

SERMON FOR HOMECOMING MASS

By

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Archbishop of Armagh**

St. Patrick's Cathedral Armagh

Thursday 29th November 2007

Your Eminence, My brother Bishops, Lord Mayor, Minister, distinguished clergy of the other Christian Churches, honoured guests, my dear people and clergy of the city and Archdiocese of Armagh,

The last few days have been among the most extraordinary, the most privileged and the most joyful of my life. I have been carried along by an immense sea of goodness, by an unending stream of kindness and faith on the part of so many people.

Tonight I want to thank you all. I want to thank you for your incredible kindness, your outstanding generosity and your invaluable support. I want to thank President Mary McAleese, An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and all the other political representatives who came to Rome or received me formally on my return. I want to thank Archbishop Harper and all the leaders of Christian Churches and other faiths who have been so generous in their good wishes and support. I want to thank the people of County Cavan and the Diocese of Kilmore, who remain so close to my heart and some of whom, including my own family are here this evening. I want to thank the thousands of others from across the country who wrote to me, phoned me or came to Rome to offer their prayers and support. I want to thank the media for their generous reporting of these events.

I have been quite simply bowled over and very humbled by the wave of good will and joy which has followed the news of the great honour Pope Benedict has bestowed, not so much on me but on the whole Church in Ireland.

I want to pay tribute to you all, to your faith in Jesus Christ, which is at the heart of all that we celebrated and enjoyed over these last few days.

Tonight I want to pay special tribute to the people of the Archdiocese of Armagh. Shortly after the announcement I was to be created a Cardinal I was greeted by a wonderful lady who has seen all eight Armagh Cardinals. Her joy was so great she came up to me in St. Malachy's Church and gave me a big hug. That said it all.

The people of the Archdiocese of Armagh, the historic See of St. Patrick, the historic See of St. Malachy and St. Oliver Plunkett, the home of eight previous Cardinals, they feel a particular joy that Pope Benedict has bestowed on them, once again, the honour of a Cardinal. That is why, as I walked through the streets of Armagh tonight, as I prayed with people in so many of the Parishes earlier today, as I look out across the sea of faces before me here this evening, that is why my heart is so full of Christian joy. Eleven years ago, you the people of Armagh welcomed me, a Parish Priest from the Diocese of Kilmore. You made me feel so at home and I will be forever grateful for that. Tonight, indeed since the very day of the announcement, my greatest joy has been for you, the people of the Archdiocese of Armagh. I rejoice in your joy that the Holy Father has honoured the See of Patrick. I know how devoted you are to the legacy of our national Apostle and the founder of our faith in Ireland. I know how loyally you honour the faith of St. Malachy, the Martyrdom of St. Oliver Plunkett and the memory of the Archbishops and Cardinals of this historic See.

That is why I am pleased that, with characteristic thoughtfulness and symbolism, Pope Benedict has assigned to me the care of the titular Church of St Cyricus and Julitta in Rome. Mother and child, Cyricus and Julitta were, like my predecessor St. Oliver Plunkett, martyrs for the faith. They will be a constant reminder to me, just like the colour red I wear as a Cardinal that I must be prepared to give up everything, whether by shedding my blood or by personal sacrifice of my will and desires, for the one who has given up all for me – Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Church of Sts Cyricus and Julitta also contains the mortal remains of Andrew Plunkett, a nephew of St Oliver Plunkett. It is said that on one of his visits to Rome the saint left a stipend for Mass to be celebrated there for his nephew. The Church is also close to the site of the former Irish College and may contain the tombs of students of the Irish College from the time when my grand-uncle, Fr Bernard Brady, former Parish Priest of Belturbet was Vice-Rector of the College. Close to the Forum and the Arch of Titus the Church is in the heart of classical Rome. Perhaps the Holy Father thought it would be a reminder to me of my more carefree days as a teacher of Latin and Roman Art and Architecture in St. Patrick's College Cavan!

In the near future I will formally receive the Church of St Cyricus and St Julitta as part of my responsibility as a Parish Priest of the diocese of Rome, which every Cardinal must be. I hope that many Irish pilgrims will visit the Church. I hope that they will pray for Andrew Plunkett, for the Irish seminarians buried there and for the Church in Ireland. I ask also that they would pray for me.

