

MASS OF EPISCOPAL ORDINATION

of Mgr Philip Egan
in St John's Cathedral Portsmouth
24 September 2012

Homily of the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols

In St Mary's College, Oscott, there is a fine long oak corridor. It has seen many a significant moment in the re-emergence of the Catholic Church in this country. As you will know, Oscott was the place where, in 1852, the Synod of Westminster was held, under the leadership of Cardinal Wiseman, to give shape to Catholic life at that time and, in some ways, to this day. That long corridor is the place where the aging Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman walked with the ailing Bishop William Ullathorne, one of the true architects of the Church we know today.

Your new Bishop-still-elect, Philip, knows that corridor well as he has often walked its length during his years as lecturer and director of studies at Oscott. He comes to you from the very heart of renascent English Catholicism. But he will also know that the great William Ullathorne was firmly of the conviction that no man, on appointment as a bishop, was ever to be congratulated!

If we do not rush to congratulate Bishop Philip we do hasten to assure him of our love and prayers. And these are the greatest gifts he can receive, gifts so powerfully echoed in the readings chosen for this Mass of Ordination, on this Feast of Our Lady of Walsingham. These readings remind us of all the qualities which characterise the Holy House of the Church, the dwelling place of the Family of Christ our Lord.

Attend again to the words of St John, to whom this Cathedral is dedicated. He shows us that in his last hours, Jesus laid the foundations of what was to follow. It appeals to me deeply to think of Jesus words from the cross, addressed to Mary and to John, as bringing the Church to birth. From the cross Jesus announces a new way of life, a new pattern of relationships, a new form of family and one that is stronger and longer-lasting than the bonds of blood. Mary was not John's mother, and John was not her son. But they are now. They were forged into that new bond by the word of the Lord and by the power of his sacrifice, unleashing the new gift of the Holy Spirit.

We, today, are that family in Christ, gathered anew at the foot of the Cross. We hear the same words. We belong to each other, for eternity, by his command and by his grace. This is our finest privilege and our greatest hope. This is the root of our 'communio', of our unity and sense of identity. It is not a coming together round opinion or taste or ecclesiastical fashion, but a binding together in search of the truth in, through and with our Risen Saviour within the 'communio' of the Church.

The words of St Paul, in our second reading, remind us of the first fruit of this new life, this outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is prayer: the joyful prayer of thanksgiving, of praise of a loving Father – Abba – the one who never turns from his daughters and sons no matter our waywardness and failure. Prayer is the hallmark of the faith of the

Church, that personal movement of the heart to stand in the sun, in the light of God's love. That is an uncomfortable place, for in that light we see, oh so clearly, our shortcomings, our narrowness of mind and our need for forgiveness. But it is an eternally comforting light and in its warmth we are healed.

The Church at prayer; the Church humbly aware of its true self; the Church prompted by the Holy Spirit.

This meditation is taken a step further in the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles. Here the Church is small, taking its first steps in Christian prayer, and at its heart is Mary. The words of Jesus from the Cross are acted upon. Mary is at the heart of the group of the Apostles and disciples.

The Apostles are named, for they are the ones chosen by the Lord to be the first witnesses and first foundations of the growing Church. Peter and John, James, Andrew...you know the list.

We have our own list of Apostles, their successors here today: Peter of Southwark, John of Hallam, Seamus of Hexham and Newcastle, Mark of Shrewsbury, Declan of Clifton, Bernard of Birmingham. The list is longer than the original list – that's the effect of inflation! And today a name is added to it: Philip of Portsmouth, newly created successor of the Apostles, given to this Church by the Lord, and coming always under the protection of our Blessed Lady. This is the greatness of the moment and, if Bishop Ullathorne will forgive me, we congratulate him on it!

But, please note, at this moment no name is taken off the list. Your dear Bishop Crispian remains right there. Shortly he will hand over his crozier to his successor and take a new place in our company: a man of prayer, of utter dedication to the Lord, a faithful servant who will continue to love this diocese as he has always done. He will continue to give to us all that remarkable witness of trust in the Lord as he did so eloquently through his difficult illness. He will sustain us with his prayers. Bishop Crispian we thank you so much.

Let me take you back to St Mary's College Oscott, to September 19th 2010. In the chapel that day all the bishops were assembled, just as the bishops had assembled there in 1852 – the same chapel, the same uncomfortable benches. This time, however, it was not the future Cardinal Newman who gave the address, foreseeing a Second Spring for the Catholic Church in this land, but the Successor of Peter himself, Pope Benedict, who spoke to us bishops. Here are some of the inspiring phrases he used to urge us on in our ministry as bishops. They are words for every bishop to take to heart, and for our new bishop to do so particularly.

'You have been chosen by God to offer them [the people of Britain] the living water of the Gospel, encouraging them to place their hopes not in the vain entertainments of this world but in the firm assurances of the next....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....Take a lead in calling for solidarity with those in need... highlighting the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged....If we are to be effective Christian leaders we must live lives of the utmost integrity, humility and holiness....'

And there is much else besides for us to take to heart.

The elegant coat of arms chosen by your new bishop includes the image of the deer quenching its thirst. This reminds us of two more words spoken by Jesus from the Cross. He said, 'I thirst.' Jesus thirsted for water as he entered his last agony. He thirsted for our love in return for his immense and all consuming love for us. And, I believe, he thirsted for his Father's Kingdom, the glory of heaven, spoken of as 'the light of the eighth day', when the entire work of creation will be brought to its fulfilment.

May we always respond to that thirst of our precious Lord, by serving him in the needs of the poor. May we always give him our love in return for his. May we always share in his longing for the fullness of life in his heavenly kingdom, the true fulfilment of all our needs.

This, I am sure, is the pathway on which Bishop Philip will lead you. Support him always with your generous cooperation, your prayers and with your love. Amen.

+Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster