

Talk for the Clergy of the Diocese of Plymouth
'Being a Missionary Priest Today'
Buckfast Abbey
Wednesday, 29 November 2017

A few years ago now, as I was about to leave Birmingham to go back to Westminster, one good natured and spirited priest said, in a voice loud enough for me to hear, that he was quite glad because now he would be hearing less about Bishop Ullathorne. Well he is not among us today and I will start with William Ullathorne, without a doubt one of my heroes!

Bishop Ullathorne, the great architect of the Diocese of Birmingham and of so much of 19th century Catholicism, always liked to think of a priest as a 'missioner', but then added that not only had the title to be earned, and that not every priest did so.

He was a blunt Yorkshire man who called a spade, a spade. He was, therefore, careful with titles. He disliked the title 'secular priest' because it was easily taken to mean that the Diocesan priest had rather more worldly concerns and pursuits than the priest who, like him, was a member of a religious order. He liked the description of his priests, of us, as 'pastoral priests', because he recognised that it was the pastoral work that is our defining character. He would like the comment that a pastor is the one who, most of all, wants to lead his sheep to food and to water. That is the essence of pastoral care. So Ullathorne saw this care as embracing the

sacramental ministry of the priest, a role giving rise to the title of the priest as 'Father', the best-loved title of all.

But it was the title 'missioner' that he held to be the highest description that could be given. In 1853, at the first Birmingham Diocesan Synod, he made this heartfelt appeal:

'We are missionaries! O name, rich with the most noble and generous associations! Our work is that of the apostles... Unless he makes himself into a sacrifice, as an apostle would, for the souls of his brethren, he may be a priest, but he is unworthy to be called a missionary. A missionary is a priest, laborious, patient, not easily discouraged, ingenious by that force of ardour which the spirit of his position kindles to meet wants as they arise!'¹

I think these words have a real contemporary ring to them! They are rooted in all Bishop Ullathorne's work in building up the parish and institutional life of the Church and have nothing to do with moving away from parish pastoral ministry into some form of 'free-floating' rather individualistic particular ministry. They have nothing to do with the exaggerated dichotomy between 'maintenance and mission'. They show that he did not want priests who saw themselves as 'settled freeholders' (to use his own phrase), content with what they had and striving simply to hold on to it. Rather his insistence was on the inner spirit and intention of the life and work of the priest, and through him of the

¹ William Bernard Ullathorne: 'Ecclesiastical Discourses: Delivered on Special Occasions, Facsimile Publisher (2015), p5
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entire community. He would have just loved the title for our reflection this morning: 'Being a Missionary Priest Today'.

Memory is a good place to start when we are thinking about our future and the challenges that face us. And here in the South West you have your own rich storehouse of memories to fire and inspire you today in your mission.

I think of the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549, held under the banner of the Five Precious Wounds of Jesus. I think of the courage of Cardinal William Allen, and those with him, who saw that the Catholic priesthood was in danger of dying out under the pressure of persecution and set about refashioning its supply chain, in Douai (1568), in Rome (1579) and in Valladolid (1589) such that by 1580 there were over 100 well-educated and courageous priests - missionaries - serving in this country. First among them, of course, was your own St Cuthbert Mayne, arriving here on 24 April 1576. We learn from Bishop Richard Challoner, writing 100 years later, that the average length of ministry of these seminary priests was about 12 months. St Cuthbert Mayne ministered for 18 months before his trial and execution, on 29 November 1577, the first of them to be hung, drawn and quartered, a butchery so crude and cruel that it is said that the executioner in Launceston went mad and died within a month. Those who watched the recent 'Gunpowder' drama on BBC 1 were given a vivid and distressing reminder of this period of our history and of the courage of these men, and women.

Now, as we think about ourselves as called to be true missionaries, the inheritors of this tradition, it is useful to look a bit more closely at these roots.

