

Mass for 75th Anniversary of Holyrood Secondary School
September 21 2011

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am delighted to be here this evening in the Church of Christ the King, to celebrate with you the anniversary of the foundation of Holyrood secondary school in 1936.

There is something fitting in both the occasion and the setting, for it is on the Cross – the Holy Rood from which the school takes its name - that Christ reigns.

Indeed the school motto – *Hoc vince* – reminds us of that, seeing in the cross the sign of victory.

I welcome all of you - some of today's pupils and others of a certain vintage! And I offer a special word of welcome to Bishop John Mone, one of your most famous alumni, and former auxiliary bishop of this Archdiocese and now Bishop Emeritus of Paisley.

I had rather hoped that Bishop John might share with us some of his memories from his school days at this Mass, but perhaps he is saving the best bits for the reception afterwards!

As I was preparing for tonight's Mass I noticed that Holyrood remains Europe's largest school with a roll of over 2000 pupils and 150 teachers. That sheer size gives to the school a certain prominence in the public eye, and it is to the great credit of staff and pupils down the decades that that prominence has always been a source of pride to the whole Catholic community of Glasgow.

Today the traditions of academic excellence and social action which have characterised this learning community for 75 years are alive and well and

flourishing in a 21st century context. I know you are very proud of your Malawi links – and they bring great credit to you, your city and your country.

But in celebrating together at Mass, we gather for an altogether deeper purpose than merely exchanging congratulations.

We come together in Christ's name, to give thanks to the Father bound in a union of faith by the Holy Spirit.

We give thanks tonight not for the fine buildings in which we learn, or for the genius of the teachers or for the success of the pupils. Rather we give thanks for the great *work of providence* that is Holyrood Secondary School.

For all that has been achieved over these 75 years is a result of the gratuitous gift of God.

God has been alive and active in this educational community for more than seven decades in ways that we will never know this side of eternity. As a priest and bishop I am often humbled when people say to me ... "I remember something you said in a sermon so many years ago." Similarly teachers I know are amazed when former pupils come back to remind them of some action or word which had a major influence on their lives.

In all of this we are the agents of God's providence just as we see Moses to be in that reading we have just heard from the Book of Numbers. It is a mysterious passage and possibly only properly understood if we see in the image of the fiery serpent a symbol of Christ who, on the pole of the cross, redeems mankind.

"And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live."

"So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."

It is important to note that God works through Moses, only AFTER Moses has turned to him in prayer. That too is like Christ whom St Paul said “offered up prayers and supplications ... and was heard for his godly fear.” (Hebrews 5,7). Herein lies a lesson we can all learn, all of us who are engaged in work of guidance and education. Our work is begun in prayer and carried out in actions and words which reflect the obedience of faith and the humility of service, as we find in the Second reading, from St Paul to the Philippians:

“Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

Humility is for the Christian a *sine qua non*. Without it our efforts become mired in pride and human glory. I suspect that the virtue of humility has been a key element of the success of this school over many decades.

Our Gospel tonight clearly echoes the first reading ... *“as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

And so after emphasising the importance of prayer, then the foundational virtue of humility, we are reminded of the great theological virtue of faith.

It is through faith that we face life’s challenges with serenity, and through faith that we see in the circumstances of life God’s providence.

I had a very vivid experience of that providence just a couple of years ago when I was in Cologne along with over a million young people for World Youth Day.

One of the members of the Archdiocesan group, a young man who needed particular care, became detached from the rest of the party.

It was not a good moment to get lost in that vast crowd of a million people, with night falling, in a land whose language you did not know.

To his credit the boy did as he had been told to do in the event of such circumstances ... he called the emergency contact number he had been given. Unfortunately there was no answer.

He tried another number – again no response.

In desperation he tried a third number, not really knowing who would answer and found at the end of the line one of your local parish priests in this area, Mgr Paul Murray.

In hearing of the boy's plight, Mgr Paul told him to keep calm, to find a police officer, to explain the circumstances and to ask to be put on a train to the neighbourhood in which the Glasgow pilgrims were staying. It was only afterwards that he realised he hadn't given the young man any idea of the times of the trains or where to go on arrival ...

I was unaware of all this as I left the arena in Cologne and headed for home. As I sat on the train, I heard a voice saying "Mario". I assumed it must be a South American or Italian pilgrim calling on one of his fellows. But again came the call, "Mario!"

When I turned round it was the young boy from Glasgow who had got lost in a crowd of a million. Somehow the providence of God had recovered him and sat him in the very carriage in which I was travelling ...

I am sure all of us have similar tales, similar experiences of being the unwitting channels of God's providence. Tonight we give thanks for 75 years of that providence in the education of generations of young Catholics on the south side of Glasgow.

I cannot finish tonight without recalling another moment – one which many of you will have shared with me. I mean the visit of the Holy Father which happened a year ago this week.

As the sun set on that hillside not far from this spot, the Pope spoke to the young people of Scotland. I leave you with his powerful and passionate words which we should never tire of re-reading.

For parents and teachers they are an encouragement to like frankness. For pupils they are a challenge to discernment to recognise what is right and good and choose it ...

The Pope said: “I would like to say a word to you, my dear young Catholics of Scotland. I urge you to lead lives worthy of our Lord (cf. Eph 4:1) and of yourselves. There are many temptations placed before you every day - drugs, money, sex, pornography, alcohol - which the world tells you will bring you happiness, yet these things are destructive and divisive.

“There is only one thing which lasts: the love of Jesus Christ personally for each one of you. Search for him, know him and love him, and he will set you free from slavery to the glittering but superficial existence frequently proposed by today’s society.

“Put aside what is worthless and learn of your own dignity as children of God.”

Holyrood is a place to learn of that dignity. May it be a boast that you were of Holyrood’s crowd, and better still, may you boast with Paul: “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world!”

Amen

