

MASS FOR ANNIVERSARY OF THE POPE'S ELECTION
ST MARY'S PRO-CATHEDRAL
MARCH 21 2010

Your Eminence, Your Excellency, Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We have established a custom in recent years of celebrating a Mass for the Holy Father near to the date of his election as Pope. We meet alternately in our two major cities, Edinburgh the capital, and Glasgow, the largest centre of population.

Our gathering in Edinburgh under the presidency of the Cardinal gives the Church in Scotland an opportunity to send its invitations to those who have leading roles in public life, whereas when we meet in Glasgow we have, by agreement, looked rather to leading members within our own Catholic community in Scotland, giving us an opportunity to pay our respects to them also.

When meeting here in Glasgow, our normal venue would be St Andrew's Cathedral, which is presently undergoing major restoration. So today we meet instead here at our second oldest archdiocesan church, St Mary's in Calton which contains, in fact, the tomb of two vicars apostolic Alexander Scott and John Murdoch.

If St Andrew's was built by Alexander Scott for immigrant highland Catholics around 1815, St Mary's was very much the work, a generation later, of the Irish immigrant community who had been driven to these shores by famine in their native land.

This church contains also other tombs, of 13 priests whose early deaths remind us of the poverty and lack of public hygiene which were rife in this mushrooming city of the early industrial revolution.

The advent of these immigrants saw the revival of the Catholic Church not only in Glasgow and the west of Scotland, but throughout the country. It is good that we should remember them here, for we owe a considerable debt of gratitude to them.

We hold in our prayers those who are presently suffering in Ireland on account of a number of scandals which have come to light and which have caused deep distress to all affected and besmirched the good name of both the nation and the Church.

Recently the Scottish bishops visited Rome on their five yearly *ad limina* visit. We were received very graciously by the Holy Father. On Tuesday of this week we had confirmation of a visit later this year by Pope Benedict to Britain. We are proud that he will be welcomed to the country by her Majesty the Queen at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, before coming here to Glasgow to

celebrate Mass where his predecessor, the Venerable Pope John Paul II offered Mass for Scots Catholics in the summer of 1982. Those of us who were already bishops at that time had the joy of concelebrating Mass with him on a glorious and sunny day in the Pentecost season of the Church's calendar.

We may find that when the Holy Father visits us in September the description of our country as a "land of mists and mellow fruitfulness" is more apt, but whatever the weather the welcome for him will be warm!

I grew up where the magnificent ruins of Elgin Cathedral and the surviving names of older streets bore witness to my birthplace's historic past as a religious centre. I attended primary school adjacent to a delapidated late medieval Franciscan Friary, and went on picnics to the empty cloisters of a former benedictine Priory. Even though by the generosity of a Marquis of Bute the former was restored as a Convent of Mercy and the latter, since my boyhood, as the home of a thriving Benedictine religious community, my personal reminiscences paint a picture of the effects of the reformation in our country, the 450th anniversary of which is being marked this year.

The date is actually that of the Reformation Parliament 1560, which banned the Mass, prohibited recourse to Rome and published a new profession of faith reflecting the teaching of the reformers and satisfying their political supporters. It released a wave of violence on persons and property.

It is true there was need of reform throughout the Church. But it is sad and ironic that this reformation parliament met as the great Council of Trent was reaching its conclusions, by which the Catholic Church all over the world was reformed from within. Unfortunately it was all too late for the Scottish Church whose own bishops, most of them in effect the nominees of the crown, recognised the parlous spiritual state of the nation.

If there has been hesitation about marking this anniversary, it is because a different spirit blows in our land today, an irenic spirit manifested above all in the ecumenical movement which, among the churches of the reform, takes its origin from the great Missionary Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh, the centenary of which is to be celebrated this year with the participation of the Catholic Church. It was at that conference that a recognition arose that the spread of the Gospel in many mission lands, opened up in the wake of colonial expansion, was impeded by divisions among Christians.

As Pope Benedict put it so powerfully when he met the Bishops of Scotland in February: "The Church in your country, like many in Northern Europe, has suffered the tragedy of division. It is sobering to recall the great rupture with Scotland's Catholic past that occurred four hundred and fifty years ago. I give thanks to God for the progress that has been made in healing the wounds that were the legacy of that period."

"No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before," says the prophet Isaiah in one of the readings set for this Sunday (year 3).

“See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light; can you not see it?”