In the 1550s, the ambition of Mary I and Cardinal Reginald Pole was to build up an educated, resident, pastoral and preaching body of priests. Their ambition actually took shape after their deaths, in the College at Douai where Cardinal Allen was already giving our ministry a particular shape. He insisted that the objective of the mission in England and Wales had to be more pastoral than evangelical, not so much conversion but the reconciliation of fearful or timid Catholics. After all, it has been estimated that at this time, two thirds of the people of this country were still striving to be faithful to the 'old religion'. He wanted priests to transform careless Catholics into conscientious and courageous witnesses and in this work he urged priests not to be too rigid in their approach to the demands of the public repudiation of the Catholic faith. Rather he urged priests to be gentle and balanced in their approach - a 'subtle and supple approach' - so as not to drive people away.²

This emphasis has endured. For a long time, we have focused on the existing Catholic community, in its strengths and weaknesses, in its needs and expectations. We have been less focused on the out-going work of direct evangelisation. The building up of the Catholic community, in its position as a minority, has been our experience and tradition. What we see

² Professor Judith Champ: 'The Secular Priesthood in England and Wales: History, Mission and Identity', Oscott Press (2016), pp33, 41
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today, in our very changed circumstances, is the need for this minority to find a confident voice at every level, in putting forward the truths of faith in a culture that has lost much of its nerve in asserting any expression of fundamental truth and principle, as a consistent basis of meaning and action.

So perhaps our task as missionaries is both in continuity with our earlier brethren and somewhat in contrast to it. It is in direct continuity for we too have in our hearts the dying words of St Cuthbert Mayne in which he affirmed, with his last breath, 'These things which I think to be true.' We too seek to affirm the truth of our faith. We too want to gather people to the life of our parishes, which as Bishop Mark says, are to be 'sanctuaries for the thirsty'³ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 27). This is the same pastoral work that those illustrious predecessors carried out.

But our times are so different and maybe we might now have a closer look at them.

Recently I read a speech by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs, such an astute observer and commentator. He pointed out that three assumptions tend to shape our perception of reality, assumptions strongly and persistently proposed to us by many. He said each of them is actually untrue.

The first is that the world is getting more secular. In fact, it is not. Religious belief is playing a more and more central part

³ 'A Pastoral Message from Bishop Mark', May 2017, p3
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in the affairs of our world today. The second is that the world is becoming more westernised, more in tune with the western paradigm of liberal democracy. In fact, it is not, as we see in huge swathes of the world which are increasingly neither liberal nor democratic. The third assumption is that in order to survive, religious belief must accommodate to the prevailing culture, whatever that may be. This, too, is not true.

Then Rabbi Sachs spells out what he sees to be the consequences of the predominance of these three assumptions, taken, rather thoughtlessly, to be true. Firstly, he says, that the family is under threat, with falling birth rates in our regions, because it takes faith and sacrifice to parent children. Secondly, he points out that the community is under threat because a firm level of altruism is essential for its survival. He points out that religious bodies and churches are the ones which generate social capital. And thirdly, he says that the stability of the state itself is under threat because there is such a weakening of a shared sense of 'we', or of 'we the people', so that everything becomes a matter of social contract; and in a contract there are always winners and always losers. There is a smaller and smaller place for what he likes to call the 'covenant activities'. Religious practice, on the other hand, provides learning and training in 'the art of association'. It is, he says, 'an apprenticeship in liberty'!

He then sketches the possible responses of religious faith to this situation. Again, he offers three perspectives, three

alternative ways of acting. The first is that a religious faith might attempt to conquer society. This is a stance of the warrior, the culture warrior or the radical fundamentalist. Secondly, a faith may simply retreat into its own safe harbour, its enclosure, and hope that the threatening danger may never arrive, or may not be overwhelming. Or thirdly, he suggests, a faith may seek to re-inspire society, to give it a new form of hope and a new courage. Religion, he says, is a consecration of the bonds that connect us. This is religious faith as loyalty and love, as altruism and compassion, a faith which consecrates marriage, sustains communities and helps to weave again the torn fabric of society.⁴

These are great insights, but my task today, and yours in the days to come, is to relate them more precisely to our Catholic faith, and to our ministry as priests.

Here are some key headlines.

