

HOMILY IN CELEBRATION OF THE
50TH ANNIVERSARY OF
ST. ALBAN'S SCHOOL, PONTYPOOL.
20 JUNE 2014 – FEAST OF ST. ALBAN
ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

Three years ago today I was installed as the seventh Archbishop of Cardiff. I chose this date because it linked the Diocese of Westminster with the Diocese of Cardiff. Having cared for the Hertfordshire part of the Diocese of Westminster for nearly ten years, I was a frequent visitor to St. Albans Abbey, the shrine of the Christian Roman soldier who gave his life to protect a Christian priest who was being hunted down during the Roman occupation of the 4th century. Meanwhile, in another Roman town I had never heard of, two other Christians were being executed for not acknowledging the Roman emperor Diocletian as a god. Julius and Aaron. The proto martyrs of Wales, were executed at Caerleon at the same time as Alban gave his life for the Faith at Verulamium, modern day St. Albans.

The word martyr simply means “witness”. It means bearing witness to something greater than ourselves, even to the point of dying for the principles of integrity and truth. To “die for the faith” is part of the extraordinary history of Christianity down the ages. Whenever Christians challenge injustice, or structures of injustice, they will be seen as subversives, dangers to the status quo, undermining the state.

That is why St. Paul wrote about the persecutions he suffered to Timothy in his letter we’ve just heard. His final sentence is haunting: “You are aware, then, that anybody who tries to live in devotion to Christ is certain to be attacked”. That was true of Alban, Julius and Aaron. True of St. David Lewis, St. Philip

Evans, St. John Kemble and the other Welsh Catholic martyrs of the 16th and 17th centuries who kept the faith alive in these parts. They remained true to the example of Jesus Christ. He gave his life on the cross as the price of his integrity, the cost of his prophetic witness as to how people should live and love each other. His sacrificial death was God saying that evil will never ultimately triumph. On the cross, Jesus did not withdraw God's love. He did not say "I have wasted my time, these people are unforgiveable". On the cross, Jesus goes on revealing, goes on loving, goes on forgiving. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do". This is the key to the risen life of Christ, which we all share.

To die for any cause is difficult – although we are witnessing on our television screens every night violent challenges to our views on the dignity and value of the life and death of every single person – even the suicide bomber. But to live for the faith and by the faith and the faith is probably equally difficult in an age which considers faith as contradicting science and reason; spirituality as a fairy tale; and the moral imperatives – do good, avoid evil – as being impossible ideals because my good may not be your good, and anyway who is to decide what is good or evil.

The purpose of a Catholic school is to give our pupils the capacity to navigate that extraordinarily complex landscape. Outstanding Estyn reports, starred GCSE's and A level results, access to good universities. All the bread and butter of every school – and St. Alban's is no exception. But the reason for the sacrifices, which established and maintain this and our other Catholic schools is to give our pupils the key which unlocks their living relationship with Jesus Christ, the man for others. It is to give them the tools for conviviality, helping each one to fulfil their own potential, certainly, but doing it realising that the degree to which I can die to my own self centredness, what I want, no matter what the cost, is the degree to which I will discover things about myself, my world and other people which I never dreamed were possible. A Catholic school in developing the natural critical faculty of its pupils, helps them to ..."judge wisely the things of earth and measure them by the things of heaven".

At the end of the first chapter of his classical book "Searching for God" the Jesuit writer Gerard Hughes said "Before reading any further, put down this book. Write your own last will and testament. Not how much money you are going to leave, or what property you will hand on, or to whom will you give your possessions. Write down what you tried to achieve, what you failed to do, how you would wish to be remembered". Not a bad mission statement for any school.

In 1903, nuns called the Daughters of the Holy Spirit came to these valleys having had to escape the persecution of the anti- church government in France, which seized all their schools and closed their convents. Evil will never be triumphant. These heroic women endured a living martyrdom but didn't take pity on themselves. They set about another witness, that of educating the poor and illiterate children here. Exile, isolation and deprivation marked the sacrifices they made to be the presence of Christ in Wales. Through the different Education Acts all through the 20th century, the Sisters adapted and cooperated, wanting nothing but the good of the children they served. And when in 1959 yet another great change in the organisation and structure of schools took place, they weren't afraid to hand over their school and their convent to the Diocese of Cardiff so that the school we know today was eventually opened on 3 September 1963.

When Pope Benedict came to England in 2010, he spoke to five thousand young people assembled on the running track at St. Mary's University Twickenham. He told them "God wants you to be the saints of the 21st century" and went on to explain how the development of each dimension of our personhood, body mind and spirit, would bring that balance, that integrity, that wholeness which is holiness. All of us know that "every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future". On this 50th anniversary, the Governors, staff, parents and pupils of St. Albans school will no doubt re-dedicate themselves to enabling our pupils to experience in their own lives that "the glory of God is humanity fully alive". (St. Irenaeus 3rd century).