While we may therefore confidently look forward in God’s good time to the healing of that “rupture” in the body of Christ’s disciples, there are many of us who have the fear of another rupture, a more fundamental rupture even than that of the reformation. I am referring to attempts to eliminate the voice of faith from public discourse, in other words a rupture between the church, faith communities and the world of politics and public policy.

The Cardinal and my fellow bishops have commented vigorously on this rupture, outlining the social and cultural changes, responsibility for some of which we would lay at the feet of successive governments which have turned a deaf ear to the warnings of the Church.

I am thinking of such areas as the breakdown in marriage and family life; the ever increasing statistic of abortion; growing rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; the incidence of drug addiction and alcoholism – again most worryingly affecting the young; a form of social engineering which virtually equates civil partnerships with marriage; insufficiently restrained bio-technical research; proposals for physician-assisted suicide and the decriminalising of those prepared to assist the suicidal; inadequate support for the hospice movement; the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers and immigrants simply wishing to improve their lot in life; and the disproportionate spending on the Trident programme and the continued exporting of weapons of war. All of these issues carry an ethical question.

The Church may not be as qualified to speak on economic matters, certainly when it comes to the determining of the appropriate policies for dealing with the recession, but there is a corpus of Catholic Social Teaching which does not hesitate to address also such issues for the common good.

It would be wrong to blame politicians only, since in so many of these areas they are perhaps following rather than leading public opinion. But with a general election looming we, like all other citizens, have the right to express our views. As members of the Church we legitimately expect that her corporate voice be heard, given her long experience of working to the benefit of society. The Church, said the late Holy Father, the Venerable John Paul II, is “expert in humanity”.

Our brother bishops in England and Wales made many of these points in their recent document “Choosing the Common Good” in which they call for the rediscovery of the concept of virtue in public life.

They state: “The restoration of trust in institutions, whether in politics or in business, places a particular responsibility on those in leadership roles. They set the tone and help shape the culture of the institutions they lead ... this demands the cultivation of moral character, the development of habits of behaviour which reflect a real respect for others and a desire to do good. It requires in fact the practice of virtue.”

And this is as true of politicians as it is of Church leaders and others who have the privileged task in whatever professional field, of heading the great institutions of society.

We need to praise integrity where we see it, and also acknowledge the courage of politicians who do raise their voices in defence of the Church's role and who promote publicly, despite secularist criticism, the fundamental place of marriage and the family and the general duty of citizens to care for one another, physically, socially and spiritually.

The Church is the repository of the most fundamental values of our civilisation and deserves recognition as an instrument of societal cohesion. Its voice is not that of a pressure group, one among many, but rather that of a teacher whose lessons have been honed by millennial application of the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance in addressing such concepts as the common good, care for the poor and the sick, the education of the young, the dignity of the human person and the equality of all citizens before the law.

Today as we gather to thank God for the election of our Holy Father and pray for his continued health and protection, it is appropriate that we should quote his *ad limina* address: "The Church offers the world a positive and inspiring vision of human life, the beauty of marriage and the joy of parenthood. It is rooted in God's infinite, transforming and ennobling love for all of us which opens our eyes to recognise and love his image in our neighbour (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 10-11 *et passim*)."

The Holy Father continued: "Be sure to present this teaching in such a way that it is recognised for the message of hope that it is. All too often the Church's doctrine is perceived as a series of prohibitions and retrograde positions, whereas the reality, as we know, is that it is creative and life-giving, and it is directed towards the fullest possible realisation of the great potential for good and happiness that God has implanted within every one of us."

It is that potential for good which our political leaders must identify and release.

The Prophet Ezekiel, set down in a valley full of bones, heard the voice of the Lord: "'Son of man, can these bones live?' (Ezekiel said) 'You know, Lord,'" The Lord replied: "Prophecy over these bones, say 'dry bones hear the word of the Lord.'" (Ezekiel 37: 3,4)

Our Gospel today tells the story of the raising of Lazarus. That story is also allegorical. Jesus raises a dead man to life...

In response to Martha's reproach Jesus replies: "Your brother will rise again... If anyone believes in me, even though he dies, He will live."

"The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bands of stuff and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them: 'Unbind him, let him go free'"

Dry bones being re-fleshed; a moribund body revived; what is it to be?

Is it a Church needing to be set free to live fully according to its principles, permitted to inspire the body politic? Or is it the body-politic, bound with “bands of stuff” and “a cloth around its face” constrained by political dogma and unable “to see life whole”?

Perhaps both ... Jesus says: ‘Unbind them. Let them go free!’