

SERVICE OF PRAYER AND THANKSGIVING – ARCHDIOCESAN ECUMENICAL COMMISSION

ST CATHARINE'S CONVENT, EDINBURGH

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

FRIDAY 24 APRIL 2009

Introduction:

It is indeed a pleasure and a privilege for me being here with you all this evening, preaching at this Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving.

I know that in our own Archdiocese we have much to thank God for with regard to the Ecumenical Movement, whose history in our Archdiocese I will trace briefly. The highlights in my mind are the establishment of our Archdiocesan Ecumenical Core Group; this led to the foundation of our Archdiocesan Ecumenical Commission; and this gathering here this evening is a reminder to all those excellent and committed men and women who have served our Archdiocese's commitment to ecumenism so well during the last 20 years – initially when we had that Ecumenical Core Group and now the Ecumenical Commission of our Archdiocese.

Brief History of the Ecumenical Movement:

As we gather this evening, I am sure that we are united, not only in our hopes and prayers for the Ecumenical Movement particularly in our own Archdiocese, but we are vividly aware of those words of Jesus in St John's Gospel. We remember what St John writes in Chapter 17: "May they all be one. Father, may they be one in us as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe that it was you who sent me".

Down through history that unity of the followers of Christ has been shattered in very many ways – through the great Christological debates in the early centuries of the Church's history; through the disastrous conflicts which led to the split with the Orthodox Churches; at the time of the Protestant Reformation throughout Europe and here in Scotland; right up to our own time. It is tragic to realise that every time there is a positive decision to effect unity between branches of the Christian Churches, there are invariably certain further breakaways!

However, as we continue through history down to just one hundred years ago we know that what has come to be called the Ecumenical Movement began here in Edinburgh in 1910 with the Edinburgh Missionary Conference, when leaders from various denominations realised that the spread of the faith was being hindered by division among them. Some 30 years later, in 1940, the British Council of Churches was formed, with Protestant and Anglican Churches later being joined by Eastern Orthodox.

In our Catholic Church the teaching of the Pope and the Bishops at the Second Vatican Council was clarified in the Decree on Ecumenism of 1964. There it is clearly stated: "**The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council.** Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communities present themselves to people as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ".

And successive Popes, down to our present Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, have emphasised that the restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal aims of their Pontificates. The late Pope John Paul II clearly said: “**I want to serve unity** – service of unity is the primary duty of the ministry of Bishop of Rome”. And our present Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has **emphasised those words** both in word and in action since the beginning of his own Pontificate some four years ago now. Here in Scotland, while rejoicing in the past, we now look forward to next year, 2010, when we will celebrate the centenary of that Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, which marked, as I have indicated, the beginning of the modern Ecumenical Movement. Whereas before we had little or no influence, now we are looked upon as valued colleagues and friends on our pilgrimage together, walking hand in hand, as indeed Pope John Paul II stated when he was with us in Scotland.

The Ecumenical Movement in our Archdiocese:

I am not trying to say that the Ecumenical Movement began in our Archdiocese with my own appointment as Archbishop – far from it. There were various stalwarts in the Ecumenical Movement very active long before my own appointment. Mentioning some names familiar to you all, I can think of those who have gone before, particularly Bishop James Monaghan, Canon Hugh Gordon, Father Walter Glancy, the late Abbot of Nunraw, and all associated with the Haddington Pilgrimage, especially the late Lord Patrick Lauderdale, at whose funeral I was asked to preach. Obviously also there were many other ministers and lay people in the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church, as well as colleagues in other Christian denominations, praying and working with our own brethren in our Catholic Church. They took the first tentative steps and we have been privileged to follow in those footsteps, enlarging them literally as we ourselves have grown in the understanding of Christ’s teaching.

The **Archdiocesan Ecumenical Core Group** was indeed established shortly after my own appointment as Archbishop. I had called an Archdiocesan Assembly at Holy Rood High School, a major diocesan gathering, co-ordinated by a resource team led by Monsignor McNally and Canon Kruger. That Holy Rood Assembly was held in November 1987 when six core groups were formed, including one imaginatively called ‘The Dreamalong Group’. It was the purpose of this particular group to identify what vision ordinary people had for our Church in the coming years – and it became obvious that many people felt that we should be more committed as a Church to the ecumenical process. Consequently, the Ecumenical Core Group was established, making initial contact with each deanery in our Archdiocese and consequently with each and every parish. An ongoing programme of study and meetings was initiated, with Paddy Ferry, here with us today, being one of the leading lights and basically the core of the Core Group over all those years. I think he does deserve a special word of praise and thanks at our gathering today.

