

## PRESENTATION OF POPE JOHN PAUL II AWARDS

### CATECHETICAL CENTRE, DERRY, IRELAND

#### ADDRESS BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

MONDAY 23<sup>rd</sup> / TUESDAY 24<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY 2009

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

It is indeed a great privilege for me to be here with you all this evening.

I understand that on these two evenings there will be in total 250 young people being awarded gold, silver or bronze awards in memory of that great late Pope, Pope John Paul II.

I know that in this packed hall of over 1,000 people family and friends of the young award winners are gathered also. As well as congratulating the young people I thank also parents and teachers, priests and families for having provided a wonderful background of the faith to those entrusted to their care and the inspiration to prepare so well for receipt of these awards which require not just one off immediate action but rather **ongoing commitment to living and practicing their Catholic Christian faith.**

#### **ONGOING COMMITMENT:**

Although born in the North of Ireland and having lived and been brought up in Ballycastle in County Antrim for over sixty years now I have lived in Scotland. I thought that perhaps you would like to know a little more about **my own personal journey of faith.**

When completing primary school in Scotland I felt that God was calling me to be a priest. After discussing this with my parents and priests I had an interview with our local Archbishop and his advisors then in the City of Glasgow. Following on various tests and examinations including a health examination I was told that I was not being accepted as a student for the Priesthood – I had a heart murmur!

I continued at secondary school and during my secondary school years my family moved to Edinburgh. Nearing the end of my secondary schooling I continued to feel that call to be a priest and again spoke to my family, priests and then the Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh. Again the Cardinal sadly told me that he did not think he could accept me because of my heart murmur and simply said to me: “Go to university first! If you survive university there is a possibility that you will survive the training for the Priesthood!”

Despite these two rebuttals I was still determined on ordination to the Priesthood, gained by University Degree and was happily ordained a priest on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1965.

Happy as a priest, serving in schools, parishes and seminaries I was asked to be Archbishop in 1985. On being asked what the motto for my episcopacy would be I looked back over twenty very happy years of priesthood and said I wanted to continue in the same way choosing words from Psalm 99: “Serve the Lord with gladness”.

I am saying this to you not in any spirit of pride but simply to indicate to you that as my determination paid off in my chosen vocation – so will **your own determination show fruit in your own chosen careers and perhaps many of you might indeed think of priesthood and religious life.**

The award which you will receive will enable you to take an evermore active part in the life of our Church, in the life of your community and society and help you also to become more aware of the teaching and role of the Catholic Church in the world. In other words you will be enabled not only to know your faith but to practice your faith as indeed you are called to do by the Church at this present time.

As the information provided about the awards indicates the **purpose of the awards** are to allow all young people to understand that religion and faith is not just for learning, nor is it a list of rules, but that **it is for living, and living life to the full!**

### **WHAT MAKES YOU A MEMBER OF THE CHURCH?**

Thinking over the purpose of the awards I think **we must also think of the purpose of our membership of the Church.**

Some fifty years ago an old Cardinal of 78 years of age was elected as Pope taking the name of John and being called Pope John XXIII. No one thought he would achieve much in what would likely be a short pontificate because of his age. Rather the opposite was the case and this great old man went on to achieve a tremendous amount during his short pontificate – with perhaps the greatest decision of his being that of calling the Second Vatican Council.

On one occasion the late Pope John XXIII was asked what had been the greatest moment of his life – when he was ordained a priest or a bishop, then he had been elected Pope, when he had given his first blessing to the City and the world from the balcony of St Peter's Basilica and looked down on the vast hundreds of thousands of people cheering him? Rather he said very humbly the greatest event in my life was **when I was baptised** in to the Body of Jesus Christ on the day of my birth in the small village church where I was born.

I would want each one of you award winners and all who have helped you to remember that as well – **your baptism in to the Body of Christ which is the Church was indeed the greatest moment of your lives.**

And baptism, membership of the church, is not just about learning and living according to a set of rules. Baptism is all about living the life of Jesus Christ, a life of love, a life of the power of Christ.

It is hard to explain just what baptism, what the grace of God is all about!

But when I was at primary school and preparing for the Sacraments in Ballycastle I remember being brought in to our parish church with our classmates for a short retreat before receiving the Sacraments.

The priest giving the retreat seemed to be towering miles above us in a very high pulpit and at one stage speaking of baptism and of the power of God he pointed to the light bulbs hanging from single flexes. He indicated that no one could see the power of electricity flowing through the flex and lighting up the bulb and consequently the church. Rather the power was there although invisible. And he went on to compare this to the power of the Sacrament of Baptism – something we cannot see but which we are aware is coursing through our bodies affecting everything that we do.

I mentioned Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council. It is the teaching of that Council which should certainly affect the lives of each one of us today. In the decree of the Second Vatican Council on “The Church” we are reminded of the beautiful teachings of Jesus in Sacred Scripture. I particularly like to think of the words of Jesus himself referring to the Church as the **Kingdom of God among us**; like a seed sown in a field which will bring forth a great harvest; the Church as a sheepfold and the necessary way to Jesus Christ; and the Church as the people of God all over the world.

In another document of that same Vatican Council a document on “The Church in the Modern World” we are told something of the **mission of the members of the Church** in the following beautiful words: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, and 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. “

We are given our mission as Christians by that Church, the Body of Christ, of which we are members. We are not just keeping a set of rules, we are not just to be Catholics for our own sake – we must continue to have an outreach in the Church and in the world.

### **OUR MISSION TODAY:**

In being here with you today I congratulate you for all that you have already achieved through working for your John Paul II award. You have been involved in many ways in living and working for others at parish level and at diocesan level.

You have shown your care for others through activities in your parish and through your social awareness, through membership of those various wonderful organisations which help other peoples such as membership of the St Vincent de Paul Society, Faith & Light Movement, working in youth clubs, being faith friends, visiting residential homes and so many other activities which you undertake.

What is important is **involvement with others which means involvement with Jesus Christ himself.**

And of course being involved in others leads us **ever closer in the following of Jesus Christ** – which is not always easy in the Church and in the world of today.

The Patron of these awards Pope John Paul II visited Scotland in 1982. That is over twenty five years ago now and it was then that he said:

“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 risk of compromising our Christian conscience”.

Many of you young people gathered here to receive your awards today are ready to move on some to further studies, some to colleges and universities, some to begin your careers in the world. I would indeed put those words before you today uttered over twenty five years ago yet as meaningful today as they were when they were first said by Pope John Paul II.

In other words used by our present Pope, Pope Benedict XVI those words were perhaps said in a different way when Pope Benedict in his first encyclical letter called “The Sacrament of Love” called us all to an evermore Christ like life when he said:

“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 at the gift God has made to us in Christ gives new impulse to our lives and commits us to become witnesses of his love. We become witnesses when, through our actions, words and way of being, Another makes himself present. Witness could be described as being the means by which the truth of God’s love comes to men and women in history, inviting them to accept freely this radical newness”.

### **CONCLUSION:**

That indeed is what each of the award winners is called to – **to follow Christ in ways which they have never followed before; to bear witness to Christ by the witness of their own lives; and to bring God’s love to the men and women in history with whom they will meet and react day by day.**

What a wonderful vocation is ours – that vocation to which we were called such a short time after our births when our frail weak and tiny human bodies had water poured over them and the words: “I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” were said over us as the water was poured.

That most wonderful event in our lives began then – our baptism into the Body of Christ. May the power of God still radiate through your lives as I congratulate you on the ways in which you have already lived Christ-like lives in the following of Jesus Christ himself the servant of all.