

TRANSFER OF MAJOR RELIC OF ST MARGARET

ST MARGARET'S CHURCH, DUNFERMLINE

SUNDAY 16TH NOVEMBER 2008

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege for me to be able to be with you today, St Margaret's Day, as we celebrate this feast day of one of the great patrons of Scotland in Dunfermline itself the Town in which St Margaret was buried.

The specific purpose of our gathering here this morning is to transfer a major relic from the mortal remains of St Margaret from St Margaret's Convent in Edinburgh to this beautiful new shrine here in St Margaret's Church Dunfermline. We thank in this ceremony the Ursulines of Jesus who have treasured this relic since their foundation in Edinburgh right up to this present time. The relic itself has become well known to the peoples of Scotland who joined annually in pilgrimage here to Dunfermline in honour of St Margaret for very many years led by the Bishops of Scotland.

However today I want to emphasise to you three principal dates – along with the people who have made these dates important.

1093: DEATH OF QUEEN MARGARET OF SCOTLAND:

St Margaret herself was born in Hungary about the year 1045 and died in Edinburgh in the year 1093. Shortly after her birth she was brought to England but then found refuge in Scotland and in 1070 married King Malcolm III, Malcolm Canmore. Margaret and her husband had six sons and two daughters – and it has always been emphasised that Margaret exerted a wonderful influence over her husband being deeply religious herself, bringing up her children admirably, and being particularly noted for her care of orphans and of the poor.

The 900th anniversary of her death in 1993 was marked by magnificent celebrations both here in Dunfermline where she was buried and in Edinburgh our Capital City particularly in St Margaret's Chapel perched on Edinburgh Castle rock, the oldest building in Edinburgh.

The late Princess Margaret sister of the Queen came to honour her royal namesake in St Margaret's Chapel in the Castle; three Hungarian Bishops joined us in our Cathedral in Edinburgh from the land in which she was born; the Apostolic Nuncio represented the Holy Father whose predecessor had declared her a Saint; and Civic dignitaries gathered from cities and towns with which St Margaret was closely associated.

I myself was privileged to lead a pilgrimage from Scotland to the small village of Mecseknyadas in the Diocese of Pecs – the place and the people where she had been born and where she was formed in her love of God and of others during her childhood. Joining me among many others were two priests, well known to the people of Dunfermline – the well loved assistant priests who were close friends, Canon John Rogerson and Canon Michael McCullagh. In that place, we were reminded of how Margaret cultivated her love of the poor; how she grew up with the support of her own family determined to hand on family love wherever she was; and we realised how she managed to accomplish so much for the Church in Scotland – never losing her sense of the individual, her sense of prayer and sacrifice, her love for the poor and the homeless.

On that pilgrimage we really lived through a special experience – along with the Bishops who came to the Mass to join myself and the other priests and people with the children especially along with their families and friends who had tears in their eyes as they kissed the relic of St Margaret.

1834: FOUNDATION OF ST MARGARET’S CONVENT IN EDINBURGH:

It was in 1834 that the Convent dedicated to her name was established in the City of Edinburgh by the great Bishop Gillis. Speaking at the golden jubilee of that Convent Archbishop William Smith declared that the growth of the number of churches and convents over the past fifty years had been due in no small part to the establishment of St Margaret’s Convent stating: “Founded in Edinburgh fifty years ago it claims the honour of being the first religious house established in Scotland after 300 years of banishment from a country where the magnificent remains of abbeys, friaries and convents show how flourishing they once had been”.

Bishop Gillis wanted the work of St Margaret and the example of St Margaret carried on by dedicated religious sisters – and two Scots women Agnes Trail and Margaret Clapperton after their religious formation in France took possession of their new Convent on 26th December 1834 with the first Mass being celebrated on 28th December 1834.

Yes the Ursulines of Jesus were the pioneers of their time continuing that basic apostolate of St Margaret herself: The work of education and the relief of the needs of the poor. Further many converts to the faith were attracted by the apostolate of the Ursulines – with the Ursulines continuing their instruction until they were ready to be received into the faith. One can say also 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.