First, work in and through your parishes. Your bishop has given you a set of tasks, the eight characteristics that will revitalise the life of your parishes. I simply add to them some words of Pope Francis, spoken to the Polish bishops in Kraków at the time of the World Youth Day there:

'I would like to stress one thing: the parish is always valid!... The parish (as such) must not be touched: it must remain a

⁴ Keynote Address: 'Cultural Climate Change: The Role of Religious in a Secularised West' 13 July 2017 <http://rabbisacks.org/cultural-climate-change/>

place of creativity, of reference, of maternity and all these things... Invent, seek, go out, seek the people, engage in the people's difficulties. If you don't go out to seek the people, if you don't approach them, they don't come. And this is the missionary disciple, the outgoing parish. Go out and seek, as God did, who sent His Son to seek us.'⁵

Secondly, don't waste words! When you speak, focus on what is central and choose your words well, with imagination. Increasingly today we are asked to focus on the basic kerygma: the presentation of Jesus as the one in whom we place our trust. How can this happen if we do not speak of Him, show His way, demonstrate our trust in Him? Here, again, are the opening words of *Evangelii Gaudium*. Perhaps we should read them every morning!

'The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.' (EG1).

And:

'I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting Him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this

⁵ Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Poland. Meeting with the Polish Bishops, Cathedral of Kraków, 27 July 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-vescovi.html

invitation is not meant for him or her, since “no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord” (EG3).

Recently I was given the framework for the renewal of the Syro-Malabar community in this country. It was simple and direct. Step one: God is the rock of our human existence, the rock on which we depend; step two: Jesus is our cornerstone; step three: we are the living stones of His Kingdom. This direct proclamation can be always on our lips.

Thirdly, urge and encourage the visible practice of the faith. Help faith to come out of the mind, out of the inner heart, into a visible practice.

Let me explain. There is an exhibition on at present at The British Museum. It is called 'Living with gods'⁶ and consists of objects chosen not for their artistic merit but because they illustrate the practice of religious faith over the entire span of human history. Faith is lived and shared mostly by how it is practiced. So, from a Christian perspective, the exhibition contains some rosary beads, a paten and a chalice and, very movingly, an image of Christ crucified from Japan, one of those on which everyone had to stamp their foot in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the Emperor and their apostasy from the Catholic faith, a test so vividly explored in the book and the film 'Silence'.⁷ It was deeply moving to gaze on that

⁶ Exhibition: 'Living with gods, peoples, places and worlds beyond', 2 November 2017 – 8 April 2018

⁷ Shusaku Endo: 'Silence', Peter Owen; New Ed edition (10 Aug. 2006). Film directed by Martin Scorsese

image and realise that it had been made precisely to become an object of rejection.

The visible practice of faith - which of course includes the journey to Mass every Sunday morning - is the way in which faith becomes part of us, and the way in which it is demonstrated. Think again of the 'Agnus Dei' found on the person of St Cuthbert Mayne and all that it stood for. Pope Francis is right: popular devotion, with all its outward manifestations, can be so central to a missionary spirit. (EG90).

Fourthly, kindness in action. Yes, our outreach to those in need is a key component in our missionary work. But what gives it its most compelling quality is the kindness with which the service is given. And that kindness both flows from the heart of Christ and gives flesh to His mercy and compassion. That is why kindness is so crucial for us, His ordained ministers. How many people have been put off, or actually walked away, simply because we have spoken to them unkindly or even harshly? I know my failures and I doubt if I am alone!

Here's the Pope again: 'The problem is how to build a parish!... There are parishes with closed doors. But there are also parishes with doors open, parishes where, when someone comes to ask, one says: "Yes, yes... make yourself comfortable. What's the problem? And one listens with

patience because to take care of the People of God is exhausting, it's exhausting!'⁸

Fifthly, don't be afraid of being small! It was put to us bishops last April that we no longer live our faith as a continent, but rather as an archipelago. We will survive as a series of islands to be found within a greater land mass. I like that image.

Indeed, we live in a time of great dislocations, of many migrations and of a kind of cultural disinheritance and our response has to be the creation of these islands of light and belonging.

In young people, in preparation for this forthcoming Synod of Bishops, I often hear the image of the Church as a second home, a place where so many young people, living away from home, find their second home.

If that is to be so then we have to be creating in our parishes a kind of 'spiritual ecology', a spiritual Eden Project, where all those longings can be nurtured and find expression. This, of course, corresponds to our duty to foster and serve the holiness of those in our care. An 'ecosystem' for holiness is going to have many characteristics, including beauty and silence. And such a place has to be real and not simply virtual. This is our opportunity. Increasingly there is a dawning awareness that social media is incapable of

⁸ Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Poland. Meeting with the Polish Bishops, Cathedral of Kraków, 27 July 2016, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-vescovi.html

delivering the kind of connectedness for which we long. It can help, but mostly as providing leads to be followed, as a means of offering invitation. For that we have to learn its language, or work with someone, who is probably under 25 years of age, who understands it!

