

Homily at Vigil for Knights of the Holy Sepulchre

My dear Knights and Dames, brothers and sisters in Christ,

We gather together at a most auspicious hour on a most auspicious day.

Today is the Feast of St Ninian – the proto-evangelist of Scotland ... A day of great joy for us.

But today is also the first anniversary of the visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to this city. Indeed at this very hour, one year ago today, the Holy Father was delivering his message of hope to the tens of thousands of people spread over the lower slopes of Bellahouston Park on that evening I have since described as “golden”.

And so I propose to draw inspiration from this feast day and from those words of the Holy Father addressed to us at this time, in this place one year ago, for our reflection this evening.

Our readings set the spiritual context of our gathering.

As Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre you have a special charism and a special responsibility to have a care for the Holy Places and a devotion to the Passion of Christ.

We are reminded of that in one of those appeals which St Paul makes so well, exhorting the Christians of Corinth to new standards of generous care for their fellow believers: “I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality.” (cf 2 Cor: 8,1-14)

Today the Christians of the Holy Land are among the most needy on the planet.

The political situation there has led to an exodus in recent years, such that there is a very real concern that some of the great centres of the Christian world may soon be so depopulated of Christ’s followers and their unique status as pilgrimage centres par excellence may be jeopardised.

We need to examine our consciences as Knights and Dames of the Holy Sepulchre and see if we are fulfilling our generous obligations towards those Christians who maintain their faith with courage and in the face of great difficulties in the land of Jesus' birth.

Earlier St Paul had reminded us of our knightly dignity and responsibility in that letter to the Ephesians which we have just heard: "Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness."

In this extract I cannot but hear echoes of that sermon of the Holy Father delivered to us on September 16 last year.

Turn your minds back to that evening and listen again with me to those words addressed to the Catholic laity of Scotland, hearing in them the modern echo of St Paul's exhortation to Christian fortitude:

"The evangelization of culture is all the more important in our times, when a dictatorship of relativism threatens to obscure the unchanging truth about man's nature, his destiny and his ultimate good.

"There are some who now seek to exclude religious belief from public discourse, to privatize it or even to paint it as a threat to equality and liberty. Yet religion is in fact a guarantee of authentic liberty and respect, leading us to look upon every person as a brother or sister.

"For this reason I appeal in particular to you, the lay faithful, in accordance with your baptismal calling and mission, not only to be examples of faith in public, but also to put the case for the promotion of faith's wisdom and vision in the public forum.

"Society today needs clear voices which propose our right to live, not in a jungle of self-destructive and arbitrary freedoms, but in a society which works for the true welfare of its citizens and offers them guidance and protection in the face of their weakness and fragility.

"Do not be afraid to take up this service to your brothers and sisters, and to the future of your beloved nation."

You do not need me to tell you of the relevance of those words in Scotland today.

That “dictatorship of relativism” would have us redefine the meaning of marriage, it would limit our right to religious freedom and it would have us silenced in the public forum, charged with the ultimate heresy of being “intolerant”.

As Knights and Dames, you have a special responsibility to take to heart that appeal of the Pope - *"Society today needs clear voices which propose our right to live, not in a jungle of self-destructive and arbitrary freedoms, but in a society which works for the true welfare of its citizens and offers them guidance and protection in the face of their weakness and fragility."*

I ask you today to examine how you might repond to that challenge in your daily lives, daring also to lift your heads above the parapet and speak up for the Church in times of trial.

That may mean writing a letter to a newspaper, attending a constituency surgery with your local MSP, or speaking bravely in the professional forum.

Our Gospel this evening tells the story of the Passion.

The Passion is a story of suffering. But it is also a love story. Christ suffers not out of a sterile sense of duty, but as the ultimate act of love for humanity.

We will not be called to shed our blood for humanity, but we may be asked to withstand a degree of criticism for our fidelity. As Knights and Dames, that call to faithful discipleship cannot be avoided.

On this feast day of St Ninian we can draw inspiration from his example of fortitude and fidelity. As the Holy Father said at Bellahouston:

"Saint Ninian, whose feast we celebrate today, was himself unafraid to be a lone voice. In the footsteps of the disciples whom our Lord sent forth before him, Ninian was one of the very first Catholic missionaries to bring his fellow Britons the good news of Jesus Christ ...

"That work was later taken up by Saint Mungo, Glasgow's own patron, and by other saints, the greatest of whom must include Saint Columba and Saint Margaret. Inspired by them, many men and women have laboured over many centuries to hand down the faith to you."

I would like to add to that list – and recall the figure of St John Ogilvie, martyred so close to this site and whose image, so powerfully painted, is placed above the

tabernacle in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel – a reminder of his devotion to the Mass, a devotion that cost him his liberty and ultimately his life.

But let us listen again to the Pope's stirring conclusion:

"Strive to be worthy of this great tradition! Let the exhortation of Saint Paul in the first reading be your constant inspiration: "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering and persevere in prayer" (cf. Rom 12:11-12).

With these words of Paul, repeated by Peter, I leave you to ponder, to resolve and to act.