

Homily for Saint Nicholas Care Fund Sunday at Saint Patrick's Dumbarton

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am delighted to be with you once again here in this magnificent church dedicated to Saint Patrick, in ancient Dumbarton.

What is the connection between three hanging balls indicating a pawn shop and a bishop from a long time ago who lived in a remote part of what was then Asia Minor, and is now Turkey? Perhaps you will guess who the bishop is, but it still leaves the question about the relationship of him to these three balls.

Yes, the bishop is Saint Nicholas. The obscure place of which he was bishop – obscure to us of course, was Myra. The three balls represent three bags of gold. The story is that among the charitable deeds of Saint Nicholas was the throwing into the homes of prospective brides the dowry money which their poor families could ill-afford. It is not too difficult to see why pawn brokers adopted those three balls, or three bags of gold, as a sign of their business. The pawn shop provided, for those whom we might call today the pecuniarily-challenged, the wherewithal to enable them to meet their present commitments!

"You will see where I am coming from" a friendly lawyer to the Archdiocese is wont to say, as he spells out in clear legal fashion the substance of some fiscal or legal matter on which we are consulting him: you see where I am coming from!

Well you will see where I am coming from when I remind you that on this Sunday throughout the Archdiocese we are collecting for the Saint Nicholas Care Fund. I may be here in person today, but in a certain sense I am present in each of the parishes, since in each a letter from me, a very short one, is being read out in which I recommend to the people of the Archdiocese support for this Fund. We used to call it the *Pastoral Care Fund*, and while we still retain that title for the Trust we have, as they say today, re-branded the Trust by introducing the name the *Saint Nicholas Care Fund*. We did this for two reasons, one because in the list of patron saints, or of saints connected with some particular aspect of the Church's life, Saint Nicholas has long been identified as the saint of charity. There is of course another word for *charity* and it is the word *love*. There are many expressions of love "Greater love than this no man hath, than that he lay down his life for his friends" describes, in Our Lord's own words, the nature of His love for us. Christian love always has an edge of sacrifice to it, of not just feeling good about something and someone, but making good their needs, or acting on their behalf, or sharing something that is ours, to make up for what perhaps is lacking in them, or is their present need.

The needs we see around us are many and diverse. Glasgow has one of the largest concentrations, throughout the City, of those who are affected by multiple deprivation, what we called "transcending poverties", the name given to a conference I had a role in organising a few years ago.

Transcending suggests that there are different levels of poverty – I don't mean simply grades according to social class, for what might be poverty for those who live in fine houses but on meagre pensions may be different from those who live in council houses with very little in way of an inheritance. By "transcending poverties" we mean that there is a

physical poverty, the lack of sufficient means to provide for one's basic needs, coupled with a poverty of opportunity to better one's condition because of a lack of work or poor health;

social poverty, by which we mean that the environment, housing, the conditions under which persons live, and the quality of the service which they have is below the standard which the dignity of each human individual deserves; and

cultural poverty, or lack of education perhaps or opportunities for personal development;

spiritual poverty, frequently manifested by a lack of a sense of one's worth as an individual or one's dignity as a child of God, with an absence of hope for the future, sometimes evidenced by some form of dependency or other, perhaps on alcohol or drugs or sexual promiscuity. Sadly many in our society today, in this very Archdiocese, experience some or all of these poverties.

Our task as a Church is to try in some way to address these poverties. Our resources in so doing are very limited, and would be even less were it not for the annual collection taken up on this Sunday and distributed by a Board of lay persons under my chairmanship. Our aim is to encourage and support local initiatives which will make a difference to the lives of some of the most needy people: the elderly of course, but also children from needy families; the lonely and those in need of companionship through being able to engage with others in a lunch club or other community activity.

I can give you a few examples...

Looking at today's readings I am struck by the way in which Saint Paul insists that our happiness is what he wants: "*I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat, what I want is your happiness*". He goes on to say that

we should be confident of the nearness of Our Lord and consequently be convinced that *"there is no need to worry"*. He then suggests to the Philippians that *"If there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus"*.

This passage appears to echo the first reading from the prophet Zephaniah: *"Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel, shout aloud! Rejoice, exalt with your heart and out of Jerusalem! Do not let your hands fall limp. The Lord your God is in your midst...he will exalt with joy over you and renew you by his love"*.

This is undoubtedly a call to those with faith to recognise the immanence, the nearness, of our God. It takes on a particular significance as we come close to Christmas, the time when our God revealed Himself in the person of His Son Christ Jesus Our Lord as a babe in the arms of His mother Mary, but there are those who lack faith and certainly are without hope, and it is those that we have in mind and for whom we must in a sense incarnate the Son of God

When John the Baptist announced the imminent coming and called for the people to prepare for his coming, they asked him: *"What must we do?"* He answered, *"if anyone has two tunics he must share with a man who has none, and the one with something to eat must do the same"*. Almsgiving is clearly one of the ways in which we make a way for the Lord, both into our own hearts and into the hearts of others.

In my letter I likened this Fund to SCIAF, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund, which has been in so many ways a success story as our communities here at home have stretched out the hand of support to those in the developing countries. I have said, however, that there is need, as my predecessor Cardinal Winning recognised, to stretch out our hand a bit closer to home, and this is what we are doing today - once we take that hand out of our pockets and place our generous offerings in the bags provided!

This brings me back to Saint Nicholas and his three bags of gold. Saint Nicholas is of course Santa Claus, and as such is one of the most popular saints in the world, even among those who know nothing about saints and would be surprised to know that they were honouring one. Santa Claus brings joy to children, it encourages the generous instincts of parents towards their little ones, and in a sense engages all of us who at Christmas exchange greetings and give each other tokens of our love.

We may not see today those whom we are helping, nor they us, but they will know that somewhere in the diocese someone put their hand deep into their pocket, out of love certainly for Christ Jesus and in honour of his birthday - and gave so that they might have some joy: *"Do not let your hands fall limp. The Lord your God is in your midst. He exalts with joy over you. He will renew*

you by his love; he will dance with shouts of joy for you as on the day of festival”.

My dear brothers and sisters I came to Dumbarton partly in order to express my appreciation, and those of the Board of the Saint Nicholas Care Fund, for your consistent generous support of our Trust, and I think that you are probably not unaware that its Administrator is one of your own parishioners, Elizabeth McQuade, whom I am glad to have the opportunity of thanking publicly here in her own parish for her devoted service of this Fund. Saint Nicholas please take note!