



Homily for the Mass of the Feast of St. Edmund

18th November 2018

St. Edmund's College, Ware

Archbishop George Stack

Fifty years ago this weekend I sat in the second row of the second block of benches in this chapel celebrating the feast of St. Edmund of Abingdon as we are today. It was a special celebration, because it was the 400th anniversary of the founding of Douai College. Transport, organisation and vision in 1968 weren't quite what they are in 2018. We weren't able to visit Douai as today's students of St. Edmund's College did for the spectacular celebration of the 450th anniversary on September 2018. What a logistical triumph that was! The photos look magnificent. I am sure it will remain in the memories of the pupils of St. Edmund's College fifty years from now.

The students of Allen Hall did one very creative thing for the quarter centenary though – much to the nervousness of the seminary and college staff! We built an exhibition at the entrance of Allen Hall. It was called Years of Faith and attracted thousands of parishioners and other visitors from all over the diocese and beyond. 1968 was the year of the students revolutions in Paris and elsewhere. We seminarians made our own bid for freedom in “opening the doors” as Pope John XXIII described the Second Vatican Council. I still have the brochure we produced for the exhibition which sold in its thousands. It made such a large profit for those days, that it became another source of conflict between staff and students as to whom the profit belonged! I am still in touch

with the authors whose names appear on the front piece of the magazine – including my own.

It was the history and inspiration of St. Edmund himself and Cardinal William Allen which held together the living memory of the origins of this place and the continued reason for its existence. Edmund, born in 1125, part of the great link of learning between the university of Oxford and the university of Paris where he saw no conflict between the study of science and theology, and practiced both during his time as Treasurer at Salisbury Cathedral and later as Archbishop of Canterbury. We need to be reminded by these giants who went before us that religion and science are not mutually exclusive, they do not contradict each other, but answer the same questions of meaning, purpose and direction of the material, intellectual, emotional and spiritual worlds each of us inhabit. An atheist doctor at a large London teaching hospital once said to the chaplain *“I have done thousands of scans of the innermost parts of the human person but I have never seen a soul”*. The chaplain asked if he had done any scans of the human brain. *“Thousands”* was the reply. *“Have you ever seen a mind?”* the chaplain asked.

Cardinal William Allen was equally passionate about the integration of learning and the discernment of truth and the price of integrity in his foundation of the college at Douai.

This was a time when political issues were often deliberately confused by using religious language. A time when spiritual loyalty could not be distinguished from national allegiance. It is a conflict we face even in our own day, not least with the Islamist “martyrs” in our midst, and whole groups of people being treated with suspicion because of the terrorist actions of the few. Writing of the education and formation of students at Douai in those recusant years, Professor Eamon Duffy says: *“No English protestant attempt to re-think ministry, or to equip men for ministry, was half so radical, or quarter professional. No one else in that age conceived so exalted or demanding a role for the secular priesthood and no one else, part from the great religious Founders, produced a body of men who rose to that ideal so eagerly and at so great a cost”*. (‘Cardinal William Allen’ in *Recusant History* vol. 22. 1995).

And what of today? What of the young men and women being educated in this college in the light of the inspiration and tradition of faith and reason, science and religion, the courage and integrity of St. Edmund of Abingdon and a William Allen? I am reminded of a young boy on a walk with his father who stopped at the university building in their town. “What do they do there, dad?” the child asked. The father, a little perplexed, took a while to answer the question. Eventually he said “They think”. It seems to me

that, amongst all the search for academic qualifications, the purpose of education is to equip our young people to think – and use thought, not mere emotion, to make rational judgments as the foundation of their physical, social, intellectual and spiritual lives. I am always struck by the words of a poem by D.H. Lawrence entitled simply “Thought”.

Thought. I love thought.

But not just the jiggling and twisting of already existing ideas.

I despise such a self-important game.

Thought is the welling up of unknown life into consciousness.

Thought is the testing of statements on the touchstone of conscience.

Thought is gazing on to the face of life and reading what can be read.

Thought is pondering over experience, and coming to a conclusion.

Thought is not a trick, or an exercise, or a set of dodges,

Thought is a man in his wholeness wholly attending.

The privilege of teaching, the adventure of learning, the challenge of maturing, the growth of the person is surely that:

“Thought is a man, and a woman too, in their wholeness, wholly attending”.

The man for others, Jesus himself, the Way, the Truth and the Life is the best of all teachers. As we heard in this morning’s reading:

“You have heard everything that I teach in public; hand it on to reliable people so that they in turn will be able to teach others”.
