

Homily for the Funeral of Cardinal Murphy O'Connor

Westminster Cathedral – 13 September 2017

On 10 November 2016, Cardinal Murphy O'Connor gave a poignant reflection during a "Pause for Thought" on Radio 2. It was an unusual reflection, not just because it was Radio 2, but that the topic was "a good death". As he spoke, he knew he was suffering from a serious illness. He was speaking, as always, from the heart.

"I want to say two things to you" he said. "Firstly, I believe in the value and dignity of every human person – that means you. And secondly, I believe that everyone is loveable in the eyes of God. In spite of all our weaknesses and failures, God loves us. So death must be of one piece with life. With the help of God, I hope I will be able to face it, not with fear but with hope and confidence as being in the hands of God".

Those family and friends who were with him at the moment of his death, and the many visitors who saw him in hospital during these last weeks, know how well he lived up to those words. Full of faith, full of Gaudium et Spes, full of a quiet resignation as he prayed often the words of Psalm "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit". The same smile of welcome. The twinkle in the eye spoke of all these things. But he was also full of gratitude - gratitude to the medical staff, those who cared for him so professionally and sensitively. He could not let go of one of his great characteristics, however. He, who would rush for trains and taxis, moving quickly from one engagement to another, was impatient to be gone. As one bishop said "...he was probably texting the angels to get a move on". His life's work was done. "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. The time has come from me to be gone..." as we read at the 60th anniversary of his priesthood.

What a life and what a work. Cormac was a priest to his fingertips. He was comfortable in his own skin. He was aware of his failings, yet supremely confident in his calling. He was a gifted man who would have made a success

of whatever career he chose. Medicine or music - maybe even golf or perhaps rugby like his brother! Yet from an early age he was convinced he should be a priest, like his two other brothers. The Cardinal chose today's reading from St. John's gospel because of his belief that we do not choose God, but God chooses us, earthenware vessels that we are, to be signs, and servants and instruments of his presence in the midst of his people. "You did not choose me, but I chose you that you should go and bear much fruit".

His gift for friendship and his capacity for putting people at their ease, together with his insightful mind and depth of faith, were a wonderful combination of gifts. He generously put them at the service of God and the Church and society at large. They enabled him to reach out in meaningful and constructive ways to other churches. His membership and scholarly contribution to the conclusions of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission. Much to his delight the fruits of his work were captured this year in the publication of all five ARCIC documents in one volume. His conviction that unity of mind and heart amongst the followers of Christ were not optional extras but sorely needed in a fragmented world. His gift of hospitality. He took the words of Jesus seriously "Love one another as I have loved you". These gifts, and the generous way he used them, were expressive of the fact that he liked people and liked being with them. He drew the best from others and gave them nothing but the best of himself in return.

But his was not superficial friendliness. He was convinced that people could and should share their faith and learn from the life experiences of others. He was not afraid to explore those paths either personally or in the Diocese at large. "At Your Word Lord" was a risky venture not just for Peter the fisherman but for priests and people in each of the Dioceses he served. No matter what the challenges, Cormac was clear on the need for formation of the laity. This is why he chose the words of St. Paul in our first reading "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is

named". He loved his family and drew strength and joy from their accomplishments. But he wanted the wider family of the parish and the Church to contribute to the building up of society, to the development of the civilisation of love "...that you be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man...that you, being rooted and grounded in love...may be filled with all the fullness of God". Faith and religion were not for him privatised activities but necessary contributions to a complex world. The Cathedral lectures and his book "At the heart of the World" were just two expressions of this conviction.

The Cardinal is to be buried beneath the tenth Station of the Cross. Like every sign and symbol in the Cathedral, this Station has a special lesson to teach us. Jesus is stripped of his garments. Our faith and devotion teach us that the seamless robe of his revelation of divine love, the integrity and compassion of Jesus, is torn away. The Jesus who stands before us naked and unashamed calls us to pay more attention to who we are rather than what we have so cunningly conspired to be. Cormac knew well what it was like to have judgments questioned, decisions criticised, mistakes analysed. That "stripping away" could easily have made him angry and cynical, causing him to retreat from the public arena. Yet he acknowledged his mistakes. He made no excuses. He said the most difficult words of all. "I'm sorry". He learned a huge lesson and proceeded to establish the most robust safeguarding mechanism possible, a model for other institutions. Humility and action were part of the robe that he wore.

Perhaps more than anything else, our final illness strips away all pretence and brings us face to face with the reality of who we are. To know and love ourselves as we are known and loved by God must surely be the greatest mystery of all. The measure of God's love for us is the measure of our need for forgiveness – and our willingness to receive it and be healed by it. That

innocent nakedness in the presence of God was personified in the life of the one whom we bury today.

Shortly before he died, the Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney sent a final text message to his wife. It contained just two words. “Noli Timere”. Do not be afraid. The same words were on the lips and in the heart of Cardinal Cormac when he wrote his final letter to the clergy and laity of the Diocese, “Please tell them that I am at peace, and have no fear of what is to come”.

May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, rest in peace. Amen.