

MASS OF THE CHRISM

ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL, EDINBURGH

TUESDAY 7 APRIL 2009

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

Introduction:

It is indeed a privilege celebrating this Mass each year with the priests of the Diocese and those priests collaborating with us from other countries or priests who are here during this Holy Week. Together, we will renew our commitment to priestly service – and then the oils for use throughout our Archdiocese will be blessed, with the oil of the chrism being consecrated and then the oils taken to every parish in our Archdiocese, a great sign of the unity of the diocese around their bishop.

In my words to you this evening I intend to speak of 'the Spirit' hovering over our Archdiocese – and this having taken place in a very special way over the past 50 years.

Spirit of Hope:

Fifty years ago there was a great sign of hope in our Archdiocese. St Andrew's College, Drygrange, our Archdiocesan Seminary had been opened in 1953 in the beautiful Border country of Scotland near Melrose, staffed by our Archdiocesan priests and with students from within our own Archdiocese and others in our Eastern Province.

The Sisters of Mercy from St Catharine's Convent, Lauriston Gardens, having listened to the request of the then Archbishop Gray, had agreed to take on many of the domestic responsibilities within the new seminary; and assistance was also provided from some of the residents with the Brothers of Charity, then at Gattonside, also near Melrose.

The seminary continued its work almost unnoticed in the Borders, but obviously with an increasing number of students year by year, coupled with an increasing number of priests on the staff. Then in 1959, some 50 years ago, the first priests from the Archdiocesan Seminary were ordained with four of them still active in parishes in our Archdiocese: Fathers Andrew Forrest, Brian Halloran, Tom Hennessy and John Urquhart. There will, of course, be celebratory Masses, at which I will preside, in their parishes, along with their parishioners, during the months which lie ahead.

I indicate that at that time there was a great 'spirit of hope' in our Archdiocese. It had been the dream of many that there would be a national senior seminary in Scotland – but those dreams came to nothing at that time. Consequently, there was rejoicing that an Archdiocesan Senior Seminary had been opened within our Archdiocese – and that students for the priesthood no longer needed to study at seminaries in England or abroad unless they went abroad for specific purposes or for further qualifications. In addition, bishops from other dioceses in the Eastern Province and sometimes from dioceses in the Western Province also at times sent their students to Drygrange.

Further, there had also been a great influx into students at our National Junior Seminary in Blairs – so much so that another junior seminary had been opened at St Vincent’s College, Langbank, taking students for the first two years of secondary school who were thinking about the priesthood.

I myself, along with another eleven classmates, entered St Andrew’s College, Drygrange in September 1959 – filling the places previously occupied by those first ordained priests, who continued in pastoral work in various parts of our Archdiocese and elsewhere.

Spirit of Realism:

From the spirit of hope which occurred in those years in the 1950’s one might say that **a spirit of realism hit the Church in the years following.**

Pope John XXIII called the **Second Vatican Council**, which met in Rome in the mid-1960’s from 1963 until 1965, producing its own ‘Decree on the Training of Priests’ in 1965 itself; and in various ways revolutionising the way in which our Church looked at itself.

I quote from one of the outstanding documents of the Second Vatican Council entitled: ‘Gaudium et Spes’ of 7 December 1965 – being described as a pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world. In this document it is very beautifully stated that our Church is not just a community of believers caring for themselves, but must indeed be open to the whole world. The opening sentences of that document state:

“The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.... that is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history”.

The Church indeed opened itself to greater engagement with the world – but in many ways the standards of the world infiltrated the Church.

Attempts were made to improve seminary education – and, following the move of Drygrange to Gillis, our Diocesan Seminary at Gillis was then combined with the Seminary at Chesters to form a National Senior Seminary for Scotland at Scotus College. And now, with no students at present in the Scots College in Salamanca, there will be a concentration of seminary education of priests for Scotland in the Pontifical Scots College in Rome, which was established in the year 1600 – with the Bishops ensuring that adequate spiritual and pastoral formation, along with human development continues for the men in training.

Spirit of Collaboration:

I would maintain that the **Spirit is indeed speaking to our Church at this present time** and while we do not glory in the shortage of priestly vocations, we still thank God for the priests whom we have and those who have joined us from abroad, especially from Gozo, Poland, the Philippines and India, and who, like those priests ordained 50 years ago, are collaborating as never before, with me as their Bishop and with the lay faithful entrusted to their care.

Magnificent documents were issued by successive Popes, with **Pope Paul VI** in his document ‘**Evangelisation in the Modern World**’, teaching us that “above all the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness”, and stating that the witness of the lay faithful is a “very powerful and effective proclamation of the Good News”.

Slowly the Church throughout the world realised that bishops, priests and people must work together ever more closely; we are not to live in isolation; the priestly vocation is vitally important and essential to the Church – but so also is the **vocation of the lay faithful**.

One might say that the Church realised that it was confronting a common enemy – in Scotland and in other parts of the world.

When in Scotland in June 1982, Pope John Paul II did state:

“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”.

Throughout all this time, our priests of 50 years ago and those ordained before and after faithfully continued their priestly ministry but with that different emphasis of which the lay faithful are now vividly aware. That **spirit of collaboration must be ever more evident in our parishes, in our deaneries and in our Archdiocese**. With this spirit of collaboration there have, of course, been difficulties as well. It would not be honest if I did not state this. Some would prefer to shut their eyes and deny that there is any problem.

Just today I received a letter concerning the present situation in our Church, which read:

“**A crisis needs to be met rather than avoided...** To give up on dialogue when we disagree would be to dig trenches for our own certainties; turning away from proper argument over social or political matters would be to retreat into the ‘fortress church’ – and consign ourselves to self imposed exile from the public square. Patience in nurturing understanding is our intellectual virtue – all the more needed, the more the conflict is intense”.

A priest in the diocese wrote to me a few months ago indicating that he thought the following:

“We are facing the greatest crisis in the history of Christianity. Previous crises have been ‘in house’: the East-West split, the Reformation. However, the present crisis is about God, about living in a post-Christian, post-modern world where every aspect of Christian life is being questioned and Church membership is dwindling at an alarming rate. The question is so fundamental, so vast, affecting every aspect of life, that the temptation is to run away from it, pretend that it does not exist or that it will somehow disappear. **The first step in the present crisis is admission that there is a crisis**. It is a call to repentance, a call to deepening faith that the Spirit is still ‘hovering over the chaos’, creating new life and order at which we can dare to look, but miss if we look away. God is in the facts, so the facts must, in some way, be kind, if only we can read them with faith”.

Conclusion:

I began by speaking of a spirit of hope; moved on to a spirit of realism; and have just been speaking of a spirit of collaboration. The Church has been purified before in times of challenge; bishops and priests have been strengthened in their vocations by the outstanding collaboration which they have received from the lay faithful; and laity have been inspired by the leadership which they have been given by their priests. **Now is the time for us again to have that spirit of hope, hope coupled with realism, as we continue our collaboration.**

I thank my brother priests of the Archdiocese for all that they have and are managing to do over the years since their ordination. The Church into which so many of them were ordained is quite a different Church in practice from that which they initially experienced and from that in which they had hoped to serve. However, most have coped in a magnificent way with the ongoing prayerful help and support of their parishioners, those valiant collaborators in ministry.

It is, of course, my own hope as I continue my own journey as your priest, bishop and cardinal, that that same spirit of hope will continue to help and inspire me on my own onward journey while facing realities and collaborating as best I can with my priests, religious and people.

May God indeed bless you as I ask you to continue in your prayer with and for our priests as we now renew our own commitment to priestly service.