I pray that I will have something of the zeal and courage of my predecessors as Archbishop of Armagh, St. Patrick, St. Malachy and St Oliver Plunkett. I pray that I will have something of the faith of St Cyricus and Julitta as I take up my new responsibilities in the Universal Church.

In our first reading the Prophet Ezekiel gave us a beautiful description of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. He described how the river which flowed from it teemed with life and brought health and healing wherever it flowed. This is a symbol of every Church in which the new and everlasting Covenant of the Eucharist is celebrated. Jesus came that we may have life and have it to the full. He came that we might have joy and that our joy should be complete.

This is why I can never fully understand people who approach the question of faith as if it were a negative – as if it were an imposition or a mere collection of prohibitions. What brought to me to this day was the discovery, very early in my life, of the joy of following Jesus Christ, of the beauty of the message of love which Jesus taught and which brought meaning and purpose to my life. I learnt it from the simple acts of kindness and neighbourly service of my parents. I learnt it from the faith and dedication of the priests and lay people who taught me and inspired me. I learnt it from the generosity and service of so many of my friends, my neighbours at home and the people I have worked with as a priest over the years. I learnt it from the many outstanding witnesses to Christian life I have had the privilege to meet, pray and work with in the other Christian Churches over the years. I thank so many of them for their presence here tonight.

Faith has never been a negative in my life, it is has been the source of my greatest satisfaction and joy.

Tonight I thank God for that faith and I pray that others might discover the fulfilment, life and joy which full participation in the life of the Church can bring. I pray that even one person will be tempted to lift the Scriptures again and be touched by the Word of Life, that someone might come to Mass again and be uplifted and strengthened by the Bread of Life, that someone might kneel beside their bed again in prayer and be touched by the love of the God who created them and continues to care for them.

Ireland without the Christian faith will not be a better place. That is already becoming clear. Ireland with a humble, compassionate faith could be a beacon to the rest of the world of all that is truly human and truly good. I pray tonight for a renewal of that faith – the faith of Patrick, Brigid, Columbanus, Malachy, Oliver Plunkett and so many others of our kith and kin who discovered the ‘pearl of great price’ which is faith in Jesus Christ.

I pray also for the continued peace and prosperity of our country. These are blessings from God which we are called to nurture and sustain in a just and generous way. They offer to this generation an unprecedented opportunity for hope. Let us ask God to show us how to make the best of this opportunity, for ourselves and for the good of the whole world. I believe Ireland and its people, of all traditions and backgrounds, have a critical role to play in leading the world in concern for the poor, in building a more just society and in building the civilisation of love.

Pope Benedict, just before he placed the red biretta on our heads reminded every Cardinal ‘that in entering the College of Cardinals, the Lord asks of you and gives to you the service of love: love for God, love for his Church, love for our brothers and sisters, with a total and unconditional dedication, “usque ad sanguinis effusionem” [even to the shedding of blood].’

If there is one thing I have learnt with certainty in my life as a priest, it is the importance of the smallest act of kindness, the simplest word of encouragement, the most hidden act of compassion and understanding. These are the building blocks of the civilisation of love. Tonight, in fidelity to the first and greatest commandment of our Lord and to the words of Pope Benedict to every Cardinal, I commit myself to seeking to build that civilisation of love with each and every one of you, through what St. Thérèse of Lisieux called ‘the little way of love’. By doing that, I think we can bring real hope to our world at this time.

For my part, standing in this historic See of St. Patrick, and standing before you, the people of the Archdiocese of Armagh, who bear his memory with such devotion and pride, I conclude by making my own his prayer:

But what can I say or what can I promise to my Lord,

as I can do nothing that He has not given me?

May He search my heart and my deepest feelings....

may God never permit it to happen to me that I should lose His people

which He purchased in the utmost parts of the world.

I pray to God to give me perseverance and to deign that I be a faithful

witness to Him to the end of my life for my God.'

(From *The Confession* of St. Patrick)

MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL.

AMEN.