

Homily

VIGIL MASS, CHISWICK CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR

Our Lady of Grace and St Edward, Monday, 11 September 2017

You will not be surprised to know that Cardinal Cormac made careful arrangements for this Mass and for the funeral rites which will follow in these days. Among others, I had the great privilege of accompanying him through some of those discussions and he was keen that a Mass be said here in Chiswick. He lived very happily here in the parish for nine years, and was grateful to be able to be a pastor in this setting in his retirement years. It was part of the great humanity of those conversations, that we were able to joke with one another, that he would even write this homily for me if he could. I had the great privilege of working closely with Cardinal Cormac for six years. They are some of the most happy ones I had in the priesthood. He was not only my bishop but became a good friend and an inspiring mentor. He had the capacity to see the potential in another and to draw that out. I know that a number here, friends and family, experienced him in his last weeks. Even in those last conversations he was keen to be generous and impart to each of us, some wisdom, some concrete piece of advice of how to live life well, how to make the most of our vocations. As for himself, he was thoroughly focused on making the last act of his dying, a culmination of how he'd lived his life, with great openness of heart, with humility, and with a very deep, rock-like faith. In one of the last conversations I had with him, in the hospital before he died, he repeated again what he had said so often to me before. He did not want me to eulogise about him but to concentrate on preaching the faith of the Church, her belief in her Risen Lord and upon God's mercy.

Cardinal Cormac wanted this Mass, and his funeral rites at Westminster Cathedral, not to be a celebration of his life or a record of his personal history, but an expression of his faith, a faith which did not fear the reality of death but saw in it the opportunity to be finally united with his Lord. As we heard on the day of death itself, he said, "I am at peace and have no fear of what is to come."

He believed he was embarking upon another journey. He wanted to die in the way he had lived, and with God's great goodness he was given what he

desired. Death is for him the culmination of the whole of his life, because it means an eternal face to face with Christ, an encounter which would go on forever. In that reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gazes with undimmed eye as he stands on the verge of the Promised land. He gazes across a new horizon, on a new land, and with new possibilities. We believe this is what is now taking place for Cardinal Cormac as he gazes, with undimmed eye, upon a new landscape, and sets out on that final Pilgrimage which will lead him home.

An undimmed eye and looking for new possibilities; these were characteristic of Cormac's whole life. It was this which sent him forth from Reading, to study for the priesthood in Rome, which brought him into priestly ministry in the Diocese of Portsmouth, back to the English College again as Rector, where his skills as mentor and wise counsellor assisted many in discovering and deepening their vocation. It was this capacity for new possibilities which gave him the confidence to set out to Arundel as a young bishop, and then to Westminster as Archbishop 22 years later. It was what made him such an outstanding Ecumenist and interlocutor in Inter-religious dialogue.

An undimmed eye - but with a certain twinkle in it, it has to be said. I remember when we would go to a parish function or celebration. Before leaving the car he would comb his hair in the mirror, and brush down his cassock. He'd give me a nudge on the arm, and with that twinkle in his eye, he'd say, "Now remember your task is to get me out of here as quickly as possible!" That humanity and lightness of touch was acknowledged by Pope Francis in their last telephone conversation together. From his hospital bed, Cardinal Cormac expressed his gratitude and encouragement to his friend, now Pope, and Pope Francis, assured Cormac of his prayer and blessing, thanked him for his accompaniment and his friendship, and then added, "Especially, I thank you for your good humour."

It is no surprise to us that his episcopal motto was, "Joy and Hope" for this was the manner of his being, and the very bedrock of his life and of his faith. It was firstly within his own family that Cormac learned to live these realities. Pat, Julie, Chris, Leigh, James and Kieran, through you we give thanks to the Murphy-O'Connor and Cuddigan families for giving such a generous, gentle and humble pastor to the Church. We know he remained close to you, his family always, and desired that you and all his family come to know more deeply something of the beauty of friendship with Jesus which he experienced in the family of the Church.

It is this sense of the Church as a family which was so central to Cardinal Cormac's life. Rather than being an institution, the Church was, for him, that community of believers where each person could find a real home and a path to follow her Lord. In her, Jesus fulfilled that promise made to his disciples, "I do not leave you orphans". Cardinal Cormac believed that none of us are spiritual orphans. We all have a Father in heaven, Jesus as our brother, and Mary as our mother. The loving heart of our mother Mary, we discover in our mother the Church.

