical or material needs. A house was simply a place to live in and from where he could move out to be in the homes of his people. A church was of necessity four walls and a roof, but what was important about the church building was the fact that it was within those walls that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass could be offered and that he could share the Sacraments of Christ with his people. I remember on one occasion looking up to the ceiling of the church where there were then, as indeed now, various faults in the building itself. I saw a hosepipe protruding from the ceiling and followed it along the length of the roof and down the wall where bricks had been removed and the hosepipe then poured water out into the grounds. A novel

arrangement to deal with leaks – but John was more concerned with the flow of the waters of baptism over the people of his parish rather than the flow of the rain waters over their heads!

John led a full and priestly ministry until his retirement – moving over the border from our own Archdiocese to the Diocese of Dunkeld and into the beautiful little parish of Cupar, so that he would not be interfering in any way with the apostolate of his successor.

Retirement of Monsignor McMeel:

When he did retire to Cupar in Fife, John remembered that first and foremost he was still a priest living in retirement – priesthood came first and then retirement. His retirement home became for him a haven in which he could still celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass day by day, sharing that sacrifice with some of those who are able to come to join him; it was a place where the Rosary was prayed by him and those who shared something of his life; and it was a place from which he could continue his magnificent outreach of love and writing to his family in Ireland.

Having celebrated the Golden Jubilee of his Ordination to the Priesthood in St Paul's in Glenrothes in 1995, he celebrated the Diamond Jubilee of his Ordination quietly in his retirement home, with Bishop Donal and his close family and friends.

I remember visiting him shortly after his Diamond Jubilee on a Sunday on my way to Confirmations elsewhere. I intruded as he was celebrating Mass with some of his friends. He immediately asked me to sit down and to share in the Mass with him as he proceeded to break the bread of the Word of God, lead his little congregation in the Prayers of the Faithful, and then we united our prayer in the great prayer of Christ in those beautiful words of Consecration and then Holy Communion. I cannot think of a more memorable Diamond Jubilee that I have ever celebrated.

Obviously, old age and ill health overtook Monsignor John – but he never wavered in his devotion to his Mass, his prayer and the Sacraments – coupled with the love of his family in Ireland and with the people of Fife, whom he had grown to love and serve so well. Indeed he never lost contact with his family in Ireland with whom he had regular contact through his own visits when he was more active and who were so meticulous in visiting him in his retirement home – and, of course, there was that regular ongoing contact by telephone and by letter.

Conclusion:

Having enjoyed a long and basically health lifestyle for some 88 years, preparing to celebrate the 65th anniversary of his priestly ordination in this coming June, John was quite simply increasingly tired. I am sure that his going to hospital must have been a relief for him so near the end of his life and he quietly passed to Almighty God on Thursday 26 March 2009.

We now commend him to the loving mercy of God our Father in Heaven. May he be granted eternal rest and as we remember him now in our Mass and prayers, so may he remember us from his place in Heaven.