

FEAST OF THE SACRED HEART

19 JUNE 2009.

OPENING OF THE YEAR FOR PRIESTS

HOMILY OF THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS

ARCHBISHOP OF WESTMINSTER

Today we begin a Year for Priests, called for by Pope Benedict XVI to be observed throughout the world. It is a year in which, as a Church, we say that we are proud of our priests, that we love them, honour them and recognise with gratitude the witness of their lives and the generosity of their pastoral work. During this year we will pray for our priests and again offer them our support.

For us priests, this Year is to be a time of renewal in our ministry. We know that our lives as priests depend on our personal relationship with the Lord. It is this relationship, above all else, that we will seek to renew, for from it flows our love for our people and our willingness to serve them freely and joyfully.

This Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus marks the beginning of the Year for Priests. There could be no better day.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus, speaks to us of the entire mystery of Christ, everything about his being and his person. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is a wonderful expression of our love of the Lord. The sign and symbol of the Sacred Heart embodies most clearly the love with which Christ continually loves his almighty Father and each of us, for all eternity. (Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 478)

It is this total self-giving of the Lord in love that we priests seek to serve and, in our own poor way, reflect in our lives.

The words of this evening's Gospel fill out the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We hear again of the moment in which the heart of our Saviour was pierced by the lance of the soldier. We read the testimony of St John who stood at the foot of the cross and saw that blood and water came out from his wounded side. We joyfully recognise in the Precious Blood of Christ the means by which we receive the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of new life in Christ. In this Cathedral of the Most Precious Blood we are to reflect constantly and prayerfully on this gift beyond words. In the water which flowed from the side of Christ, we see the clear symbol of the Holy Spirit, washing over us in Baptism and, of course, cleansing us in the Sacrament of Penance.

These are the means by which God seeks to draw us to himself, fashioning us, day by day, into his likeness.

St Paul describes this work of the Holy Spirit in his lovely prayer:

'Out of his infinite glory may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and

then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth, until knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God.’ (Eph3.14-19)

This is the work to which the priest gives himself, a work of cooperating with the Holy Spirit, through the sacraments of the Church and in all that the priest says and does.

There are, indeed, many ways of speaking about the role of the priests. The priest is a leader, standing before the people in prayer and example. The priest can also be thought of as an ‘enabler’, helping his people to live to the full the gifts of the Holy Spirit which they have been given. The priest is a teacher, too, putting before his community the truths of the Gospel and of the Church as a sure guide for living.

But the image of the priest that I like is that of the priest as simply an instrument, an instrument in the hand of the Lord – a pencil, pen or biro perhaps – with which the Lord can write all that the Father tells him. And what he writes – if we permit him – will most certainly be a story of unflinching love.

We priests seek to be available to the Lord so that he can use our hands and our voices for his own. This is most clearly seen as we celebrate Mass, and in the words: ‘This is my Body’; ‘This is my Blood.’ At that moment it is no longer the priest who speaks, but Christ, using the voice of the priest. In this way, the words of the Lord are spoken again and again, in every time and place, making real the sacrifice through which he gives us everything.

In the same wonderful way, our voices are used to say: ‘Go in peace, your sins are forgiven.’ This is the great treasure and privilege of the priesthood.

Today, we priests need to remember that all our words carry great resonance. The words we say, the things we do, can bring about great good, even when we don’t intend it. In the same way our words and our actions can also cause great harm. Our ill-chosen words and our wrong actions also have a similar resonance. This we know too well. We know we must live our high calling with great humility.

During this year of the Priest, as a Diocese, we will centre our effort round a renewed practice of prayer. In every parish we will centre this effort on prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and the Rosary. I hope every parish will devote an hour each week to prayer for priests before the Blessed Sacrament and that a rhythm of Forty Hours Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament is established around the Deaneries. I hope this renewal will reach to our schools, too. This practice of prayer, as well as study, will sustain us in our life together, it will enable us to thank God whole-heartedly for the gift of our priests and, I believe, it will be the source from which new vocations to the priesthood will spring.

This year is also an opportunity for all the baptised to recall and renew a sense of being one with Christ the High Priest. All members of the Church share in this priesthood of Christ. We are a priestly people. In practice this means that every baptised person is to offer each day to the Lord, in conscious prayer, so that it may be

made holy. The priesthood of all the baptised is the call to make this world holy, through prayer, through our morning offering, and through faithfully carrying out every duty as an offering to the Lord. Perhaps we can renew this sense of our common priesthood, too.

The Year for Priests has its own Patron Saint: St John Vianney, the Cure of Ars. This year is the 150th anniversary of his death, and we turn to him in prayer, for he is the universal patron saint of parish priests. He is so well known for his simplicity of life, for his depth of prayer and for his devotion to the Sacrament of Penance. I thank all the priests of the Diocese for their ministry in this Sacrament, and especially the chaplains here in the Cathedral who are so faithful to the confessional.

But let's remember that among the priests of this place we have our own saint: St John Southworth. As you know, he was a Lancashire man who devoted his life to the priesthood in the turbulent times of post-reformation England. Much of his ministry was in Clerkenwell and here in Westminster, among the sick and the poor. He was martyred at Tyburn in 1654 and his body lies here in the Cathedral. We will celebrate his Feast on 27 June with great solemnity this year as he inspires our prayer and renewal during this Year for Priests.

May these two great saints help us. In the words of the first reading, may the Lord lead us with reins of kindness, with leading-strings of love. May he forgive us our waywardness and our failings. May he hold us close to himself always. Amen.

+V. Nichols