



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Silver Jubilee of the Diocese of Menevia

Rt Rev Paul Stonham, Abbot of Belmont's Homily

ST JOSEPH'S CATHEDRAL, SWANSEA, 19 MARCH 2012

**We are gathered here today in this fine cathedral church of St Joseph to celebrate three important events, the restructuring of the Diocese of Menevia twenty five years' ago, the fortieth anniversary of the priestly ordination of Bishop Tom and the tenth anniversary of his episcopal consecration. We're also here to celebrate a great victory, the Grand Slam! It's not really for me to talk about Bishop Tom, even less to preach his panegyric, so I'll do what he asked and say something about the history of the Catholic Church in Wales, his land of adoption, the land to which, no doubt, one day he will lose his heart. But let us remember first of all that today this cathedral and Diocese live under the protection of St Joseph, the just man, the man of honour, faith and obedience, who was called by God to be husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary and foster father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. May we learn to follow his example and so nurture the Church of Christ in our hearts and our homes.**

Wales is a land of poets, saints and mystics, a land that was Christian long before St Augustine was sent by St Gregory the Great to convert the English. The sees of Caerleon, Llandaff and Menevia existed long before that of Canterbury and the very name Menevia is synonymous with Christian Wales. A lot has been written about the Celtic Church, much of it rather fanciful. The reason why Bishop Tom is the true successor to St David is that the Church throughout Celtic Europe, and not only in Wales, was always part and parcel of the Catholic Church in communion with the See of Rome. The Celts used the Latin language in worship and the Roman Rite for their liturgy. There were regional customs, and Wales was no exception.

The Celtic Church was a monastic Church with strong family and tribal links. Think of the great monasteries at Llantwit Major, Llancarfan and Llandeilo, linked with Saints Illtud, Dyfrig and Teilo, and the important schools attached to them. There were others too, one of these being St David's own monastery at the great religious centre that now bears his name. Each of these saints had countless disciples and they took the faith to every nook and cranny of the land, as well as to the remote, windswept islands around our coast. Wales today is peppered with small, ancient churches, many dedicated to Our Lady or St Michael and the rest to saints known to us only through legend and miracle, and for each church there is a holy well. Many of the Welsh saints travelled abroad, such as St Patrick to Ireland. Crossing the sea was part of the spirituality of men and women who placed themselves entirely in God's hands and at his service. We remember the words of St David, his legacy to us his children. "Byddwch lawen a chedwch eich ffydd a'ch cred, a gwnewch y pethau bychain a welsoch ac a glywsoch gennyf i." "Be joyful and keep your faith and belief and do the little things you have seen and heard from me."

Yet nothing in the shifting sands of this world is permanent. Cultures are transformed by contact with others. The Celtic Church, like the Anglo-Saxon Church, was both destroyed and renewed by the advent of the Normans, change and continuity. Ancient buildings were replaced by more solid Romanesque and Gothic ones, though little in Wales can compare to the grandeur and magnificence found in England. Other than St David's, which is unique, churches and cathedrals were relatively humble, for this is a smaller and poorer country. As in Celtic times, the Church in medieval Wales was a monastic Church, for the most part, Cistercian. The Benedictines, Augustinians and new mendicant orders, with their schools and hospitals, were restricted to towns. Think of Abergavenny, Brecon, Chepstow and Llangennydd, Wales, like Ireland, proved a more suitable breeding ground for the Cistercians. Now think of Tintern, Neath and Margam and the greatest of them all, Whitland, where hardly a stone remains. Miraculously, today in this Diocese we have two Cistercian houses, Caldey and Whitland. We're great survivors.

Caldey deserves special mention because, rather like the Diocese of Menevia, it has reinvented itself over and over again. That small island, just across the choppy waters from Penally, birthplace of St Teilo, has been home to Celtic monks, to medieval Tironians and Benedictines, to Anglican Benedictines and finally to Cistercians. In a way it's more historic than either Montecassino or Citeaux. It is the nearest thing Britain has to the Coptic monasteries of Egypt. Your Diocese, Bishop Tom, is truly blessed. What attracted the Cistercians to Wales? Was it the sheep? Well they certainly liked the mountains and valleys and the rugged coastline. But the monasteries were not only centres of learning, agriculture and industry, they were also the focus of evangelization, for most of the parishes in medieval Wales were served by monks.

