

The Church of Our Lady of the Angels, Erith, Kent, 11.30am, 1 October 2008

The Most Rev Kevin McDonald, Archbishop of Southwark, gave the following homily today, 1 October 2008, at the funeral of Ann Noonan.

Homily for the Funeral of Ann Noonan

We gather together today to give thanks and praise to God for the life and work of Ann Noonan – a very special person. As I said at the beginning of Mass, we all want to offer our heartfelt sympathy and our prayers for Eugene, her husband, and her son, Paul. Theirs is a great loss. But Ann's death, although long expected was a great blow to so many people, her family and relations, friends, members of the Focolare movement, people she worked and collaborated with, within the Catholic Church, in other Churches, and members of other religions. Her death leaves a void in her family, in the Church, and in the whole community. Many will feel her loss keenly because of her person, her unique gifts and her role in the Church. We entrust her good and gracious soul to God confident that she will know new life, eternal life in Christ. As we will see, the theme of new life figures significantly in the readings that Ann herself chose for this Mass. She really did believe that working and trusting in God's action could bring about a new situation, a new kind of culture, a new world. She had faith in the future, faith that resided in a heart that was honest and without cynicism.

Her commitment to God and to the Church went right back to her childhood and marked her whole life. She was an amazingly unselfish person, someone for whom her relationship with God and her love of other people was fundamental to her whole identity: unity with God and unity among people – and that is why she was so much at home with the values, ideals and the life of the Focolare movement. Her interest in other people was generous and genuine. She cared about people because they mattered to her. The fact that, as a young woman, she spent three years in northern Kenya as a volunteer teacher was symptomatic of her instinctive need to go out to others, to be of service to them

and to be a genuine practical support. That was the way she was and remained: other-centred and uncomplaining. The centre of her life was her family, Eugene and Paul. In another sense the centre of her life was the Eucharist. And those two focuses take us to the heart of her gift – a gift for forging relationships. In whatever she did that was the key thing – not a strategy or a policy but a way of being that was grounded in faith in God and faith in other people.

Let's consider the readings she chose for this Mass which will illustrate that and put her life and work in its widest and deepest context.

The prophet Isaiah says *"Now I create new heavens and a new earth."* Ann believed in a new order that God sought to bring into being with the cooperation of men and women. *"The wolf and the young lamb will feed together, the lion eat straw with the ox ... They will do no hurt, no harm on all my holy mountain, says the Lord."* Ann sought to play her part in bringing that vision to fruition. She had good will and looked for it in others, and she believed things would happen – that things could be changed.

The direction of that change and the nature of the new order is spelt out in the two readings from St John: *"My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God ... since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another."* A world shaped by the love of God and of others was the goal of all her endeavours.

The beautiful Gospel puts all this in the form of a strong and a very visual story: Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus gives us here the example of the servant who attends to the needs of others, and he directs his disciples to do the same: *"you must wash each other's feet."* The meaning of this gesture is encapsulated in these words of Jesus: *"I give you a new commandment; you must love one another as I have loved you."*

This commandment shaped Ann's life and it shaped the way in which she approached the work to which she gave the last years of her life namely inter-religious dialogue. I got to know Ann in 2001 when I was appointed bishop of Northampton and took over from Bishop Charles Henderson as Chairman of the Bishops' Conference Committee for Other Faiths. She had already been doing the job for a few years, and we immediately got on well and we worked happily together for the next seven years. I always say that for inter-religious work, as for ecumenical work, you need a particular kind of person, namely someone who is totally engaged with and faithful to the Catholic faith but also at the same time, genuinely interested in, open and receptive to, those with whom we seek to be in dialogue. To have both qualities in full measure is vital and not altogether common. People recognised these qualities in her and she was greatly respected for them. She was trusted by people of other faiths who saw the way she worked and knew that what she was trying to achieve was positive, life-giving, and for the good of all. She was also particularly good at supporting all the people in the Catholic Church who were committed to closer relations with people of other faiths. She was good at "networking" – that was one of her words. And her work bore great fruit: some of it very visible and tangible like for example, the two-day event at Heythrop and Westminster to mark the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. But much of the good that she did in furthering closer relations and greater understanding with people of other faiths was less tangible. It was to do with developing relationships, creating a new atmosphere, subtly but profoundly changing the situation. And I am sure that her previous journey through life had prepared her for this special role.

So as her Bishop, I am grateful to her on behalf of the Church in England and Wales. But we all may fittingly be grateful today. Eugene and Paul I know are justly proud of her, of all that she was and many people of many religions are grateful for the person that she was, grateful for the person they knew. We bless and thank God for all that she was and entrust her soul to the Lord. May she rest in peace.