



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND & WALES

Episcopal Ordination of Fr Robert Byrne C.O. *Homily: Cardinal Vincent Nichols*

METROPOLITAN CATHEDRAL OF ST CHAD, BIRMINGHAM, 13 MAY 2014

The Papal Bull of Pope Francis, by whose authority this ordination is taking place, graciously describes Birmingham as 'a city of a thousand trades'. As many of you will know, this great feature of the city came about because Birmingham was determined to be a place which welcomed people of every persuasion as long as they had a contribution to make to its spirit of enterprise. If you could do the job then you were welcomed.

And that is true for us today. Robert Byrne is, I know, most welcome in this Diocese of Birmingham. He can certainly do the tasks that are called for.

Indeed, the promises to be made in this liturgy itself spell out those tasks. The bishop is to be faithful and constant in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ; he is to maintain the deposit of faith, the teaching of the Church, entire and incorrupt; he is to build up the Body of Christ in unity with his fellow bishops; he is to be faithful in obedience to the successor of the apostle Peter; he is to be a father to his people, showing kindness and compassion to the poor, strangers and all in need, seeking out the stray. He is always to be a man of prayer whose life gives no grounds for reproach.

Quite a tall order!

Indeed, the words of Bishop Ullathorne come immediately to mind - and what sermon of mine in St Chad's would be complete without a reference to him! He said that never in his life had he congratulated a man on becoming a bishop!

But the promises made by the bishop to be are followed by this heartfelt prayer: 'May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfilment.' So while we readily recognise the abilities of our new bishop we welcome him most sincerely because he has been sent to us by The Lord himself. We receive him not because we approve of him but because he is God's gift to us. This is God's work, not ours, and as God's work, we welcome it from the depth of our faithful hearts.

Indeed the Gospel we have just heard makes this so clear: 'I have chosen you'. 'I have appointed you' says Jesus to his disciples, to our new bishop, to each one of us. And the Gospel also makes clear the intentions of the Lord in making this choice. We are chosen for joy. We are chosen for love. We are chosen for friendship with him.

Jesus tells us all, and tells Bishop Robert most directly, that he chooses us so that our joy may be complete! Here we touch the truth so loved by Pope Francis. Our joy lies not in satisfaction in our own achievements but in the utter free gift of God's mercy. Yes. We cannot pretend that we bring to the Lord the gifts he needs. No, we come to receive from him what we need: freedom from the burden of our sin, our failure, our half-heartedness. When we live each day as sinners who are forgiven, as people who are redeemed, then our joy is indeed complete. And the bishop is the one to embody this joy rooted only in the mercy of God.

Then Jesus tells us that we are chosen for love. We are to live in love of one another. We are chosen, through the call of faith, sealed in our baptism, in our confirmation, today in this episcopal ordination, to live and work together in love. We are not called to compete with one another, in some foolish desire to impress. Nor are

we called to relish disputes between us, fostering oppositions or hostilities. No, we are to love one another, searching together for the right way, but always in love. Why? Because Jesus laid down his life for us and we are to lay down our lives for one another. This is the heart of the Church, the motivation of each one of us today.

For this reason Jesus assures us that we are his friends, so much more than his servants. Yet, remember, there is nothing demeaning about the Biblical title of servant. Moses himself is afforded the high title of 'servant of God'. Yet to be a friend is something so much more. It is to have the right to enter into the presence of the King whenever we so desire, not waiting to be summoned, not just glimpsing the Majesty as he passes by.

Here, then, is the formula of our true joy: to be constantly in his presence, laying down our lives in loving service, rejoicing in his mercy. St. Paul expresses this so powerfully: we live in the knowledge of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus. Every day we look to Jesus. Every day we are filled with the glory of God. What else could we be except joyful in our hearts and, we pray, in our work.

Just after Bishop-elect Robert makes his promises, we turn in prayer to the saints of the Church. Uppermost in my mind will be St Philip Neri, so well known as the saint and prophet of joy, renowned for his relaxed and attractive method of education, living across the road from the Venerable English College in Rome, giving his blessing to the young students, especially as they set out for their mission here in England. We certainly ask for his blessing today on this man.

And Blessed John Henry Newman, of whom Father Robert is a true son. He too will bless us today and enkindle in us that same passion for the truth of faith which he followed at such cost and with such rigour. His journey was described, on his tombstone, as one of moving 'Out of shadows and images into the truth.' May that be our daily journey, too, coming each day more fully into the light of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus.

But I also like to remember of this great man that the people of this city lined the road in their thousands to witness his funeral cortège and to pray for him. Most of those who came to show their love for him, knew him not through his countless letters and erudite learning but through his practical care. They gave their hearts to him for he had brought them coal when they were freezing, visited them when they were sick, defended them at work when their consciences were threatened. He truly was a father of the poor and, in this, is an inspiration to every bishop and, of course, to every member of his Oratorian family.

Lord, today we humbly present to you Bishop-elect, this earthenware vessel, like us all, a vessel of clay, weak and prone to failure and dismay. The weakness is ours. The glory is yours. Help us, with him, to reach out beyond our limitations, to receive from you a full measure of your mercy and love, wherever you may place us. Bless this new bishop with the gift of joy in its fullness, and kindness in its true depth for then he will truly be a shepherd of your people, an apostle to your people and a cause of our joy. Amen.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster