

Mass for Commissioning of Catechists

October 27 2010

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is a joy to be with you this evening and to award to a number of members of the Archdiocese, certificates which recognise the work they have undertaken and which qualify them to work within the Archdiocese as catechists.

They form the second cohort to have completed our "Award" course, which is run in partnership with Glasgow University. This commissioning ceremony not only acknowledges their achievement but offers prayers for them in undertaking the work for which they have qualified in administering catechesis in various parishes.

It is commonplace in the practice of the Church, when someone is publicly commissioned for a work, or ordained for a ministry, that they be questioned publicly about their intentions and commitment to the work in view. And I will conduct this part of the ceremony after this homily which is intended to be an exhortation to them and to you to appreciate the importance of catechesis within the Church.

Our second reading was taken from St Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which he speaks of there being "all kinds of service to be done, but always to the same Lord." Among these St Paul mentions some who may have "the gift of preaching with wisdom given him by the Spirit". While another may have "the gift of faith given by the same Spirit."

The Holy Father may well have been thinking of this passage when, in his address at Bellahouston he said: "Among the differing gifts which St Paul lists for the building up of the Church is that of teaching. The preaching of the Gospel has always been accompanied by concern for the Word, the inspired Word of God, and the culture in which that Word takes root and flourishes."

The work of the catechist is within that general context of teaching, but has a very special character in that it is generally addressed to those preparing for the sacraments, for reception into the Church, and for putting into practice what they have learnt through study, reading and formal educational processes. Such practice needs also good example, which is why the catechist must always look to his or her own spiritual life and development accompanying their work with prayer.

In the course of recent Sundays we have been hearing extracts from St Paul's letters to Timothy when time and time again he refers to the task of teaching and of bearing witness

to the truth. St Paul wrote to him: "I am reminded of the sincere faith which you have," and then he refers to the fact that he received it, humanly speaking, from others: "It came first to live in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and I have no doubt that it is the same faith in you as well."

But then Paul goes on to remind Timothy that the gift he has received needs to be fanned into a flame by God's Holy Spirit: "God's gift is not a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, and love, and self control keep as your pattern the sound teaching you have heard (also) from me and the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. You have been entrusted to look after something precious; guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."

All of us who received the gift of faith have a need to share it, and in the sharing of it we come to understand it better and to love it more and to find it more fruitful in our own lives.

Our Gospel reading from St Mark gives us the parable of the sower going out to sow and recounts the way in which he (the sower) distinguishes between the season in which he has to prepare the ground and scatter the seed, knows also the season when he must wait for that seed to mature before recognising the season of the harvest.

Patience is greatly required of all who are involved in teaching, catechists must be imbued with that same spirit which St Paul considers characteristic of teachers when he encourages Timothy to continue his preaching "with all the patience of a teacher."

Our Holy Father came to Britain motivated by a desire to beatify John Henry Cardinal Newman and we are discovering again in these days so much of Newman's catechetical and educational work.

Here is a precious paragraph from Newman's writings when talking of conversion: "God deals with us very differently; conviction comes slowly to some men, quickly to others; in some it is a result of much thought and many reasonings, in others of a sudden illumination ... some men are converted merely by entering a Catholic church; others are converted by reading one book; others by one doctrine – they feel the weight of their sins ...or they are touched and overcome by the evident sanctity, beauty and (as I may say) fragrance of the Catholic religion."

It is for you dear catechists, not only to be patient, but to have about yourselves that "fragrance" of which Newman speaks, so that those whom you catechise are as much affected by your own tenderness, patience and goodness as by what you say.

Just as the sower relies upon the seasons, upon the good earth and the gentle rains and sunshine, so too we rely upon the light of the Holy Spirit.

As Newman notes: "You ask what it is you need, besides eyes, in order to see the truths of revelation. I will tell you at once; you need light. Not the keenest eyes can see in the dark ... the grace of God is the light. You are born under a privation of this blessed spiritual light; while it remains you will not, cannot, really see God. I do not say you will have no thought at all about God, nor be able to talk about Him, true, but you will not be able to do more than reason about Him without that illuminating grace of the Holy Spirit."

And so finally let us return to the wisdom of that first reading of tonight's Mass. It gives us, all of us, teachers and catechists and all who wish to pass on the faith to others, confidence. It is the Lord's promise: "I will pour out my spirit on all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men see visions ..."