



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND & WALES

## Episcopal Ordination of Fr Alan Williams

*Homily: Cardinal Vincent Nichols*

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST MARY AND ST HELEN, BRENTWOOD, 1 JULY 2014

It seems a long time ago now, but in 1984, as a comparatively young priest, I was sent to London to serve Cardinal Hume and the bishops of England and Wales as General Secretary of the Bishops' Conference. Yet, by that date, long time ago as it seems, Bishop Thomas McMahon had already served this Diocese of Brentwood for four years, having been ordained bishop in 1980 by the great Cardinal himself.

How much we all owe to Bishop Thomas. How much today we thank him for faithful service here in Brentwood for just two weeks short of 34 years! Bishop Tom, thank you so much! May the years ahead be both peaceful and prayerful, for you deserve the peace and we need the prayers.

All those years ago I never dreamed that I would be here today taking this part in the episcopal ordination of his successor, Fr Alan Williams, who today will put himself entirely in the hands of our loving Lord as he begins his episcopal ministry. Alan, you are most welcome and you know you are supported by the love and the prayers of all of us here today, and by so, so many more.

This is, indeed, an awesome moment, for you, Alan, for me, for all of us. For we are about to ask of the Lord a gift that will change us all because it will make you a bishop, a father to this diocesan family, a brother to us bishops, a sign and voice of the truth of our faith in the public arenas of our society. How do we know that this is the right thing to do? How do we proceed with this ordination with confidence and not anxiety?

In February I was privileged to be present when our Holy Father, Pope Francis, addressed the Congregation of Bishops. That day, he told us that a key moment in the ordination of a bishop, a moment we have already witnessed here this morning, is when the question is put: 'Do you have a mandate?' This moment, he said, echoes the actions of Jesus who 'called the twelve to himself and sent them out' - mandated them - two by two (Mk 6.7).' So, he told us, this morning's question can also be expressed in these words: 'Are you certain that this name, Alan Williams, has been pronounced by the Lord himself? Are you certain that it is the Lord who has chosen him from among all those he has called, to be with him in a singular way and to entrust him with the mission which has been given to the Lord by the Father himself?'

And the answer to this question is clear: 'Yes we are.'

As the mandate was read we felt great joy because we gladly believe that it expresses the will of the Lord. It is he who sends us a new shepherd, a new pastor. He does so by working, as he promised, through the Church, through the thoughts and words and actions of us poor servants of his.

St Paul expresses this faith so forcefully: 'We are only the earthenware jars!' How true that is, and how deeply you, dear Alan, will feel that today. But Paul is sure, and we may be so too: 'The power comes from God and not from us.' So when you prostrate yourself, Alan, and when we humbly beseech the Lord for this great gift of grace, we do so in trusting ourselves to him. We do so with the trust of true lovers in a shared embrace, with the trust of children hugged by the parents, with unshakeable trust in the God who loves us with the totality of his Godhead, with the full mercy of a loving Father, with the eternal and human depth of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

When he spoke to us in February, Pope Francis put into words, in his remarkable way, so many of our hopes, so much of the joy we feel at this moment. He said this: 'From the lips of the Church comes the cry: Give us a bishop, one who will lift us up, who will watch over us with the fullness of the heart of God. Don't send us a manager, an administrator, a delegate from the agency, nor someone who is at the level of our weakness and small pretences. We need someone who knows how to reach up towards the gaze of God and who can guide us towards Him for only in His gaze is our future to be found.'

Here is the mandate for our new bishop: challenging, exciting, invigorating. It is expressed powerfully in the words of Isaiah that we have heard: 'I have appointed you as prophet to the nations...Do not be afraid! There, I am putting my words into your mouth!'

These words of Isaiah point us towards the true task of our ministry. We are summoned to be witnesses to the Word of Life, witnesses to the Risen Lord.

This was the task first given to the Apostles, to share the wonderful gift of life and hope which comes with faith in the Risen Lord. We know, and attest, that once this faith is received, then our horizons are thrown open, our imagination fired with new images and meanings. Faith in the risen Lord changes completely our view of every day and every event.

These are the words put into our mouths, the truth which we are to present over and over again, making it attractive, compelling. We have to come to this task with endless patience, always trying to understand those we seek to touch, always seeking for the right image, the right word, the right appeal. Indeed Pope Francis spoke of patience as the finest quality in a bishop. 'Patience, patience,' he said, 'five times patience!' We will always keep trying.

And he also reminded us that the only way to a true understanding of the Risen Lord is through his Cross. He said this: 'The courage to die, the generosity of offering his very own life, of spending himself for the flock, are inscribed in the DNA of the bishop. Self-denial and sacrifice are co-natural to the mission of the bishop.' In this way, day by day, we make the message of the Risen Lord truly credible.

His words that day also contained advice about how a bishop is to see his priorities. Here they are. Alan, remember them always - as I try to as well.

The first work of the bishop is prayer. His first enthusiasm is for prayer. He is to pray boldly, arguing with God for the sake of his people.

Then, secondly, he is to stay close to the people, in his heart and in how he spends his days. In a bishop, said Pope Francis, there can be 'no psychology of princes'. He is always to be a servant.

Indeed, these are the very words of the Gospel we have heard. We are to have nothing in common with great men who make their authority felt. We are not to be served but to serve; we are not to be first, but a slave and most of all a servant, a slave, of the Word of God. That is the third priority of the bishop.

Alan, as a son of the Society of Mary you have her, and your devotion to her, to give you such powerful extra support. Mary, the Mother of Jesus and his first and best disciple, embodies all of these priorities. She is first in the praise of God and she is for us the best teacher of prayer. As our Mother she is always close to us, just as she was close to her Son, standing with him in his agony, at the foot of the cross. And she is also, in her own words, 'the handmaid' of the Word, for she always brings us to her Son that he may heal and redeem us.

Today I cannot help recalling, dear Alan, a favourite saying of my mother. She insisted on it, often on the most difficult days: 'This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.' Well, difficult days will come. But today her advice is easy to keep. We do indeed rejoice. We rejoice in this work of the Holy Spirit who alone can evoke in us the holiness we are called to radiate, the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ himself, visible in our lives, today and always. Let us lift up our eyes to his face and joyfully proceed with this ordination.

Amen.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols  
Archbishop of Westminster