

ST JOHN'S DAY MASS – KNIGHTS OF BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF KNIGHTS OF MALTA

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

BROMPTON ORATORY, LONDON

WEDNESDAY 24TH JUNE 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege for me to be here with you in London to celebrate the annual St John's Day Mass in Brompton Oratory.

When speaking of our heavenly patron St John the Baptist one does not need to say too much about St John the Baptist himself in this present company.

The early chapters of St Luke's Gospel give us the salient points concerning the birth of St John the Baptist, his hidden life, his preaching, and then his imprisonment and later on his death. I think what is important for us as Knights and Dames is to realise the **importance of "proclamation"** in the life of St John the Baptist. There was that **hidden proclamation** within the womb of his mother Elizabeth; there was that **public proclamation** shown by his preaching and by his teaching; and there was that wonderful **proclamation shown by his martyrdom**. The greatest of praise was given to him by Jesus himself when he said: "I tell you, of all the children born of woman, there is no one greater than John; yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he is".

Just some months ago I had the privilege of dedicating in memory of our late Grand Master, Fra Andrew Bertie a magnificent statue of St John the Baptist beside our baptismal font. I am sure that the late Fra Andrew would like all who see this statue especially all members of our Order to continually remind ourselves of that **need for proclamation of the Gospel in our own present time**.

As we all know the special service of the Knights and Dames of Malta is service of **Our Lords the sick**. Without detracting from that particular service I would like to see an extension of the phrase "Our Lord's the sick" to those **sick in poverty throughout the world** as well as those **sick in so very many ways in our society at home** as we well know.

SITUATION IN THE WORLD:

I always think it brings us back to a certain reality when we think of the conditions in which so many of our fellow human beings live and suffer at present.

As Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh I have been privileged to have very close links with the third world throughout my 24 years as Archbishop. My predecessor our late Confrere Cardinal Gordon Joseph Gray adopted the missionary territory of Bauchi in Northern Nigeria following on contact with the Bishop of Jos, whom he met at the Second Vatican Council. After his death and my own appointment as Archbishop that mission from our Archdiocese was extended to countries crying out for justice and peace especially El Salvador; and then our priests also branched out to help with the similar needs of the peoples of Guatemala and Chiapas Mexico.

I vividly remember being with one of my priests working in the Archdiocese of San Salvador who later wrote: “The health services here have been slashed to the bone in order to satisfy the demand of the World Bank and the IMF. I find terrible irony in the rhetoric of the UN when beautifully dressed people step out of their chauffeur driven cars to preach to us of the importance of the eradication of poverty and all the time the World Bank and the IMF with members of the UN, insist on economic policies that cause increased poverty”. He went on to add: “It strikes me as strange how people at home pass laws to ensure that pigs ride in trucks so that they found no discomfort. Yet here, people are piled onto buses, conductors pushing and shoving to fit us all, we hear no voice raised in protest. People become vegetarian at home because they can’t stand the thought of chickens all piled on top of one another in coups, yet they lift not a finger to protest against two or three families being forced to live in a house 5metres by 5metres – here in Soyapango such households number tens of thousands”.

Further, in my responsibility as a Director of our Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF), I visit a different Third World country each year, seeing our co-workers and inspecting our projects. This year I was in **Myanmar**, previously known as Burma, and visited areas recently shattered by the cyclone Nargis. I spoke to many survivors including one man named Luke who described how, like so many others, he had lost his whole family as a result of the cyclone. He indicated to me that when he was able to get back to his homeland he could not see anything – no human being and no indication of where his home had been – and losing his wife, his children and all of his family and friends. He then said to me very moving words indicating that he thought that perhaps God was teaching him that “**we human beings don’t really possess anything for ourselves**”.

