

# **Ordination of Bishop Richard Moth**

Catholic Bishop of the Forces

*Westminster Cathedral, 29 September 2009*

## **Archbishop Kevin McDonald's homily**

Some time after the election of Pope Benedict, I came across a small book containing homilies that he had given on the occasion of ordinations to the priesthood. And I noticed that he frequently referred to the call of the Apostles as recounted in the Gospels and especially that of Peter, Andrew, James and John, the fishermen called from their boats to follow Jesus. They left their boats and followed him into a world and into a future that was unknown and entrusted themselves to a role and a destiny which was much greater than anything they could understand themselves – a destiny which tried and tested them to the limits of their resources and in some cases, cost them their lives. The point the Pope recurrently makes is that it is of the essence of priesthood to give yourself to a life that is not shaped by your own needs or ambitions but by the will of Christ that is mediated to us through the Church. That gift of oneself is made in the freedom of faith and will be honoured and blessed. The Acts of the Apostles provides us essentially with a picture of that blessing and a reflection on it.

When our bishop-elect was ordained a priest, I suspect that it did not occur to him that he would one day become Bishop to the Forces. But the Church is a Church of surprises and so it is. Of course, many people have said that he is particularly well suited to this role and that, doubtless, is true. But nonetheless, it is a great change and upheaval especially since Richard is deeply attached to his home diocese and has played an important role in its life and work. And I think it must be true to say that no matter how much we may know about the armed services, it is a very different matter to become part of that world and to exercise such a vital pastoral role within them. There is here, surely, a definite element of giving oneself to an unknown future.

The scriptures we have heard today are particularly apt for this occasion, especially when considered in the way I have proposed. They will be familiar to many but they are all readings to which we may constantly return for nourishment, encouragement and strength.

“The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me.” This passage from the prophet Isaiah is an expression of confidence, a confidence that should be shared by all Christians, and especially today by our bishop-elect – a confidence not in oneself but in the choice and action of God in one's life. Beginning with Abraham and carrying on through the prophets, God calls people to go to a place and to a people that they do not know. And there we have the key word – “people”. Whatever we are called to by God, we're called for and to people, people who, for a bishop, become his people his responsibility. And even though the context in which our new Bishop will be serving his people is a very specific one – a world with its own particular structures and procedures, it is nonetheless essentially and crucially, a service of the people to whom he is sent. What is asked of everyone who is ordained is simply to be open to the people for whom one has been anointed. It is for this that the Spirit of the Lord is given to us. At this stage, Richard has met some of the people he will serve, but

there will be many more – people of whose lives he will become part and among whom he will play a unique role.

Responding to this kind of call is a great joy but also very demanding. It requires us to dig deep into our own resources in search of wisdom and strength. We also need encouragement and that is what St Paul offers in his letter to Timothy when he says “That is why I am reminding you to fan into a flame the gift that God has given you.” Frequently in his letters, there is encouragement to the new Christian communities to rekindle the original ardour that brought them to faith. The signs of the loss of that ardour are being timid and ashamed – no longer being what the Lord empowered us to be. It is clear to Paul – and, indeed, clear throughout the Christian tradition – that for those who have the gift of faith, our response to that grace and our embracing of it, will either grow or wither. What is certain is that our faith will be tested and twice in this passage, Paul speaks of the hardships that will be visited upon those who would be heralds of the Good News.

But the Good News is not news of immediate comfort and release. Paul describes it as the news of the abolition of death and the proclamation of life and immortality. Of course in the context of today’s ordination, that message has a very special poignancy. We cannot but think of the coffins being carried out of the military aircraft that have come from Afghanistan and the families of those who have died or had terrible injuries. That is the reality of war: the reality that those who would minister to people in the armed forces must share in, trying to be a source of strength and support.

In war, of course, the faith of many people is tested to breaking point as was certainly the case during the two great wars of the last century, as well as subsequent conflicts. There is no easy comfort for those who are bereaved. What I find remarkable is the pride and the generosity with which loved ones speak of their loss. But it is a loss and in the darkness of pain and of grief the Church does represent and embody hope and so takes on a unique role.

Of course, the Good News is most fully appreciated by those who live in faith, those who are alive to God in Christ Jesus. And so someone assuming important responsibility in the Church must, through prayer and growing intimacy with Christ, fan into flame the gift of his own faith so that the people he serves may become aware of the flame of faith in their own lives and allow it to grow stronger.

That faith, as I have said is faith in Jesus Christ who, as today’s Gospel tells us, is our Good Shepherd. We must not be too quick to cast the priest or bishop into the role of shepherd. We all need, first of all to recognise Christ as our Good Shepherd and to look to Him. That particular image of Christ was one of the very earliest Christian symbols – it’s found in the catacombs – and its meaning is explored deeply in the Gospel of St John. It is Christ the Good Shepherd who unites us, who leads us to living water, who draws us together. But having understood that, we then acknowledge that an apostle, a pastor, a bishop must be that for his people. He must be their good shepherd. How he exercises that role will vary greatly depending on his situation, his gifts, his strengths and, indeed, his weaknesses. But as I have said, his life only makes sense in relation to the people he serves and he must in one way or another lay down his life for his sheep.

Today we are very aware of our armed forces, and of the great danger that their work involves. I also know that there are those here today whose lives have changed drastically because of injuries you have sustained in conflict. Your courageous response to those injuries is an inspiration to us all. We can only imagine, therefore, how vital must be the role of chaplains in situations like Iraq and Afghanistan, and it is chaplains especially, above all, that the Bishop of the Forces will seek to support. The nature of warfare is changing and conflicts today are complex, inextricably linked with terrorism and often seemingly intractable. So we must use this occasion to must pray earnestly for peace, for reconciliation between cultures, and between religions. We must pray for wisdom and integrity among politicians on all sides. We must pray for an end to war, but while war lasts, those engaged in it need prayer and need pastoral care. I know everyone here today is confident that today's ordination will be a blessing for all of them.

**+Kevin McDonald**  
*Archbishop of Southwark*