For over a thousand years Wales was a Catholic country and the Welsh people happy and united in their faith. It is sad to speak of the Reformation and the Dissolution of the monasteries, but these things happened and we still live with the consequences today. Wales was not a priority for Thomas Cromwell and, in any case, there was a serious problem with language, culture and geography, so the process was slow and uneven. A popular, lively Church, with the active participation of rich and poor, men and women, was gradually replaced by an agent of the state, which sought to control not only the faith of the people but every aspect of their lives. From free men they became slaves and, with the closure of the monasteries, many lost their livelihood. In spite of persecution, by the beginning of the 17th Century there were still men and women who remained Catholic and others who converted to the Old Faith, some of whom went on to serve the Church as priests and religious, even to the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom. One such man was St John Roberts of Trawsfynedd, who as a boy had been tutored by the last surviving Cistercian of Cymmer. He, together with Dom Leander Jones from Breconshire, were founding members of the restored English Benedictine Congregation, having initially been professed at St Martin's Abbey, Compostela. Another native of Breconshire was the martyr Blessed Philip Powell, who had studied law under the future Dom Augustine Baker, the great mystic and teacher of the art of contemplative prayer. These are just four of the many Welshmen who became Benedictines, Franciscans or Jesuits in the 17th and 18th Centuries, a time when the English colleges on the continent preferred not to take Welsh students for the secular priesthood. Being Welsh speakers, they were regarded as subversive and dangerous.

Welsh Catholics in the years from the Reformation to the restoration of the Hierarchy were scattered and had their greatest concentration in Monmouthshire, sometimes described as the Welsh Lancashire. If you include Breconshire and Herefordshire (don't forget that this English county was still to a large extent Welsh speaking and that the Diocese of Hereford had been created out of the Diocese of Llandaff in 676), then three quarters of Welsh Catholics were to be found in that corner of the Principality. Abergavenny, Brecon, Monmouth, Usk, Raglan, Llanarth and Hereford were all important Catholic centres throughout the Recusant period. Unfortunately, much of the country lay abandoned and only sporadically did missionaries visit the few Catholics living in West, Central and North Wales. Catholic belief and customs, however, did not die easily, and I believe that what remained of the Catholic spirit among the people responded enthusiastically to the Methodist Revival at the end of the 18th Century. We know that in 1773 there were about 750 Catholics in Wales and 190 in Herefordshire.

From 1688 Wales formed part of the Western District until its partition in 1840. The Vicars Apostolic served a scattered and impoverished community, Catholics in Wales being the poorest and most scattered. Of the eight Vicars Apostolic, five were Benedictine, two Franciscan and one secular. In truth, their connection with Wales was largely peripheral, although the surviving diary of Gregory Sharrock, preserved at Clifton and Downside, reveals a growing community around Wales. Things were about to change, for a number of reasons, not least the arrival of large numbers of Irish immigrants seeking work in the coalmines and docks of South Wales. In 1840, Thomas Joseph Brown of Downside, father of the Catholic Church in modern Wales, was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Wales, an area that included not only the twelve counties but also Monmouthshire and Herefordshire. His episcopal consecration took place at Bath on 28th October at the hands of the future Cardinal, Nicholas Wiseman, who remarked, "For labour and exertion there will be abundant room, God knows, in the field allotted to your care, and therein rejoice rather than despond. The wilderness made to bloom by your toil will be more pleasing to the eye than an Eden already planted; and one sheep added by your care to the flock will be dearer to His heart than ninety-nine folded in security." These words have not lost their force, and today, Bishop Tom, they are addressed to you. But you still have a long way to go, for when he died in 1880, Bishop Brown had been a bishop for forty years, ten as Vicar Apostolic and thirty as Bishop of Newport and Menevia.

When the Hierarchy was restored in 1850, Bishop Brown was of the view that Wales should remain a vicariate. After all there were only a few small chapels, hardly any priests and not many Catholics, and there was certainly no church fit to be a cathedral. Still, he obeyed the wishes of Pope Pius IX. In 1880 Brown's obituarist, Dom Aidan Gasquet, could write, "When he received his vineyard there were in the portion which constitutes the present Diocese of Newport and Menevia, only eleven missions and two chaplaincies, and now it is possessed of some fifty-eight churches and chapels, and sixty-two priests, while a body of his Benedictine brethren form the cathedral chapter." Downside would not help him to build a cathedral at Newport, then the most important town in Wales, so he had to make do with Francis Richard Wegg-Prosser's offer of the church he was building at Belmont, just south of Hereford. Ultimately Belmont served as cathedral church of the Diocese for 67 years and the adjacent monastery as a common novitiate and house of studies for the English Benedictines. It would also become a seminary for the Diocese, a role it played up to the end of the Second World War. What his fellow Downside monk, Bernard Ullathorne, was for the Church in the Midlands, so was Brown for Wales. But he was a difficult man to deal with. He had a strong personality and disliked opposition. He was tenacious and assertive, yet practical, a man with boundless reserves of energy. Dom Bede Vaughan, soon to become Archbishop of Sydney, Australia, while serving as his Cathedral Prior at Belmont, described him, with distinctly English Benedictine candour, as "a first-class mischief-maker."

