



# CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

## *THE NEW EVANGELISATION*

Opening Address: Archbishop Vincent Nichols

HOLY APOSTLES CHURCH, PIMLICO, WESTMINSTER, 30 APRIL 2012

**Evangelisation is an important theme which is recognised by the whole Church, so we have major initiatives in the Holy See with the establishment of a new department of the Holy See for the New Evangelisation.**

Evangelisation is important in the work of the Bishops' Conference which comes under the title of Home Mission and it is also recognised in the initiative of the Holy Father for us to hold a Year of Faith from next October through to the following November. If our discussions in the Bishops' Conference earlier this week are anything to go by, most dioceses are beginning to fashion their plans for that Year of Faith, particularly as a year in which we will try to deepen our shared understanding of the Faith. I think it's important today too because it helps us to recall and be motivated by the remarkable visit of Pope Benedict to this country which gave us, as the Catholic community, a new spur of hope and of determination.

This theme that you're addressing today is also important for very personal reasons, because the loss of faith or the absence from the practice of faith, is something which touches many families and many friendships. Faith is of great value to those who, as it were, have put their lives into the community of faith, so when it is lost or even scorned by somebody close to them, then this is a theme that is very important and often quite painful in the lives that they share.

I would like to suggest that your work today is essentially about relationships, it is essentially about how people relate together and how those relationships are the vehicle by which faith is shared or indeed lost. Just a few headline comments from me on different aspects of this theme, and I'm going to do no more than headlines, just to give you some prompts for the day.

The little bits of sociological research that I've heard suggest these things, that people drift away or leave the church because of hurt or simply because of neglect, that much is pretty straightforward. What is interesting is that those who are asked, who have left, who have gone, comment quite often that: 'Nobody seemed to notice whether I was there or not.' Also at the same time, people who have been asked say that they are open to a request, they are open to the suggestion that they might want to talk about how this happened. 95% of people say they would welcome an approach which addressed this issue in their lives. The third thing from this little bit that I've read, tells us that returning to the practice of their faith within the community is not that easy. Crossing the Threshold - the title today - is not a single and a simple step.

Some more headlines:

If this work that you're addressing today is essentially about relationships, then it is about relationships within the family, within the community of the Church, but most essentially a relationship with the Lord. In all of these relationships life and faith are inter-twinned because they are the two great gifts that we receive from God. In the family, life and faith go together, parents are the givers of life and the first teachers of the faith. They often figure in the story of the breakdown of faith and often in the repairing of faith. In my experience it is often husbands and wives and children who bring each other back to the practice of the faith. Families don't do all this work on their own but within a wider community, especially the community of the Church. It's true to say that within the community of the Church, the role of the priest is crucial because he is the one who stands at the altar and therefore the potential in the priest is key. That can be good and it can be for harm, that we know.

Thirdly, this is about a relationship with the Lord and it is in Him and with Him and through Him how we enter into the mystery of God. That relationship, the way we live in the context of the mystery of God is constantly changing and growing and it needs space, it needs recognition and maybe more than anything else it needs to find a voice, an expression, in words and in practice. I hope that during the day you look at some of the ways in which faith finds a voice, finds an expression which is very sensitive to those who are on the edge or to those who have stepped away from its practice.

Some of you may have watched the BBC film called *Catholics – Women* which was the voice of women who spend time and pray in Westminster Cathedral. I thought it was a remarkable piece of filming because it showed how central the relationship with the Lord of those women was, to the account of their lives that they gave. And it showed (and I know from people who have spoken to me after watching it) it showed in a phrase that a relative of mine used, it showed that ‘there’s room in the Church even for me’ – a person whose life is not particularly conforming to the patterns for which we might strive. But she said, listening to the women speak on the film, sensing that essentially it was about their relationship with the Lord, gave her a clear understanding that there is room in the church for her too.

So faith finding an expression, finding a voice in prayer and in silence, in conversation, in debate and in simple action, I would like to suggest might be at the heart of the things that you explore today.

Thank you very much for coming together. I’m sure this will be a productive and stimulating day and I hope that every single one of you goes away with two or three things - practical things – that you’re going to try, treasures that you’ll take from this day that I’m very grateful indeed is taking place.

Thank you very much.

**Most Rev Vincent Nichols**  
*Archbishop of Westminster*