Finally, and very importantly, the risk of the parish as an island is that we can become marooned. When this happens, a priest who comes across as sad and lonely destroys the very 'ecology of the spirit' we hope to engender. But such loneliness so easily happens, with some significant consequences. And it is not new.

Let me dip again into our history.

In the decades following the Acts of Supremacy, the experience of the Catholic priest was one of profound isolation. He had no settled home, no church from which to minister. He was dependent for his life and work on the network of people, local knowledge and personal commitment. This was no brief interlude. Indeed, as Judith Champ puts it in her recent study 'The Secular Priesthood in England and Wales: History, Mission and Identity':

'The habit of independent, self-determined action became automatic, accompanying the isolation in which most of them lived.' She continues, 'This unique formative experience lasted through generations, for over two hundred years, and became part of the way in which secular priests saw

themselves. It became fundamental to the identity of the secular priesthood in England and Wales.⁹

I do not think I am exaggerating if I say that this 'habit of independent, self-determined action' is part of the DNA of our priesthood, even to this day. It is one of our great strengths, yet having its downside, too. At least Bishop Ullathorne found it so when, in the 1890s, he commented: 'The clergy are so fond of independence. One is obliged to think a great deal about their feelings to save a great deal of difficulty!'¹⁰

Not surprisingly, then, a constant appeal of the first diocesan bishops, both Nicholas Wiseman and Henry Manning for example, was that priests foster 'a love for their diocese and loyalty to their bishop'. Thankfully, in my experience, that appeal has always elicited a rich and fruitful response and this sense of loyalty is strong today for the most part. But renewal is always needed. We need to work hard at supporting each other, at building that sense of shared mission, of reliable companionship without which survival will be difficult. A quality of priestly life much favoured by Pope Francis is that of 'closeness': closeness of the priest to his people; closeness of the bishop to his priests; and closeness of priests to one another. This closeness is not based on personal friendship, but on the great gift that they share: that of the

⁹ Professor Judith Champ: 'The Secular Priesthood in England and Wales: History, Mission and Identity', Oscott Press (2016), p39

¹⁰ Professor Judith Champ: 'William Bernard Ullathorne, 1806-1889: A Different Kind of Monk', Gracewing; edition (May 2006)
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priesthood of Christ Himself, which can get us beyond all personal taste and all petty bickering.¹¹

Let me finish with a rhetorical question: What is it that binds us together, across the centuries and with such a great diversity of experience? For me, the most appropriate word, the only word, which takes us to the heart of priesthood, is the word 'gift'. Priesthood is a gift given by the Lord to us in our daily unworthiness, entrusted to these vessels of clay, unfolding in responsibility, in opportunity, in a flow of trust, respect, affection that we do not deserve but which is given solely in the light of the office, the gift, we have received. Sometimes we mistakenly think that this gift bestows a personal superiority over others, or that it is a source of personal privilege setting us above others. How wrong that is, yet how beguiling: that we mistake for personal honour, the respect and esteem that belongs solely to the gift of being a priest of Jesus Christ.

We know only too well, as have all our brothers of ages past, that we are men who face every temptation, who know every weakness that characterises our humanity and our age: the difficulty of sustaining faithfulness in the commitments we have given; the difficulty of handling all relationships with integrity and openness; the challenges of social media and their addictive power; the dangers of misinterpreting anger or praise or indifference. The list is as complex as our

¹¹ Pope Francis: Seven "Pillars" of Priesthood, <http://rcdow.org.uk/vocations/priesthood/articles/seven-pillars-of-priesthood/>

common humanity. Yet the Lord has chosen us. Day by day, we can rejoice in that choice, in the utterly astonishing fact that we are bound to Him forever and that He chooses to use our hands, our words, our hearts to accomplish the most sublime work of His grace. The gift unfolds in so many ways, but especially, I suggest, in the way so beautifully expressed by Tony Philpott, in our witnessing and sharing in 'the great and miraculous joy' in the lives of so many ordinary people. That indeed is the stuff of our daily living and it is that which urges us on to be Missionary Priests of Today.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster

Feast of Christ the King