



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Mass of Welcome

Cardinal Vincent Nichols' Homily

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL, 28 FEBRUARY 2014

Thank you, all, very much, for coming to this Mass of Welcome. You have certainly made me feel just that - most welcome and wonderfully supported by your prayers and good will.

In return may I say a little about the marvellous events in Rome over last weekend.

The public Consistory last Saturday was a moment of such exuberance. I enjoyed it thoroughly. And I also learned, immediately, the deep esteem and respect in which Cardinals are held. Salutes all around; a sharp clicking of heels from the Swiss Guards; freedom to wander anywhere within the Basilica of St Peter's; endless smiles and joyful greetings! So I was able to make my way over to greet our own Cathedral Choir, singing alongside the Sistine Choir. What a special moment. Then, next day, our choir met Pope Francis personally and gave him a brief impromptu concert. He readily expressed his thanks and admiration.

The choir sang on two occasions: the public Consistory on Saturday, when the 19 new cardinals were created, through the imposition of the red biretta and the giving of a ring, and the solemn celebration of Mass with the Holy Father on Sunday.

I experienced these two emotional events as a real deepening of our bonds with the Holy Father, the successor of St Peter, around whose tomb we were actually gathered. They were also moments of infectious joy, shared, I believe, by all present.

On the following day, Monday, we went to the tomb of St Paul, in the great Basilica just outside the walls of Rome. Peter and Paul, one the foundation stone, the other the great missionary. Then, on the third morning, we celebrated Mass at the Venerable English College, around the relics of our martyr priests, those who followed The Lord with unwavering fidelity, even unto dreadful deaths.

In these three locations of St. Peter, St Paul and the English martyrs, we found such a powerful affirmation of St Paul's great cry, 'that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the body of Christ.....until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself' (Eph 4: 12-13).

What I learned again in Rome, as did all who travelled to be with me, was that this growing into Christ is the daily life-blood of the Church. Our faith does not invite us into a private spiritual experience, or a secluded garden in which we are well protected from the rough realities of daily life. No, our growing into Christ is brought about, as St John tells us in the Gospel, by our readiness to love one another, even to laying down our lives for each other (see Jn 15:12-13).

When he spoke to us, Pope Francis was very clear that the call of the Gospel, the consequence of being a Catholic, is that we try to walk with Christ each day. From the moment we awaken to the last moments before sleep, we are accompanied by Jesus. He will guide and shape our lives if we are

attentive and responsive to his promptings. This is such a simple, direct and demanding picture of the Christian life, entirely suited to a new cardinal as well as to each of you!

Jesus has to be in our hearts. Then, day by day, we begin to see with his eyes, act out of his love, set our priorities according to his teachings and shape our decisions in conformity to his will.

If we do this, then we will have eyes for all the needs around us. Our eyes will not be closed to the drama of poverty in our midst. We shall see the crucial importance of the ethical dimensions so keenly needed in the creation of wealth. These are the two realities which so characterise this great Metropolis of London. We will see the needs in front of us and respond, as Pope Francis himself said, 'with intelligence, courage and full of love.' When we walk with Christ this is indeed our calling. And in following it we seek to work with all who share those same concerns.

And in the midst of this engagement with the complex realities of our time we will not hesitate to point to Jesus, to the Anointed One. In St Paul's words, 'he is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength.....so that the body grows until it has built itself up in love' (Eph 4:15-16). We are, each one of us, his missionary disciples and I hope that this moment in the life of the Church, under the Pontificate of Pope Francis, will lead us to discover more deeply the dignity and joy of that calling.

As you will all know, the scarlet of the Cardinal's robes is accepted as a sign of total dedication to the pathway of Christ, even to the shedding of one's blood. There are, in the rich history of the Church, many, many martyrs. There are many Cardinals, too, who have given their all in service of the Church. I think of the line of my predecessors, going back to Cardinal Wiseman. Each one, in his own way, gave of himself unstintingly.

But this evening we also look more deeply into our history and as a token of its richness we have brought here the symbols of the bishops' ministry of three other Cardinals who have graced the Church in these lands.

First of all we have the ceremonial crozier belonging to Cardinal William Allen. With the death of Queen Mary in 1558 he moved abroad, founding the English College in Douai and the English College in Rome, from where came so many priests who nurtured Catholic life in communion with the See of Rome in the post Reformation years. He was the undisputed leader of English Catholics in exile. He died in 1594. We owe so much to him. May his prayers be with us this evening.

Then we have the pectoral cross worn by Cardinal Reginald Pole. Related by blood to King Henry VIII, he bore in his mind and heart all the anguish of those times of conflict. He opposed Henry's emerging understanding of the Catholic Church. As a result his mother and brothers were executed. He too lived in exile, to return only for the reign of Queen Mary, bringing about a temporary reconciliation with Rome. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury and the fig tree he planted in Lambeth Palace still flourishes to this day. We pray this evening that the flourishing of that tree may be a sign of the growing deep cooperation and mutual commitment between the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, and that God will indeed bless our efforts.

Then, much to the delight of my heart, we have in our midst the episcopal ring of St John Fisher. It bears an image which must be that of St. Peter, and we know that it was for the primacy of Peter that this noble bishop and scholar was martyred, perhaps the only Cardinal martyr in the history of the Church. I pray that I may continue to be inspired by him and have a small measure of his courage. I know I have no chance of that without your constant prayers and support.

Our Alleluia verse at Mass this evening consisted of these words: 'I am the good shepherd; I know my own and they know me.' We are surrounded by the example of so many outstanding shepherds, including Pope Francis, who stands as first among all earthly shepherds. He certainly inspires me, with

his inner peace, with his directness of speech, with his eloquent actions and ability to touch our hearts. But there are many shepherds present here this evening, also to be inspired. Parents, be inspired to be good shepherds of your families. Teachers, be good shepherds of your pupils. Employers look after your workforce. Priests, be true shepherds of your parishes and may this Cardinal be always true to his new-found role.

May St Peter keep us firm in the unity of faith; may St. Paul keep us energetic in our mission and may the martyrs of our land inspire in us an equal generosity in our daily lives. Amen.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster