

**Mass for Religious
Westminster Cathedral
Thursday 11 February 2010**

As you will know, the bishops of England and Wales have recently returned from the 'ad limina' visit to the Holy See. The days we spent in Rome were days of renewal. We prayed at the tomb of St Peter, and at the tomb of St Paul, and we met with the successor of Peter, Pope Benedict XVI.

In a way, in these days, we bishops, on behalf of the whole Catholic community, returned to our founding charism.

To touch again the apostolic roots of the church is a prayerful experience. It is unforgettable to sit with, be received so warmly and be encouraged by the successor of Peter, the one to whom Jesus gave such a remarkable mission and charism. We found not only warmth and encouragement, but also great serenity and peace. One thing I noticed: the Pope himself, and all those around him, seem to be smiling most of the time. He is a man at ease with himself; or, as someone put it: a man at peace with his faith and with his theology, unafraid of any question, quietly confident that for all our mistakes and sinfulness we will be guided in the right way by this gift of faith and, of course, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As you will know, the Holy Father asked us to be brave in professing our faith, to be wholehearted in our devotion to the Lord and generous in our serving of our society, even in our service of the truth of our humanity. He stressed the importance of religious freedom. He did so not just for Catholics. His concern is wider than that, as is made clear by his appeal to natural law. The importance of religious freedom is for all because the quest for God is an essential part of our human nature. We are spiritual beings and find our fulfilment only in relation to the transcendent dimension which the gift of faith enables us to know as our loving Father. Without the space, the freedom, to follow this quest, to express faith in action - and not just in private action but in the public sphere of life too - we deprive ourselves of an open window, living instead in a more confined and constricting atmosphere.

Religious life bears eloquent witness to the freedom and joy which can come in this following of Christ. When we give our lives to him, then new horizons open up: horizons of self-forgetfulness, of generosity, of self-sacrifice; horizons of intimacy with him, of life shared in community

and of freely given obedience. Of course this is a struggle, and the record of our failings is long and well-known. But the project is still there; the call still excites us; the vocation we receive still has the power to open our hearts again to the needs and pain of others, letting them take precedence over our own.

During the 'ad limina' I had time to think over some of the outstanding moments of the last few months. Foremost among them have been two moments in which the richness and beauty of religious life has shone most clearly.

First there was the celebration, here, of the canonisation of St Jeanne Jurgan, founder of the Little Sisters of the Poor. Since then I have been reading more of her remarkable story, not only of her boundless activity but also of her painful banishment and her remarkable journey into the heart of God. As I understand, her essential message to the novices, with whom she was to spend over 25 years, was that we are to be 'little before God', just as the most high Son of God himself became the humblest of men in order to be close to all. We are never to think of ourselves as great and mighty, but rather depend in all things on him who has loved us first. Only on this foundation can we genuinely serve others, rather than seeing others as the opportunity for us to find an outlet for our talents or desires, and for finding the satisfaction we seek.

This lead on to her second lesson: in all we do we are to seek to make happy those we serve. This, says St Jeanne, we can achieve only by giving them our 'consideration', by showing them our esteem. In this we place those we serve on an equal footing with ourselves, acknowledging that they may bring to us something precious that we lack.

Such true and inspiring service of others springs from the vision of the dignity of each person: the dignity that certainly gives rise to their rights. This is a dignity that comes from God. This, alone, is the foundation of human rights; not the decrees of a state or the decisions of an authority, but the innate nature of each person, made in the image and likeness of God. This must be constantly at the heart of the witness we give.

The second wonderful event of recent weeks was the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Mary Ward. Here, too, the wonderful energy and zeal of religious life shone out: a woman who walked three times to Rome to affirm her desire to serve the whole Church and to present her case; a woman equally at home in many European countries in which she set up fine schools which have enjoyed

such a long tradition; a woman who, like so many founders, endured misunderstanding and misjudgement, yet never turned to bitterness or resentment such was her love of the Lord.

A phrase was mentioned in our conversations in Rome concerning contemporary religious life. It was that there is a clear need today for an ‘apostolic plan of religious life’, a plan, or a systematic perspective that holds in balance mission, community life and prayer. These are three essential elements in the following of Christ in religious life. And it is clear that those who serve him best, those whose pastoral work is the most effective, are those who have a clear appreciation of the precise and realistic nature of their mission, who have a clear and realistic view of the importance of community life, and who have a pattern of regular prayer at the heart of all they do.

This, I am sure, is something to which we all give our thoughts in these days of change and challenge. But all three are so important, not just in theory, but more certainly in practice.

At the end of our ‘ad limina’ visit, the Holy Father, joyously, made it plain that he intends to be visiting us this autumn. Details have still to be worked out and announced. But our preparations can begin. Speaking of that preparation, Pope Benedict said: ‘During the months that lie ahead, be sure to encourage the Catholics of England and Wales in their devotion, and assure them that the Pope constantly remembers them in his prayers and hold them in his heart.’

This I happily do, as we celebrate this Mass together, to renew our joy in the Lord, our desire to serve him and our happiness at being together to do so!

+ Vincent Nichols