

**Episcopal Ordination of
The Right Reverend John Francis Sherrington**

Westminster Cathedral

Wednesday 14 September 2011

Homily

The Exaltation of the Cross is a beautiful feast for the ordination of a bishop.

It is so because the bishop is called in a very special way to lift up before the world the Son of Man, who, though His state was divine, emptied Himself and was humbler yet even to accepting death, death on a Cross. All who look upon the crucified Christ may believe that He is their Lord and Saviour and be raised with Him to eternal life!

Yes, our loving Father so loved the world that he sent His only Son, not to condemn the world but to save it. And the Son in turn sent the Apostles out into the world, filled with the Holy Spirit, to preach the Gospel of Salvation. By the laying on of hands, the Apostles passed on that gift of the Holy Spirit which they themselves had received. Today, John, you receive that same Holy Spirit as the fullness of the Sacrament of Holy Orders is conferred upon you. You are sent out to proclaim the glorious triumph of the Cross.

You're the first bishop to be ordained in England and Wales since the wonderful Visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom. In just four days time, it will be exactly one year ago that he celebrated Mass here in our Cathedral. Do you remember how, during his inspiring homily, he said: "The visitor to this Cathedral cannot fail to be struck by the great crucifix dominating the nave, which portrays Christ's body, crushed by suffering, overwhelmed by sorrow, the innocent victim whose death has reconciled us with the Father and given us a share in the very life of God"?

The Pope invited us "to contemplate that great crucifix which rises above us". "Our Lord's hands, extended on the Cross," he said, "also invite us to contemplate our participation in his eternal priesthood and thus our responsibility, as members of his Body, to bring the reconciling power of his sacrifice to the world in which we live."

Significantly, the Holy Father highlighted first the indispensable role of the laity in carrying forward this mission of the Church. An essential task which you embrace today is that of forming and leading the faithful people of the Church to a deeper life of faith and of service. The more faithful you are to your Episcopal ministry, the more you will –and again I use the Holy Father's words - "inspire all Christ's followers to conform their every thought, word

and action to Christ, and to work strenuously to defend those unchanging moral truths which, taken up, illuminated and confirmed by the Gospel, stand at the foundation of a truly humane, just and free society”.

And we are in need of such people, those who can, I quote, “speak convincingly of the liberating power of God’s word to a world which all too often sees the Gospel as a constriction of human freedom, instead of the truth which liberates our minds and enlightens our efforts to live wisely and well, both as individuals and as members of society.”

When the Holy Father addressed the Bishops of England, Wales and Scotland gathered at St. Mary’s College, Oscott, he reminded us bishops that we ourselves must be courageous witnesses if others are to witness in their turn. He spoke of sensing a deep a thirst for the Good News of Jesus Christ among the British people. What the Pope then said to us bishops is now addressed to you:

“You have been chosen by God to offer them (to this people) the living water of the Gospel, encouraging them to place their hopes, not in the vain enticements of this world, but in the firm assurances of the next. As you proclaim the coming of the Kingdom... be sure to present in its fullness the life-giving message of the Gospel, including those elements which call into question the widespread assumptions of today’s culture...encourage people to aspire to higher moral values in every area of their lives against a background of growing cynicism regarding even the possibility of virtuous living... We must live, as leaders, lives of the utmost integrity, humility and holiness... I pray that among the graces of this visit will be a renewed dedication on the part of Christian leaders to the prophetic vocation they have received, and a new appreciation on the part of the people for the great gift of the ordained ministry.”

So it is through our own example as bishops that we are to foster a new appreciation of the ordained ministry. Our care for our priests, as well as for our own ministry, sets the tone for the whole Church.

This was an important part of the Holy Father’s address in Bellahouston Park, Glasgow. (But I think it applies to those of us south of Hadrian’s Wall too!). He said that one of your first pastoral duties is to your priests (Pres. Ord. 7) and to their sanctification. I know that the priests of Hertfordshire are looking forward to your arrival in a special way. The Pope said: “The priest is the ‘alter Christus’ to the Catholic community, so you are to them. Live to the full the charity that flows from Christ, in your brotherly ministry towards your priests, collaborating with them all, and in particular with those who have little contact with their fellow priests. Pray with them for vocations... Just as the Eucharist makes the Church, so the priesthood is central to the life of the Church. Engage yourself personally in forming your priests as a body of men who inspire others to dedicate themselves completely to the service of Almighty God.”

The Pope did not forget the deacons, and neither will you, for theirs is a ministry of service associated in a particular way with that of the order of bishops. You are to be “a father and a guide in holiness for them, encouraging them to grow in knowledge and wisdom in carrying out the mission of herald to which they have been called.”

John, I gladly welcome you on behalf of your fellow bishops. We assure you of our unfailing support. Your Episcopal ministry will bring you great joy but, so too, many challenges. You're clearly a man blessed with many gifts and a wealth of experience. Nevertheless, there will be moments when you are acutely aware of your weakness and are tempted to consider that even your best efforts are fruitless. However, as you have said yourself, “you know you need to rely on God's grace more deeply than ever and to cultivate your life of prayer”. Such prayer always includes a contemplation of the crucifix from which the Lord proclaims: “My grace is sufficient for you; for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). In him we see apparent “failure” glowing with the light of the new and unexpected life of that victory. Be certain that particularly through your sacramental ministry the fruits of Christ's victory still flow into the hearts of those whom you serve.

It is in our celebration of the Mass that we contemplate most closely the triumph of the Cross. To echo again the Pope's homily in this Cathedral, we see the Lord's outstretched arms “lifting up to the Father all the ranks of the faithful who gather around the altar of the Eucharistic sacrifice and share in its fruits. The crucified Lord stands above and before us as the source of our life and salvation, ‘the High Priest of the good thing to come’ (Heb 9:11)”. And remember that in your person, as bishop, this High Priest remains present among us proclaiming his great Gospel of hope, leading us through every wilderness to everlasting life.

Through the motherly intercession of Mary, standing at the foot of the Cross, may your heart remain always open to the power of the Holy Spirit and may she always guide and protect you in this ministry which begins today. Amen.

✠ Vincent Nichols

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