

Mass for the Close of the Year for Priests and Feast of the Sacred Heart.

Westminster Cathedral

Friday 11 June 2010

During this Feast of the Sacred Heart, and during our Forty Hours Devotion, we concentrate on the faithful love of God, made visible in Jesus and, we pray, effective in our lives. Today also marks the end of the Year for Priests, established by Pope Benedict. Today, in Rome, he formally closes this Year, as we do here this evening.

This has certainly been a tumultuous year.

Rarely has such public attention been given to our failings – we priests and bishops - particularly our failures to ensure the safety of children in our care in past years. We acknowledge these failures, with realism, without exaggeration, and with recognition of the depth of damage done by, in Pope Benedict's phrase, 'the sin within the Church.'

Speaking today, Pope Benedict renewed these steps of repentance and renewal and then added:

"Had the Year for Priests been a glorification of our individual human performance, it would have been ruined by these events. But for us what has happened is precisely the opposite – we grow in gratitude for God's gift, a gift concealed in 'earthen vessels'. We look upon all that has happened as a summons to a purification, as a task which we bring to the future."

So it is, by a sound instinct of faith, at Easter, when public criticism was at its most intense, most churches saw a notable increase in those attending Mass on Easter Sunday, in particular. This sign of resilient faith in the Risen Lord, strong among so many, is a great encouragement and something for which we clergy are grateful. I am grateful for all who joined us in prayer during the month of May, as we sought to place our sins before the Lord in prayer of reparation and renewal.

Among the lessons we learn from these months, and from the years past which are casting their shadow, is the importance of all of us, and especially us priests, living afresh our 'core values'. As I said recently, at our day of renewal for the priests of the Diocese at London Colney, I think these core values are those of simplicity, honesty and joy.

The simplicity that we seek to live is a freedom of heart by which we do not ask much for ourselves. As is often said, a person is rich according to the simplicity of their needs. And in this regard, every priest can be rich indeed. Things go wrong when we ask too much for ourselves, especially when we begin to ask just a little of what is forbidden to balance out the great effort of self-sacrifice which we think we are making. A true simplicity of heart, a profound sense of relying on the Lord and on the goodness of the people, lies at the heart of priestly life and of discipleship.

Similarly the core value of honesty is one to which we must cling. When areas of our life become hidden from others then we run the risk of going astray. The appeal of a 'private life' is as compelling as it is fashionable. Of course every priest needs time and space in which to rest and be restored. But when that becomes inappropriately hidden or strictly private, then a healthy openness is being lost. Honesty with ourselves and honesty with those we trust are essential characteristics of the life of the disciple. It is true for the priest, too. It is fully expressed in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

And joy, too, is a core value which we are called to live. By this I do not mean a superficial happiness, but rather a profound sense of well-being, or peace, which is rooted in our knowledge and trust in the Lord. It is he alone who can provide us with the foundations which withstand tempestuous conditions. We are to be the house built on rock within which there is a hearth of warm and safety, from which radiate calmness and joy – at least on our good days!

In thinking about these core values, we do well to evoke another memory of the Year for Priests. I think back to the presence in our midst of the relics of St Thérèse of Lisieux, not least the momentous days when those relics were in our diocese and here in the Cathedral. They were days of great blessing. Remember that more or less 100,000 people came into this Cathedral in those three brief days, in a display of faith and prayer which can still encourage even the most downhearted among us.

Thérèse showed the simplicity of heart for which we seek. She showed that joy in the Lord.

In her life there is to be seen such an unwavering love of the Lord and of the Church, overflowing into love and prayer for priests. And this love and prayer is to be found in every one of our parishes.

In her life there was a readiness to face her failings with humility. She taught so clearly that when we do the same, we learn that no one who expresses repentance is ever unacceptable to God. In the presence of her relics, so many turned back to the Lord through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

St Thérèse was centred on the Word of God, allowing that Word to soak into her heart, so that it could bring its healing and empowering grace. We too can do the same.

Our days with St Thérèse were blessed indeed and an important part of the Year for Priests.

At London Colney, we priests made a shared act of reparation and rededication. We committed ourselves afresh to work with young people and the vulnerable, with no loss of nerve and no loss of generosity. We renew that pledge today as this special Year comes to its close.

So this evening, at this Mass, my heart and yours too, I trust, is full of thankfulness.

We give thanks for the gift of the priesthood: such a privileged way of giving oneself to the Lord so that He can use us as He wishes. It is such a vital and essential part of the life of the Church.

We give thanks for the response of you, the people of our parishes, to this Year, thanking you for your prayers and constant practical support even while you have had to bear the burden of public criticism and not a little mockery.

We thank God for the embrace of the sacramental life of the Church, which holds us close to the Lord through every storm. And we priests thank God for the privilege of being the ministers of those sacraments.

We thank God, too, for the privilege of our priestly ministry of prayer, for being given time and space to honour that central call of our vocation: to pray for our people, for our world and for our Church. We treasure the daily rhythm of prayer and the Mass as we try to

support in our prayers all who are going through real crises: the people of the villages of Cumbria where those dreadful killings took place; the people of Gaza who live in such confined and oppressed circumstances, that the progress of peace may free them from those restrictions.

We pray too for the forthcoming visit of Pope Benedict to the United Kingdom. His visit is now being awaited with real anticipation – and I thank all who have already contributed to the costs of that visit, in the Pentecost collection which, in many places, exceeded expectations. May the Lord bless our preparations and the visit itself.

Without a doubt, its climax will be the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman. What a moment that will be when we not only witness the first ever beatification to take place in this land, but rejoice in the fact that the one being beatified is an English parish priest, who served and loved his people in Birmingham for 30 years and who, like so many of us, was loved and supported in return in full measure.

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus guide and protect us.

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus ever be praised and adored.

May we be filled with an echo of that love so as to serve the Lord in gladness all our days.
Amen

+Vincent Nichols