I think that is the basic thought that comes to me regarding the present situation in our world having visited very many countries along with SCIAF in Africa, in Asia and in Central America – **through the suffering of others God is trying to teach us that we don’t really possess anything for ourselves!**

SITUATION AT HOME:

I think the **present situation at home is well enough known to us all**. The poor seem to be getting more poor while the rich in many cases seem to be getting richer.

We know something of the horrors that have afflicted us in recent months with the **current international financial disasters** affecting so many of us. Perhaps we thought that we were well settled into our lifestyles; we may have believed that we had made adequate provision for our retirement or for the ongoing education of our children or of our children’s children; it did not seem if anything could in colloquial terms “rock the boat” in which we were comfortably sailing at this present time.

But then we realise that the **economic disasters were going to affect us**.

Perhaps more difficult to cope with was the situation which affected so many of both our elected Members of Parliament or non-elected members of the House of Lords. We realised then as did so many of those we might describe as the “ordinary people” of our villages, towns and cities that so often those who were responsible for the government of our country seemed to have “feet of clay” as had so many in the financial sector. I think many of us came to the reality of this belief with a certain sense of shock.

It was in the great jubilee year of 2000 that the late Pope John Paul II declared Sir Thomas More the Patron Saint of Politicians stating that: “**His life teaches us that Government is above all an exercise of virtue**”.

It was on one of my visits to the Houses of Parliament at Westminster that I preached in St Mary's Undercroft stating: "I point to the witness of Saint Thomas More and to urge all in positions of responsibility to learn from him that the human conscience, the right to adhere to one's beliefs, is beyond the power of earthly sovereigns and human governance. Laws, which are passed by human authority, must always respect the dignity of the human person and each person's integrity of conscience, whether that is a conscience formed by Christian principles or any other belief system. **The conscience is formed by truth not by force**".

CONCLUSION:

Obviously I could go on at length concerning the situation in the world at large and the situation here at home. However I leave it to you yourselves to continue the debate in whichever way you find useful.

My mind goes back to our recent celebration of the silver jubilee of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Scotland in 1982 the same year as he visited England and Wales. The Pope then stated – all those years ago that he was aware of the "**new and demanding situations which represent pastoral challenges for the Church today**". He went on to state that in Scotland there "**no longer exists the reality of a Christian society, that is a society which despite human weaknesses and failings takes the Gospel as the explicit measure of its life and values**".

The Pope at that time proclaimed the necessity of the **revitalisation of Christian life – which demands a holy people**. We must indeed take that call coupled with the increasing calls of Pope Benedict XVI evermore seriously.

Prayer must be at the heart of our vocation as religious. Prayer must be at the heart of each and everything which we say and do. As our late Prince and Grand Master Fra Andrew Bertie said in his foreword to our prayer book: "One of the characteristics which distinguishes the Order of Malta from other extant Orders of Chivalry is the fact that **it is a religious order**, and therefore all its members are required to deepen their spiritual lives. Prayer, both private and public, is one of the most important ways of fulfilling this obligation". And Fra Andrew went on to write of devotion to our Blessed Lady and especially the Saints of our Order.

And, of course, our Grand Master in his own reflections in the ninth number of our 'Journal of Spirituality' gives us some wise words with regard to nurturing our faith when he says: "We must, however, also be aware that we are required to nurture the faith for that is what *tuitio fidei* means. **To this end we must all be fully aware of the Catholic principles and the teaching of the Church**. Above all, we must be loyal and supportive of our Holy Father the Pope. This means that we must be sure that our own conduct causes no scandal and that, when we are questioned about our faith, we know what answers to give".

Our annual gathering in honour of the birthday of St John the Baptist is a wonderful opportunity for us to **be together in prayer** and to think seriously of **what exactly our vocation as Knights of Malta really means**. May our prayer continue to inspire us to follow the example of our great patron; may the proclamation of the Gospel inspired by our life of prayer be the goal of everything that we say and do; and may we ourselves continue to walk the path of virtue unstained by any sin so that one day we may also enjoy the glory of the Saints in Heaven.