The **tenth anniversary service of the Archdiocesan Core Group** took place at St Catharine’s on Friday 16 October 1998, with the service being led by myself and Bishop Mario Conti, the then Bishop of Aberdeen, being the guest preacher. Paddy himself gives a full report of the early history of our Archdiocesan Core Group in our Archdiocesan Directory of 1999 on page 234.

The studies undertaken by the Archdiocesan Ecumenical Core Group included, of course, the documents on ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council. One of the key recommendations in the Decree on Ecumenism was that every diocese should have an **Archdiocesan Ecumenical Commission** – and ongoing work took place, leading to the establishment of this Commission at Gillis Centre by myself on 28 October 2001. The special preacher on that occasion was Dr Kevin Franz, the General Secretary of ACTS. He presented a stimulating sermon which provided much thought for everyone gathered there, especially the members of the new Commission. He stated that: “The Commission is animated by vision, and that ecumenical vision is nothing less than a vision of the Church and the world healed and restored. That is what is implicit for me in the first aim of the Commission, the promotion of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on ecumenism as a duty of the Christian conscience, enlightened by faith and guided by love. And the end of that aim is that all might be one”.

Dr Kevin Franz really took us from where we were in 2001 back through those 2000 years to the same words of Jesus Christ himself: “That all may be one”.

Since that time, the Ecumenical Commission has continued its steady work – with the role of the Commission more or less being taken for granted at this present time. One might wonder just how we managed without such a Commission reaching out, as it always has done, through our deaneries into the parishes of the Archdiocese.

Conclusion:

On this occasion, as I indicated in my earlier words, as Archbishop I want to say thanks to all those who have contributed so well over the past 20 years to the work of the Core Group initially and now our Ecumenical Commission. The service with its theme of: “Well done good and faithful servant” from the 25th chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel, sums up what I, as your Bishop, want to say to you all gathered here.

No commission works in a vacuum and it certainly does not operate without a tremendous amount of background work by very many people. Consequently, I am only too happy to thank again on this occasion Mr Paddy Ferry but also those lay women and laymen and those dedicated priests who have provided theological insight and their own background experience to the operation of our Archdiocesan Ecumenical Commission, naming in particular Monsignor Philip Kerr and Father Nicholas Hodgson.

Obviously, the work of the Commission is not complete – and perhaps it will not be completed in our own lifetime – until we are indeed ‘all one’ as the Lord prayed.

However, as with the Core Group, so with the Commission – **education** must continue of the members of the Commission; this **education on ecumenism** must spread out into our Archdiocese; and, consequently, the knowledge and love of our Church must be **shared with our sisters and brothers of other Christian Churches** as we grow in our knowledge and in our love of them.

It is amazing just exactly what has happened over those past 20 years. I myself look back with great joy to the invitation which I received from the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland following on my creation as Cardinal, to address the General Assembly on Friday 21 May 2004. On that occasion I used three visual aids to help me in my talk: a little compass of Iona Silver; a towel; and my rosary beads. The Iona Silver was to take us back to our common ancestry in the Celtic Church – taking us back to Jesus Christ himself and his teaching; the towel I used as a symbol of service, with St John being the only evangelist writing of the washing of the feet, with no mention at all in St John’s Gospel of bread and wine; and the rosary being a symbol of our prayer together and on our own.

I indicated that “as we remember our common roots; as we remember that **call to service** which goes out to us all; we are also to remember the **basic importance of our prayer together**. We go forward for our own good and for the good of all peoples; for the sake of our Churches and for those of other faiths and of none; for the ongoing growth of Christianity in our country and in the world, working together with all peoples of goodwill”.

And that is exactly what I wish you all this evening. Remember your own call to service; remember the value of our prayer together with other Christians; and remember that we must go forward both for our own good and for the good of all peoples.