



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Homily: Special Mass for Cardinal-Designate Vincent Nichols

SANTA MARIA SOPRA MINERVA, ROME, 21 FEBRUARY 2014

I want to begin by welcoming you to this church, my Titular Church here in Rome; I hope that my Successor is as lucky as to receive a similarly beautiful one!

It seems extraordinary to me that we spoke of 2013 as the “Year of the Two Popes”, and now we find that 2014 has turned out to be the “Year of the Two Cardinals”! I say this because it is in fact the first time that there have been two Cardinals in England since Blessed John Henry Newman and Cardinal Manning both held that office.

I started by mentioning the beauty of this church, because, to me, it is harder to find one with more splendid decoration or richer imagery, nor one which speaks of a history just as rich. We see, for example, its beautiful statue of Jesus with the cross and its side chapel depicting Our Lady and St Thomas Aquinas, painted by Filippino Lippi. It is also the burial place of Lippi’s artistic predecessor Blessed Fra Angelico. Most astonishingly of all, its sacristy has played host to not one, but two Conclaves, one of which elected Pope Pius V. And I hesitate to mention this, but it was that Pius, who went on to excommunicate Elizabeth I!

The feature of the church that I really want to talk about today is its most famous, and rightly so: the tomb of St Catherine of Siena, Co-Patroness of Europe, which we see here under the High Altar. The Fourteenth Century in which St Catherine lived was a period of great turbulence for the Church, a turbulence to which she was not indifferent, but instead keen to address; as John Paul II put it, she “dived into the thick of the ecclesiastical and social issues of her time”. The Pope himself had fled to Avignon, but Catherine fearlessly told him: “go back to Rome!” seeing that there must be unity in the Church, so greatly threatened with imminent schism. She told the cardinals, too, to be silent no longer, urging them to be brave and speak out in the name of peace. Most audaciously of all, she even spoke up to God Himself, telling Him in no uncertain terms: “You know how and You are able and it is Your will, so I plead You to have mercy on the world and to restore the warmth of charity and peace and unity to Holy Church. It is my will that you do not delay any longer.”

And so today, it is with this zeal for mission, for unity, for peace in the Church and the world, that we should pray for Vincent Nichols. We pray that he will lead the Church in England and Wales with renewed courage and wisdom. We pray that he will receive grace from God to assist the Holy Father and to be open to his guidance in every way.

We also pray for Pope Francis, as he carries the Cross as Jesus did, that he will continue to inspire Christ’s faithful people with the joy of the Gospel.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor

Archbishop Emeritus of Westminster