



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Migrants' Mass

Archbishop Nichols' Homily

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL, FEAST OF ST JOSEPH THE WORKER, MONDAY, 6 MAY 2013

In 1929 many people in Italy were facing hard times, the result of inflation, debts, unemployment and food shortages. On the streets and in the countryside, there were also outbreaks of political violence. It was in these circumstances that the Bergoglio family sold all their possessions and emigrated to Argentina on a ship called the 'Guilio Cesarea', with all their money sown into the lining of the mother's fur coat!

So it is that our new Holy Father, Pope Francis, comes to the See of Peter as the son of an immigrant family. This is an encouraging thought for us as we celebrate this Mass with so many who are the migrants of today.

Our new Holy Father chose the name Francis to signal his special concern for the poor of the world. And we opened our Mass by singing words of St Francis, words which are a cry of praise to God present in all creation, in all its richness and diversity.

'All creatures of our God and King
Lift up your voice and with us sing Alleluia!
Let all things their Creator bless
And worship him in humbleness
O praise him, Alleluia!'

And that is what we do today.

These themes - of the wonder of all creation - find a first expression in the Book of Genesis, our first reading this morning. There we heard that throughout the work of creation God saw and found all that he had made to be good. Indeed when he had created man and woman, made 'in the image of himself, in the image of God', he saw that 'indeed it was very good' for it is our high calling to have stewardship of creation, to give something extra to creation, to work with God for the unfolding of God's own work, day by day. (Gen.1 & 2)

As we look around this Cathedral this morning we see indeed that the work of God's hand is very good, in all our diversity and talent, in our joy and striving, in our rejoicing and praise.

Today we gather from across London recognising that London has a unique role as a city, a city in which every race and nationality has a presence. It is a place in which strangers become Londoners. For the most part London is welcoming, respectful and tolerant, qualities that in fact spring from the resonances of belief that we are all bestowed with a dignity that comes from the hand of God himself.

Today we can rejoice that the Catholic Church plays an important role in this work of welcome and mutual esteem.

I am conscious of the hard work that many parishioners put into welcoming new comers and new families. I thank all who undertake this work. This work of welcome makes such a difference. So do the efforts made to integrate migrants into the life and worship of the parish. We all share a place before God our heavenly Father. We all share the precious relationship with Jesus, our brother, our Lord, our King. We all share the language of the heart in prayer, the language of the Holy Spirit who has been poured into our hearts. We all come to the same sacraments that the Lord may nourish us. Today's Mass makes this so clear.

I also thank all who sustain the life of our schools for they too play a vital part in helping us to be a vibrant community. Our schools are important communities of integration, bringing us together and enabling us to progress together. They help young people and families to establish firm foundations in faith and to develop confidence in their own identity and openness to those who are different.

At this Mass we celebrate the richness and vitality of London. The gifts that diversity bring are real and to be cherished. Yet the challenges are real too. There are challenges faced by those who come here, by those they leave behind, and by the communities who have to find the resources to host them. These pressures are real - on housing and the health service, for example, - and are made sharper by recession and slow economic growth. I know, we all know, that there are no simple solutions to these complex problems but the right policy will always be guided by courage and generosity and not by appealing to fear or pessimism.

Today I express a particular concern for the well-being of families. Economic and time-period thresholds recently established for non-EU families to be united here are putting great strain on the vital unit of the family and could be seen as actually putting a price-tag on the value of family unity. Given the proven importance of the family for social stability, surely it is for the common good that immigration policies must be more sensitively shaped in such matters.

The theme of the family is, of course, very relevant to this celebration which is in honour of St Joseph. He was given by God the role of watching over, being the custodian, of the Holy Family. He fulfilled that role with unflinching love, the key requisite of all family life. He also did it through his work as a carpenter, as we heard in the Gospel. We should remind each other of the dignity of our work and of the need to be attentive to situations in which that dignity, that recognition of the value of work, has diminished or is absent.

Pope Francis called our attention to these things just recently, in his celebration of this Feast. He said:

'Labour is a fundamental element for the dignity of the person.' It is a God-given capacity 'to maintain ourselves, our family, to contribute to the growth of our nations.'

He then continued: 'I would like to invite all to solidarity and encourage those responsible for public affairs to make every effort to give new impetus to employment. This means having a care for the dignity of the person. Mostly I would like to say not to lose hope. Even St Joseph had difficult moments, but he never lost trust and he knew how to overcome them with the certainty that God does not abandon us.' (General Audience 1 May 2013)

We celebrate today this great gift of our Catholic faith. We come to the Lord to be fed with real food, with real drink, with real blessing. At this Mass our diversity, which shines so brightly, comes to its true source of light, Jesus the Lord, whose light we always seek to reflect in all we do and say.

Amen.

+ Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster

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