Brown's auxiliary and successor was John Cuthbert Hedley, an Ampleforth monk, who had taught at Belmont for eleven years prior to his consecration. He was a celebrated preacher and retreat giver and a sound theologian. In 2015 we will celebrate the centenary of his death. We need an authoritative biography as well as a new edition of his writings. In character he was warm and scholarly in contrast to the rather acerbic Brown. But it was Brown who built up the Diocese, bringing in Capuchins, Rosminians and others as well as all the congregations of religious sisters still working in Wales today. Hedley consolidated Brown's work and between them they served Wales as bishops for seventy-five years. Hedley was aware that it was the secular clergy who were to be crucial in the development of the Catholic Church in Wales. He was renowned for his care of the clergy and showed particular concern to increase the number of diocesan priests and so reduce dependence on the regular clergy. In 1881 there were only thirteen diocesan priests in Wales but by 1915, the year of his death, the number had risen to fifty-four.

Now Hedley wanted Wales to be a separate ecclesiastical province, basing his arguments not only on pastoral need but historical fact. The Welsh Province was erected by the Bull *Cambria Celtica* of Pope Benedict XV of 7th February 1916, when an Archdiocese was set up at Cardiff, by now the capital of Wales and a city growing in importance. However, the boundaries had already been changed in 1895, when the Diocese of Newport was redefined as comprising the counties of Glamorgan, Monmouth and Hereford and Bishop Hedley re-appointed as Bishop of Newport alone. Francis Mostyn was made Vicar Apostolic for the rest of Wales until 1898 when that area became the Diocese of Menevia and he its Bishop. The new diocese was based at Wrexham and this is how it remained until 12th February 1987, when Blessed John Paul II, with the decree *Fiducia freti*, restructured the Catholic Church in Wales. Today the Diocese of Menevia covers almost the whole of the ancient Catholic Diocese of St David's, though centered now on the City of Swansea. Ironically, Downside refused to build a cathedral for Bishop Brown at Newport, but from 1886 to 88, aided by the pennies of the poor, they built this magnificent church of St Joseph, Greenhill, which was destined to become the cathedral church of the Diocese of Menevia in its third modern incarnation. Since 1850 there have been three Dioceses of Menevia and three cathedrals: first St Michael's, Belmont, then St Mary's, Wrexham, and now St Joseph's, Swansea. I won't hazard a guess at what will happen next!

What a joy it is to see so many guests as well as Menevians here today, especially Bishop Daniel Mullins, my own father in faith, as it was he who ordained me many years' ago, the first bishop of the new Menevia, and Bishop Mark Jabalé, my former abbot and your second bishop. What is our dream for Menevia today, our hope and our prayer? Wales has always been a land deeply rooted in the Christian faith. If, for the moment, on the surface at least, it appears to have lost that faith, there can be no doubt that every Welsh heart thirsts for God and longs to know Him and be loved by Him. In Welsh we have the wonderful word "hiraeth", not easy to translate. It describes that profound yearning for our beloved homeland, the land of our birth, our own earthly paradise and the reflection of heaven, where we shall see God face to face. Our dream is to help everyone in Wales come to know and love of the living God.

And so we come to the end of our long story, but the end of one story marks the beginning of another. Such is the life of the Church, Christ's Mystical Body. To paraphrase St Paul, it is not we who live but Christ who lives in us. It is not we who suffer and die, but Christ who suffers and dies in us. It is not we who are raised to

new life, but Christ who is raised to new life in us. Throughout our history, we have tried to remain faithful to Christ, our Lord and Saviour. The Welsh Church was always both missionary and monastic. Today it is simply a missionary Church and our mission is to preach Christ, live Christ and be Christ. The moment the mission stops everything else collapses. Wales and her people long to hear the Gospel preached today and, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ has empowered all of us to preach his Gospel effectively, not from church pulpits but by the integrity of our lives, if we but do what St David asked of us: be joyful, keep the faith and simply do the little things that will bring others to Christ. Amen.