

VISIT OF CARDINAL O'BRIEN TO HOUSE OF COMMONS

MASS IN CRYPT OF HOUSE OF COMMONS

WEDNESDAY 4 JUNE 2008

Introduction:

My visit this week to the Houses of Parliament comes at a time of uncertainty, a time of great moral challenges and a time of confusion over the most basic questions about our society and the values we hold dear.

I simply read out to you as an indication of the truth of what I have said some headlines which have confronted me over the past few days: 'A deadly week for the unborn'; 'Outrage over Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill's vote'; 'Faithful urged to fight on after HFE Vote'; and 'State is Immoral for failing to protect the unborn'.

Further, just a few days after that vote in the House of Commons, a headline in one of Scotland's national papers read: 'Abortions in Scotland soar to record high with 38 performed every day', while the article goes on to say that there were 13,703 abortions carried out last year in Scotland, compared to 13,163 the previous year.

Rightly therefore can I say that it is indeed **'a time of uncertainty, a time of great moral challenges and a time of confusion over the most basic questions about our society and the values we hold dear'**.

Role of Conscience and its intrinsic link to truth:

I have spoken before in this esteemed location about **the role of conscience and its intrinsic link to truth**. In our first reading today St Paul affirms the value of a clear conscience. He writes to his disciple Timothy: "Night and day I thank God, keeping my conscience clear and remembering my duty to him as my ancestors did, and always I remember you in my prayers". Since the votes at the Committee stage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill, I have pondered the situation in which our society finds itself in regard to the value and strength of conscience as a guide for the moral life.

The Church is a signpost for conscience not just of those who adhere to the Catholic faith but to all peoples. The Christian message is a gift with which we have been entrusted, it is a message not of our own devising. Rather, to us falls the grave duty of preserving Christian memory, of handing on the teachings of Christ – but handing them on not merely as a list of prohibitions and rules. To do this would present a jaundiced and mistaken view of the gospel. The message of the Church is one promoting the fullness of life and presenting for all people the truth of how we find fulfilment in this life and the next. We must be presenting in our lives and in our teaching something of the joy of the vocation of Christian living.

Difficulties in witnessing to the Gospel:

Each generation encounters its difficulties in witnessing to the gospel. We should not be surprised if at times we appear to have little success. We can ponder the

experience of our Lord: never had the world heard such a master teacher, never before had signs and wonders abounded in witness of his authority. In raising Lazarus from the dead Jesus did not find the resistance of his enemies melting away, instead they hardened themselves and plotted the death of Lazarus and finally succeeded in killing our Lord himself.

Our battle is one not just of worldly arguments, as St Paul warns us in Ephesians our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

Does that mean that the force of argument and reason is to be abandoned? Far from it. **Where the Church's teaching accords with reason it is accessible to all peoples and we have every right to demand that our message plays a part in public discourse.** But there is another dimension that cannot be neglected, the one of prayer and spiritual formation.

Lack of reproach from conscience:

It has struck me that for all the Church's calls for recognition of the inviolability of conscience the sad reality is that the vast majority of politicians have given support to various attacks on human life with apparent lack of reproach from conscience.

What does one say then, in the face of those who without guilt condemn the innocent in the womb, show disregard for family life and play God with the building blocks of life?

In this regard Pope Benedict XVI is enlightening. He states: "A man of conscience is one who never acquires tolerance, well being, success, public standing and approval on the part of prevailing opinion at the expense of truth".

Disquiet within oneself after doing wrong is a sign of a functioning conscience. This is in fact the second sense of conscience, which Cardinal Newman famously described as the aboriginal Vicar of Christ an inner voice that discerns the rightness or otherwise of our actions and choices. It is in responding correctly to this prompting of conscience that we make ourselves more human, more virtuous. St Paul teaches us in his letter to the Romans: "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts while their conscience also bears witness ..." (Rom 2:14).

Response by people of goodwill:

This reality is a constant feature of human nature across times and cultures. It is why the truth that we proclaim finds a resonance in the hearts of people of goodwill. We know that many people of faiths other than our own, including Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh, who believe in the sanctity of unborn human life, join with us at this present time and are continuing to seek through their ongoing efforts a change in the present laws.

Yet our culture does much to dull that inner voice of conscience. A feature of our age is the incessant noise, the lack of quiet, endless distraction; the ipod and mobile phone ensure silence and reflection are the preserve of very few. As a result we cannot but help

notice that consciences among even some who ostensibly see themselves as loyal Catholics or champions of the life have been dulled even so far as to acquiesce with what is euphemistically called a right to choose.

It is in **teaching with confidence and faith that we can begin the much needed task of awakening consciences in our society**. I believe in fact the campaigning of recent months has already contributed to that task. We do not have the peace and harmony which arises from clear conscience, instead we see doubt and division, compromise and confusion which are the fruits of a false conscience. These are manifested not just in issues around abortion and embryology but across a spectrum of social issues which exhibit time and again some of the hallmarks of a society in decline.

Conclusion:

Those involved in political life have an important role in promoting the common good and resolving the troubles of our time. In my final words I remind you of those other words from St Paul in his letter to Timothy: “Fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid hands on you. God’s gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power, and love, and self-control. **So you are never to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord**”.

That is precisely what all involved in political life are called upon to do at this present time, relying on the strength and direction of the Lord.

As Paul said to Timothy: “**I remember you in my prayers**”. I will do that for each one of you, as I ask you to pray for myself and all those of the Christian faith or of other faiths, who are at this present time trying to witness to their own faiths and acting according to their consciences.