2008: TRANSFER OF ST MARGARET’S RELICS TO DUNFERMLINE:

The Sisters at St Margaret’s Convent continued their valiant apostolate from that same site until this present time.

Because of a decrease in the number of religious vocations and the growth of Catholic primary and secondary schools one of the apostolates of the Ursulines was no longer necessary namely that of education. That particular task was continued by a valiant band of Catholic lay women and lay men who still continue that apostolate to this present day.

The buildings of the Convent initially became the senior seminary for our Archdiocese – and then Gillis Centre was established in those same buildings providing the home for all of the committees and commissions and agencies of our Archdiocese as well as also providing a very welcoming pastoral centre for the education of the lay faithful in their various needs for the proper fulfilment of their ministries.

On 22nd June 2008 at a Solemn Mass in St Margaret’s Convent in Edinburgh I thanked the Ursuline Sisters for their valiant apostolate stretching over 174 years in living the faith and handing on that faith according to the example of St Margaret of Scotland. I thanked the Ursulines for having left a wonderful heritage and a great tradition – with tangible reminders of their apostolate being left to us. Records in history of the Church in our Archdiocese based on the writings of the Sisters since 1834 are now preserved in our national Catholic archives. This beautiful vestment gifted by the Sisters to me earlier this year is a further tangible reminder of the ongoing links of our Archdiocese with St Margaret of Scotland.

The major relic of St Margaret is perhaps the most impressive of the relics which the Sisters have possessed and which they are now handing on to the care of the priests and people of St Margaret's Parish, Dunfermline.

Father Barr gives the proud history of this major relic in the accompanying booklet. St Margaret died in Edinburgh Castle. Her remains were smuggled to Dunfermline where she had asked to be buried where they safely remained until they were removed at the time of the Reformation to Douay and Flanders. They were then given to King Philip II and Queen Isabella of Spain, who deposited them in the Royal Monastery of the Escorial Palace in two caskets marked: 'St Margaret: Queen; and St Malcolm: King'. The Escorial Palace itself was to become the victim of anti-Church insurrection during the Peninsular War and many relics were desecrated – but those of St Margaret and St Malcolm remained intact.

It was Bishop Gillis who, as you know, had built St Margaret's Convent and St Margaret's Church in Edinburgh, who went to Spain in search of the relics of St Margaret. His efforts were successful and he obtained permission from the King and Queen of Spain to remove the relics of St Margaret from the Escorial Palace and bring them back to Scotland. In 1863 he returned from Spain with the relic of St Margaret, which has been identified as part of her shoulder bone. For 145 years now the Ursuline Sisters have been the custodians of this precious relic until this very day when the relics are being handed over by the last two Sisters in St Margaret's Convent to the care of the present parish priest of St Margaret's and his successors, along with the parishioners and their successors.

This will ensure that St Margaret will again be venerated in her own beloved city of Dunfermline – in much the same way as the major relics of St Andrew are at present venerated in St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh.

CONCLUSION:

This relic is indeed a very tangible reminder of the links between St Margaret of Scotland and the peoples of Scotland. It is fitting now that these relics be enshrined in the Church in Dunfermline dedicated to her name so near the other major relics preserved in Dunfermline Abbey.

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 the life of prayer of St Margaret, perhaps we should think also of another major relic of that saintly queen.

At the time of the 900th anniversary there was a major exhibition in Edinburgh when St Margaret's Gospel book was on display. Her biographer Turgot wrote of that Gospel book which she possessed and indicated: "She had always felt a particular attachment for this book; more so than for any of the others which she usually read".

St Margaret herself had learned from the words of the Bible something of what is described as the "excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ". Perhaps as well as honouring and revering the major relic, now handed over to the care of St Margaret's Parish – we should do the same with the Bible especially the Gospels of Jesus Christ entrusted to us down to our present day.

As we honour and respect this relic – so we must honour and respect all the more the Bible entrusted to us down through the centuries – bringing us back not only to the teaching example of Jesus Christ himself but to the reality that we owe all we have and are to Almighty God our one Father in Heaven.