

Apostolic Nuncio's Address to the Bishops of England and Wales

His Excellency Archbishop Antonio Mennini

Plenary Meeting
Hinsley Hall
Leeds

11 November 2013

Dear brothers in Christ,

It is a great pleasure for me to be with you today as you open this Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. I am very grateful for your kind invitation not only to attend this important ecclesial event, but also to address you, once again, as Apostolic Nuncio in Great Britain.

First of all, I would like to convey to you, as the Bishops' Conference, as well as to each one of you individually, the closeness, the affection and the esteem of the Holy Father Pope Francis, who most of you had the opportunity to meet personally, albeit briefly, last April in Rome. The Holy Father appreciates your generous pastoral zeal and has asked me to convey to you His Apostolic Blessing.

I also want to deeply thank you for what you have done in defending the real nature of marriage and its truth during the long months previous to the approval of the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act*. I really admire your determined and steady commitment in trying to avoid this sad legislation and its negative consequences for the family. In a special way, I want to thank Their Graces, Archbishops Vincent Nichols and Peter Smith; I am sure that this sentiment of gratitude is shared by all of you as well.

Unfortunately, there are also many others challenges that our Church, both here in Great Britain and abroad has to face; I think, for example, of

issues like religious and catholic education in schools; the serious consequences that will follow if the *Right-to-die Bill* is passed, etc. Though we are not living in easy times for the Church, we don't get discouraged. As Pope Francis said during his homily on Palm Sunday, "*Never give way to discouragement!*". Indeed, we are confidence in the help and assistance of God's Providence.

Having said that, now I would like to dwell on the appointment of Bishops, a very delicate and important work, which all of us at the Nunciature are very committed to. In this regard, the Holy Father Pope Francis, addressing the participants in the Papal Representatives Days in Rome last June, indicated some criteria to be followed in the process of choosing candidates for the Episcopacy (I have made some copies of this paragraph in particular, so that each one of you can read and reflect on it).

For Pope Francis, one of the main criteria is that candidates must be endowed with the following human and priestly qualities: "*pastors close to the people [...] gentle, patient and merciful; may they love poverty, interior poverty*", without "*the mindset of 'princes'*", and so on. "*May they be able - the Holy Father said- to 'watch over' the flock that will be entrusted to them, in other words to care for all that keeps it united*".

In this way, the Holy Father not only presents the profile of who should be taking into consideration as a candidate for the Episcopacy, the "*bishops-to-be*", but -I dare to say- also Pope Francis shows how those who are already Bishops should live; actually each one of us! We are called to a permanent conversion in our ministry to imitate more closely Jesus, the Good Shepherd. May I invite you to read and meditate on these words of Pope Francis.

Changing to another issue I would like to say that following the beautiful and fruitful experiences of last year visiting the Dioceses of Birmingham, Hexham and Newcastle and Menevia, among others, this year as well I have had the wonderful opportunity to visit more of the Scottish dioceses, some others in England and Wales, recently Northampton and Wrexham. While I deeply express my gratitude to their Ordinaries for their warm and fraternal welcoming, I want to say that these visits have been of great help for me to get to know better, and at first hand, the reality of the Catholic Church in England and Wales and to recognize and appreciate the pastoral zeal and commitment of their Pastors. Certainly it has been for me

and my collaborators a “strong experience of Church and communion”, full of spiritual fruits. Indeed, I have experienced as true what the psalmist affirms: “*How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers dwell together as one!*” (Psalm 133:1).

And I think that the same positive experience has been lived by the bishops as well. I have been very glad when afterwards I heard bishops talking also about the benefits of the Papal Nuncio’s visit to their dioceses. Therefore I would like to reiterate my willingness to visit your communities, if you think that this can be helpful for you and for them. For me it certainly proves to be a wonderful opportunity to learn more about your “*joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties*” in your pastoral work.

I conclude by reassuring you of my prayers for your work during these days as a Bishops’ Conference as well as for each one of you and your individual Dioceses. While I fraternally ask you to keep me and my collaborators at the Nunciature in your prayers that we may better serve the Church in Great Britain. In this, the Dowry of Mary, I entrust you to the protection of Our Lady, Queen of the Apostles, and, by Her intercession, I fraternally invoke upon you God’s blessing. May the Lord, the Good Shepherd, inspire all your works and support you in your ministry.

I thank you for your attention.

+Antonio Mennini
Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain

“I would like to conclude with a word too on one of the important aspects, at least for the vast majority, of your service as papal representatives: collaboration with the bishops' provisions. You know the famous expression that indicates a basic criterion in the choice of the person who must govern: *si sanctus est oret pro nobis, si doctus est doceat nos, si prudens est regat nos* — if he is holy let him pray for us, if he is learned, let him teach us, if he is prudent let him govern us. In the delicate task of carrying out the investigation required prior to making episcopal appointments, be careful that the candidates are pastors close to the people: this is the first criterion. Pastors close to the people. He is a great theologian, has a learned mind: Let him go to university where he will do such great good! Pastors! We need them! May they be fathers and brothers, may they be gentle, patient and merciful; may they love poverty, interior poverty, as freedom for the Lord, and exterior poverty, as well as simplicity and a modest lifestyle; may they not have the mindset of “princes”. Be careful that they are not ambitious, that they are not in quest of the episcopate. It is said that at an early audience Blessed John Paul II was asked by the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation of Bishops about the criterion for the selection of candidates for the episcopate, and the Pope said with his special voice: “the first criterion: *volentes nolumus*”. Those who seek the episcopate... no, they won't do. And may they be bridegrooms of one Church, without being constantly on the lookout for another. May they be able to “watch over” the flock that will be entrusted to them, in other words to care for all that keeps it united; to “monitor” it, to be on the alert for dangers that threaten it, to nurture hope, so that hearts may be filled with sunshine and light, to sustain lovingly and patiently the plans God brings about among his People.”

[Pope Francis, *Address to Participants in the Papal Representatives' Days*, 21 June 2013]