



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Homily: Installation of Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor
as first chancellor of Newman University

Archbishop Emeritus Kevin McDonald, Southwark

HOMILY, NEWMAN UNIVERSITY, BIRMINGHAM 20 MARCH 2014

I would like to begin, if I may, by congratulating everyone at Newman University on the fact that this institution has now become a University in its own right. I likewise congratulate Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor on being appointed its first Chancellor. As someone who was originally a priest of the diocese of Birmingham and who has visited Newman many times for many reasons I recognise that this is a particularly welcome and auspicious development.

While I was pondering how to address this new situation and, indeed, how to address this congregation, my mind returned to two occasions on which I have visited the city in recent years. One was the last occasion on which I addressed a University assembly. It was during the summer of 2005 when my own University, the University of Birmingham, was kind enough to award me an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity. That was a rather special experience for a bishop - an opportunity to address faculty, students and their families in a secular institution and offer words of encouragement and challenge to people of many faiths and none from a Christian and Catholic perspective.

Today is different. Newman University is a Catholic foundation but one which welcomes students who belong to other Christian Communions, other faiths and people without religious affiliation. What I find both interesting and encouraging is that Newman University is, I understand, a popular choice for young people of other religions. I would like to think that part of the reason for that is the outreach and openness to other religions that has developed within the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, the 50th anniversary of which we celebrate next year.

Relationships between religions have changed significantly in recent decades. When I was parish priest of English Martyrs in Sparkhill, the number of Muslim children in our school increased dramatically. Sometimes people would ask me: don't the Muslim parents object to having their children attend Christian prayers and RE lessons. I was happy to reply that, on the contrary, they were only too happy for their children to be taught in an environment of faith.

I would like to think that something analogous to that would characterise the ethos of Newman University. The future of our society and indeed of peace in our world depend crucially on the development of a culture of peace between religions. Pope John Paul's invitation to members of other religions to bear witness to peace with him in Assisi in 1986 continues to be an icon of the role and responsibility of the Catholic Church in facilitating understanding between the different religions present in our cities and in our increasingly globalised world.

I mentioned another occasion on which I came back to Birmingham and that was for the visit of Pope Benedict when he beatified Cardinal John Henry Newman and visited Oscott College. Cardinal Newman wrote a famous meditation which I think it is fitting to recall and apply today in this University which is named after him.

This is part of it:

God has created me to do him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission - I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught, I shall do good, I shall do his work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it - if I do but keep his commandments.

There is, of course a message for each one of us in those words, but applying it to today's occasion, I want to say that any school or university should be a place where everyone matters and where people are able to identify and to develop their own particular gifts. It should also be a place in which people come to understand more fully that they have a role and a responsibility in the society in which they will live when they leave. Receiving a University education is a privilege but what is received in a University is not just received for one's own benefit. Rather it should shape and make possible the particular and unique contribution that each person has to make to the Common Good. And here in this University I can invoke Blessed John Henry Newman to say quite explicitly that each of us has a vocation within God's purposes and the more clearly we identify it the more we will fulfill it. In particular, that passage is a good antidote to what I would call the culture of choice. By that I mean the attitude of mind that focuses primarily, on my choices on what I want. We are called to be more than that.

The Word of God which we have heard gives indications and admonitions for today's occasion which may well be uncomfortable but are all the more urgent for precisely that reason. Each of the three readings questions us in turn about personal integrity, about prayer, and about faith. We all needed to hear them.

The second reading from St Paul's letter to Timothy interrogates us at this moment when we meet to pray in this chapel. It says "In every place, then, I want people to lift their hands up reverently in prayer, with no anger or argument." If this chapel situated as it is in the heart of this University were to be genuinely a place of prayer, that I think would significantly enhance the case for its being a separate and distinctive institution. If people of different religious backgrounds were to see this institution as one in which freedom to cultivate a life of prayer was fostered then it would certainly be special. People say we live in a very secular environment. I'm not sure that's true. But I do think that many people don't know how to pray even though many of them want to, they are not sure what it is.

The gospel tells us that no man can serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. The ambition to pursue a career simply in order to make yourself rich is not a choice for life. A decision to use your gifts to serve God, humanity and our environment is precisely a choice for life.

Birmingham is a vibrant city with great potential in all sorts of ways and not least spiritual potential. We should not listen too much to the siren voices that tell us that young people are not interested in faith or religion. Recently I was staying in a community in Austria where I met many young people from Central Europe with real passion for Jesus Christ but that was because there was someone to enthuse and inspire them. People just need to be inspired and to be led. What the future will bring to Newman University I do not know but I would encourage you to dream dreams and to look for vision and I am quite sure that there are people here who can nourish and inspire.

Cardinal Murphy O' Connor is someone who over many years has sought to inspire people and communities to grasp opportunities and to have a vision for the future. He is the right person to be Chancellor of Newman University. With the election of Pope Francis, it seems to me that the Catholic Church is finding its bearings and finding new confidence in its role in the world. That role and that profile is changing and developing not least because these have been times of purification and painful growth. There is a phrase from the Second Vatican Council that points to that development, where it says that the Church is as a "sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race."

The Church is not here to impose itself on people but to be a sign and a witness to what human community is all about. We are here for everyone. The Church needs to be a place of freedom, of justice, and of worship. It seems to me the Newman University can be very much at home in that Church and will have a vital contribution to make to it. Everyone here today will join me in wishing every blessing to the new Chancellor, the Chair of Council, the Vice-Chancellor and all who work and teach and study here.