

THANKSGIVING MASS FOR APOSTOLATE OF URSULINES OF JESUS

ST MARGARET'S CONVENT EDINBURGH: 1834 – 2008

ST MARGARET'S CONVENT, EDINBURGH

SUNDAY 22ND JUNE 2008

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a very great privilege for us all being here this afternoon thanking God for service almost unique in the history of religious life in Scotland. I speak of the coming of the Ursuline Sisters of Jesus to this very place in the year 1834 – and of their outstanding 174 years of prayer and apostolic service from this place until this very time.

Foundation Day of St Margaret's has been recognised as being on 26 December 1834. In gathering here this afternoon we think of those valiant people of the past who established St Margaret's Convent on this site at that time, helped by very many friends and benefactors. We thank God for all that has been accomplished during those 174 years of service here and from here. We now trust ourselves to the providence of Almighty God for the future and we pray that we may have that same strength of faith which inspired our predecessors some two hundred years ago.

FAITH OF THE FOUNDERS OF ST MARGARET'S CONVENT:

In looking back to the founders of St Margaret's Convent here on this site initially I use the words of Archbishop William Smith, the second Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh who presided over the golden jubilee celebrations of this Convent.

He wrote on the great advances which the Catholic faith had made in Scotland over the fifty years since the establishment of St Margaret's in 1834. He stated that: "In that space of time, churches and convents, schools and orphanages, priests and religious, monks and nuns, have multiplied amazingly, and a thousand other active forces of Catholic life have been brought into play". He also indicated that: "Among the factors contributing to such a result, the Convent of St Margaret's is deservedly numbered. Founded in Edinburgh fifty years ago it claims the honour of being the first religious house established in Scotland after three hundred years of banishment from a country where the magnificent remains of abbeys, friaries, and convents show how flourishing they once had been".

And looking back at that time to the establishment of St Margaret's Convent names stand out and are remembered for the faith which they showed by our present generations.

Bishop Gillis himself recognised as the founder of St Margaret's Convent looked back to **Bishop Paterson** and **Bishop Carruthers** the first and second Vicars Apostolic of the then Eastern District of Scotland as having inspired him in his endeavours. However it was through the inspiration of Bishop Gillis and the financial help of **John Menzies of Pitfodells** in Aberdeen that the foundation was able to be made – following on the contacts which Bishop Gillis had made with the founders of the Ursulines of Jesus in France: **Father Louis-Marie Baudouin** and his collaborator in that apostolate **Charlotte Gabriel Ranfray**.

Obviously the Convent would not have been established without valiant religious sisters – and **Agnes Trail** and **Margaret Clapperton** were the two women who in the plan of Almighty God were the women of faith who initially went to Chavagnes the Mother House of the Ursulines of Jesus to be trained in that religious congregation.

Professed as **Sister Agnes Xavier** and **Sister Margaret Teresa** they took possession of their Convent on 26th December 1834 with the first Mass being celebrated on 28th December 1834.

Those two great friends Bishop Gillis and John Menzies died respectively in 1864 and 1843 – their mortal remains being buried in the Crypt underneath this very Sanctuary where this Mass is being celebrated.

FAITH OF THE URSULINES OF JESUS AND ST MARGARET'S CONVENT OVER 174 YEARS:

The apostolate of the Ursulines of Jesus based in St Margaret's Convent continued unabated on this particular site from that date until the present.

The education of girls was a primary concern of the Sisters – with fees earned from the education of more well off children being channelled into the education of the needy in various other parts of the City of Edinburgh and further afield.

In addition social care was valiantly extended to those in any sort of need particularly the care of the poor and of orphans. A boarding school was established and also a day school under the name of St Anne's Seminary which eventually moved to a building erected by the Sisters on their own property in Strathearn Road.

Many converts attracted to the Church by Bishop Gillis received their instructions from the Sisters at St Margaret's aiding him in every way possible in this particular apostolate.

Land was also purchased by Bishop Gillis in the hope that he would be able to erect near St Margaret's Convent both a Cathedral and a seminary for the education of young men to the Priesthood.

Thankfully over the years which followed other religious congregations and orders both of women and men came to Scotland including Franciscan Sisters, Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd followed not long afterwards by the Sisters of Charity, the Little Sisters of the Poor and the Sisters of Nazareth. Religious orders and congregations of men also followed including the Oblates of May Immaculate, the Jesuits, the Vincentians and Marist Brothers - again followed by the Passionists, Franciscans, Redemptorists and Benedictines.

