

**HOMILY FOR THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF PRIESTLY ORDINATION
OF**

CORMAC CARDINAL MURPHY O'CONNOR

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL

3 NOVEMBER 2016

ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

John 10:11-16 "Jesus said: I am the good shepherd".

2 Tim 4:6-8 16 – 18 "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race".

One of the many beautiful and symbolic moments at the ordination of a priest is when he prostrates himself before the altar whilst the people join in praying the Litany of the Saints. That prostration is a sign of many things. It is a gesture of abandonment and trust. "Here, I am Lord, I come to do your will". It is a gesture of humility. "Lord, I am not worthy". It is a gesture of dependence on God and on other people. "Saints of God, come to his aid". These, and many other thoughts must surely have been in the mind and the heart of Cormac Murphy O'Connor on 28 October 1956 when he was ordained priest by Cardinal Traglia in Rome.

Other words and images would have formed his prayer on that day too. Among them the words of Jesus in today's gospel: "I am the good shepherd" "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep". That is the model of all priesthood. The degree to which the priest embodies those truths in his ministry and in his life are the degree to which he is "another Christ". Generosity of heart. Dedication. "I know my own and my own know me" says Jesus. In Fr. Cormac there has always been warmth and genuine interest in people. In the causes he has supported and the work that he has done, always passionate and compassionate. In caring for the most vulnerable he has not

been afraid to share his own vulnerability too. “I know my own and my own know me”.

“There are other sheep I have who are not of this fold. These I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice and there will be only one flock and one shepherd”. The Cardinal’s passion for the unity of Christians. His work on ARCIC, his engagement with people of other faiths. His desire that Catholics be formed in an adult faith so that they may give an account of their faith. All this so that that they might engage in the Common Good not as outsiders or onlookers, but from within as fellow pilgrims. He has not been afraid either of tackling difficult and challenging issues in public, on radio and television, in the Spectator as well as The Tablet. In the words of the First Letter of Peter: “Reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have. But give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience, so that those who slander you when you are living a good life may be proved wrong.” 1 Peter 3:15)

Courageous in facing up to criticism and sometimes unjust judgments, too. St. Paul has something important to say in our first reading. “The first time I had to present my defence there was not a single witness to defend me”. Cardinal Heenan once described the episcopal life as a Crown of Thorns. Cardinal Cormac would describe it as one of faithful witness to the truth, which needs to be explored and discovered and above all lived. “But the Lord gave me power, so that through me the whole message might be proclaimed for all to hear.

The editor’s note to that reading says: “Paul, in the evening of his life”. I think the Cardinal intends that description to apply to himself. “The time has come for me to be gone. I have fought the good fight to the end. I have run the race to the finish”. If this really is the evening of Cormac’s life, if it really marks the end of the race, will any of us tell him please stop running? We just can’t keep up with you. Just in time to catch planes and jump on a train leaving the platform as he moves quickly from one engagement to another. Always

available to give this talk or write that article. All the time being hospitable to those who call on him for the wisdom and experience of his years.

Having been baptised in Ireland by uncle Murphy O'Connor early in my life, and working with his nephew in this Byzantine Cathedral late in my life, I cannot help but finish with the Irish poet William Butler Yates:

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul claps its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school, but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the Holy City of Byzantium.*

Thank you to the Murphy O'Connor family for "sailing the seas" and bringing so many gifts to the Church. Thank you, Cormac, for the gift of your priesthood and the gift which is yourself. Thank you for coming to Westminster and gracing our own 'mini' Byzantium here at Westminster Cathedral and for gracing us with your presence tonight and in your almost ten years as our Archbishop.

AD MULTOS ANNOS!