



**Homily for the Funeral Mass of Fr. James (Jimmy) Thomas**

**21 March 2018**

**Nazareth House, Cardiff**

**Archbishop George Stack**

One of the most moving moments in the ceremony of the ordination of a priest is when the candidate prostrates himself in front of the altar as the people join in singing the Litany of the Saints. That prostration is a gesture of abandonment. *"Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will"*. It is a gesture of humility *"Lord, I am not worthy"*. It is a prayer of abandonment. *"Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit"*. These, and many other thoughts would have been in the mind and heart of Fr. Jimmy Thomas when he was ordained priest by Archbishop Ward on 8 December 1992.

Today, Fr. Jimmy lies prostrate before the altar once again in that final act of abandonment to the will of God which is the moment of death. When everything else has been stripped away, when all the things with which we surround and support and distract ourselves in life no longer matter, the prayer of the Church at the last anointing surrounds the one who is dying. The Holy Communion, the Bread of Life, the Viaticum the food for the journey is given to the dying person to carry him from this life to the next. *"The Body of Christ"*. Amen. I believe. This is what Fr. Jimmy believed in and ministered during his priesthood. How blessed he was to be surrounded by prayer and care in this place where that mystery is enacted every day. The work of the Sisters and the staff of Nazareth House, the ministry of the chaplain, and the dedicated visiting of the members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul every week, each in their own way supported him in these last years of his life.

Those of you who knew him will know that his path to the priesthood was an unusual one. Having had a successful career in youth work and as a magistrate, well known in the local community of Cardiff

and beyond, receiving an MBE for his dedication to others, he approached the Archbishop in his late 50's and offered himself for the priesthood. It was obvious he wouldn't have fitted into any seminary system. He had learnt far too many lessons from life in his professional career. So, he had a tailor-made preparation at Belmont Abbey and was tutored by a number of priests present today in preparation for ordination. Cardinal Basil Hume often used to say there were many schools in which a priest was trained. The school of spirituality, of course. Learning to pray. Learning to deepen your own relationship with God so that you could speak and teach others from experience and not just from a text book. Another school is the school of theology. As priests we have to teach and preach, we have to give an account of the *"hope that lies in our heart"* (1 Peter 3:15) in order to *"bear one another's burden"* (Gal 6:2) in the community of faith. But the most important school of formation for the priest, and every human person, is the school of suffering. The question which confronts us all, believer or non-believer alike, is what the meaning of suffering is. Why does God allow this to happen? Where is God in the midst of human suffering? Suffering is a waste of time.

The follower of Jesus looks at the cross and sees that no time is wasted in which God is served. The service of God is the sanctification of time. And when time lies heavily on us in sickness, we see Jesus with arms outstretched on the cross. Holding together the things of heaven and the things of earth. Providing a bridge over which we are drawn into his own suffering, death and resurrection. Fr. Jimmy had to bear that cross of suffering in a long and painful way. Lying on a bed of sickness for a number of years meant that he had to live out those words of abandonment portrayed at his ordination in the most graphic way. The words of Jesus to Peter in

today's gospel speak to me very powerfully of Fr Jimmy's active life and then his contemplative, hidden life:

*"When you were young, you fastened your own belt and walked where you wished to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will fasten your belt for you and carry you where you do not wish to go".* He said this in order to show by what death he was to glorify God. Then he said to him *"Follow me"*.

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