These were truths, Cardinal Cormac learned in the midst of his own loving family, and they were deepened by his experiences within the family of the Church. How often in these past months he would quote words from the final audience of the Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI. They had clearly become his own, and I quote:

"I can say that the Lord has truly led me, he has been close to me, I have been able to perceive his presence daily... a... journey which has had its moments of joy and light, but also moments which were not easy; I have felt like Saint Peter with the Apostles in the boat on the Sea of Galilee: the Lord has given us so many days of sun and of light winds, days when the catch was abundant; there were also moments when the waters were rough and the winds against us, as throughout the Church's history, and the Lord seemed to be sleeping. But I have always known that the Lord is in that boat, and I have always known that the barque of the Church is not mine but his. Nor does the Lord let it sink; it is he who guides it, surely also through those whom he has chosen, because he so wished. This has been, and is, a certainty which nothing can shake. For this reason my heart... overflows with gratitude to God, for he has never let his Church, or me personally, lack his consolation, his light, his love."

Cardinal Cormac's belief in the presence of His Lord in the Church, does not mean, in a rather glib fashion that things are simply made right at the end. That is why he wanted to be buried at the tenth station in Westminster Cathedral, so that people would pray for him as they passed by on the way to the Lady Chapel, to the sacristy, or to the confessional. Cardinal Cormac knew he was dependent on God's mercy, in death as in life. This awareness wasn't primarily because of his faults or failings as a bishop, of which he was well aware. We know he was honest in facing his limits, particularly in the area of child protection. He recognised his mistake and sought to put in place, ways of working and responding which would make it easier for victim survivors, and hopefully, bring healing to those most vulnerable who had been hurt.

His humble awareness of his own vulnerabilities was deeper than anything he experienced in the spotlight of the media. It was because he knew that death would bring him before God. Before the face of the living God I recognise my own unworthiness and the need to shed illusion and untruth. This shedding of the old self is of course the work of every human life; what St Edith Stein calls the “breaking of the chains of personality”. The breaking of the chains for most of us is a work that is not complete by the time of our own death. Cardinal Cormac knew this, but he also knew that in the loving mercy of God, this process of change is continued in the journey we make to God following death. In these last weeks he was deeply consoled by this awareness, and regularly described it in Pilgrimage terms, as 'being on the way'.

For Him, this was the Church's deeply consoling belief in purgatory. For the believer time does not run out. If there is any unfinished business to prepare the soul for an eternal face to face with God, then God in His Providence allows for this.

At the same time, the person on their way through purgatory, knows that what is longed for, what is desired - eternal beatitude - will eventually be granted. So tinged with any sense of regret is the joy that such a soul will ultimately see God. It is this which gave Cardinal Cormac's death such peace and such a gift to those who witnessed him.

For us, too, there is consolation in the knowledge that we are still united with the one we have lost. We can help them with our prayers and their suffering which is but the pain of deep longing and deep desire to be with God forever, this longing and this desire can be offered to God out of love for all those who are still on the way. It is such longing and desire which acts as a flame to purge away any lack of love or truth and which expands the soul fully so that we can be prepared to receive God in His fullness.

It is our fundamental belief and our hope that this process of transformation begins in our earthly life, as it clearly did for Cardinal Cormac. This is not only through those things which he endured in his life, but also in these last weeks when we accompanied him through his final suffering, as he day by day came to terms with embracing a whole new possibility. It is an immense consolation to us, to know that all has been taken up in and through His participation in Christ's embrace of suffering and death.

There is one last word. We are between two jubilees in Cardinal Cormac's life. Last October he celebrated sixty years as a priest, and in December he would have been forty years a bishop. He was looking forward to another party! Yet in these final weeks he knew that celebration would have to take place in another way. He was, to his very bones, a priest. The final goodbyes are a blessing which we shall forever treasure. In one of our last meetings, he suddenly stopped talking and after a few moments of quiet, he said to me, "Mark, for all the words that you and I might say to one another at this point, it is the words of the Mass and the Liturgy which above all give me comfort....let us say Mass together." And so we did, with a fellow bishop and the hospital Chaplain. Life had become very simple....the praying of his daily Office, the Rosary, and Mass. These were the things which had sustained him all his life and these sustained him as he embarked on the final journey.

I suspect that as he is now accompanied by his Guardian angel through purgatory, he's got that twinkle in his eye, and is giving them a nudge, and saying, 'Remember, your job is to get me out of here as quickly as possible.'

Dear Cardinal Cormac, dear Father, my very dear brother, go in peace and may you soon gaze forever on the One for whom you worked so faithfully, with such humility, and for whom you long so ardently.

Eternal rest grant unto him O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace. Amen.

Rt Revd Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth

11 September, 2017