One could say that the faith of those founding sisters inspired other religious orders and congregations in their own faith building up the Catholic Church in Scotland prior to and after the restoration of the Scottish Hierarchy in 1878.

However, what is vitally important is the inspiration of which the Sisters at St Margaret's Convent gave to so many other individual Catholics and those seeking entry into the Catholic Church through their valued apostolate in field of education, of social work and of parish apostolate over those years.

FAITH OF THE SISTERS IN THE LAST TWO DECADES:

The faith of the Ursulines of Jesus was tested in the past and was even more tested in recent years.

I was appointed Archbishop in 1985 and shortly afterwards had to assist the Sisters in their decision making with regard to moving from what had been their old traditional convent home to take up residence in the “new St Margaret’s” their previous novitiate where the Sisters have been residing for the past twenty two years. This was indeed a very considerable break with the past but it was brought about the situation that the Sisters had to face. They could no longer continue their private school due to the decreasing number of sisters and the consequent increase in fees which would have to be charged for the education of girls. It must have been with a sad heart that the Sisters moved from the old buildings – but their faith was strengthened when I decided to move our Archdiocesan Seminary from Drygrange in the Borders to the magnificent site of what was then called “Gillis College” almost in the heart of the City of Edinburgh. One could see that in a particular way the dream of Bishop Gillis was coming true with a seminary at the heart of the City having strong links with the University of Edinburgh itself.

However, because again of a decrease in the number of vocations to the Priesthood, not only in the East of Scotland but throughout Scotland and indeed most of the western world, Gillis College which was a seminary only between 1986 and 1993, combined with Chesters College leading to the establishment of Scotus College as the National Seminary for Scotland.

And over the years since then because of a decrease in the number of sisters the faith of the sisters was again tested when they had to face the reality of their situation and move from the “new St Margaret’s” at Gillis leaving the Convent for the last time.

As Sister Agnes Xavier and Sister Margaret Teresa were two women of faith so I pay tribute now to **Sister Kathleen** and **Sister Catherine** for overseeing with their present Provincial Superior, **Sister Nora Mary** the final move from this site of St Margaret’s Convent.

They have done this with the same faith which inspired those first sisters and I have acknowledged their going with the same faith that inspired Bishop Gillis.

I would like to think that this move will not be seen as a negative move but **a very positive approach to the way in which we serve the needs of the Church now and for the years which lie ahead.**

I am sure that Bishop Gillis and those sisters of 174 years ago would marvel at the role which our Church plays in our civil society at this present time and the high regard and esteem with which it and all its endeavours are appreciated. Gillis Centre here near the heart of the City of Edinburgh is indeed the heart of the missionary endeavours of our Church not only overseas but here in our country, in our Archdiocese and in our Capital City. The central administration of our Archdiocese continues from here as does a multiplicity of agencies embracing all of the work of the Church in our Archdiocese at this present time. A valiant band of lay women and lay men assisted by a number of religious sisters and priests see to the outreach of our Church in our Archdiocese from the buildings which once housed the first Ursulines of Jesus in our country.

CONCLUSION:

The Ursulines of Jesus have left a **wonderful heritage** and a **great tradition**. It is up to the Catholic community at this present time to continue the traditions so well established by our Ursulines in very different times from those of today.

Obviously various tangible reminders have been left by the Ursulines. We will be forever grateful to them for the **records and the history in the Church** in our Archdiocese based on the writings of the Sisters since 1834. We have many tangible reminders of their presence in their midst in the buildings which they have so carefully preserved and handed on to us including the beautiful **St Margaret's Chapel**.

However, our best way of keeping the memory of the apostolate of the Ursulines of Jesus alive is by **the way we act and behave as Catholic Christians at this present time inspired by our life of prayer**.

I have spoken much about faith in my words today: The faith of the founding women and men of St Margaret's Convent; the faith of the Ursulines of Jesus over the past 174 years; and the faith of our present Sisters and all of us at this present time.

I conclude with some words from our present Pope, Pope Benedict XVI in his recent encyclical letter on "hope" when he writes: **"So much of our lives are lived out on a promise of future fulfilment that we need to be a people who know how to hope and how to wait!"**

And as St Paul says as a Christian people we are **"waiting for our bodies to be set free!"**

Let us continue as people of faith to know just how to wait and serve the Lord as we are called upon to do now and for the years which lie ahead until we are called to our final home in Heaven to receive the heritage which the good Lord has prepared for us following on our lives of faith, hope and charity.