

Mass for the Irish Community

March 13 2010

St Mary's Pro Cathedral, Calton

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last year, at the inaugural Mass for the Irish community, I remember being very struck by the importance the organisers attached to having that celebration in the Cathedral, in a sense at the very heart of the diocesan Church.

I had thought to offer the Mass in St Patrick's in Anderston, the church dedicated to Ireland's patron, but was told politely and graciously that the people would prefer to come together in the Cathedral, around the bishop to offer thanks to God, and prayers for Ireland and her sons and daughters spread over the globe. It was a request I was delighted to grant.

Today we gather again in a Cathedral of a different kind ... a pro-cathedral. That will be a term familiar to many of you due to the designation of the pro-cathedral in Dublin.

You are well aware, I am sure, that our own Cathedral of St Andrew is closed currently for renovation and so it is that St Mary's has been designated Pro-Cathedral for this period.

But there is a happy coincidence in all of this, for it means that we are able to come together in the cathedral church, but also in a church which is in a sense the spiritual heart of Glasgow's Irish diaspora.

It is salutary to remember that the Glasgow we know today as a bustling metropolis, is of relatively recent origin. Between 1750 and 1821 Glasgow's population exploded from just under 32,000 to almost 150,000 people.

In the period following, it is estimated that as many as 40,000 Catholic Irish men and women arrived in a single year at the time of the Great Famine, necessitating the opening of a second Catholic place of worship in Glasgow ... thus was born St Mary's, opened in 1842.

And so it was to this building that your forebears flocked in their tens of thousands in the period following the great famine, making it one of the busiest and best-loved churches in Scotland.

This place is of course known for another event which happened in the hall behind the church around 50 years after the church opened, when Brother Walfrid, a Marist brother from Sligo, and headmaster of St Mary's School thought to call a meeting with a group of men of the parish to help alleviate the poverty of the Irish immigrant families who populated the surrounding area in such numbers.

The aim of the charity was, while raising funds, to provide also a social outlet for the men of the area. So it was that Celtic Football Club came into being in 1888. I would not dare tell you what history was to follow, for I suspect you know rather more about it than me!

And so, in a sense I think we can all feel as though we are on home soil here in St Mary's today ... I as bishop in my pro-Cathedral, and you as proud Irish men and women in the church that served as the spiritual epicenter of your community in its foundational years.

But today we gather not only to recall the past and celebrate our heritage. We gather also to reflect on our role in today's society, not just as an Irish community but as an Irish Catholic community.

And for inspiration I need look no further than our Holy Father the Pope, who just last month received the bishops of Scotland in audience.

On that occasion he set out a challenge for us, which I in turn offer to you ...

He said: "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 recognize and love his image in our neighbour. Be sure to present this teaching in such a way that it is recognized 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 realization of the great potential for good and for happiness that God has implanted within every one of us."

What a refreshing reminder to all of us, at a time when some would prefer to paint the Catholic Church as an outmoded authoritarian institution.

On this St Patrick's day the words of the old hymn come readily to mind ... each verse of Hail Glorious St Patrick is redolent with imagery, nostalgia and patriotism.

But one in particular stands out, and, it seems to me, represents a poetic way of putting the Holy Father's challenge to us ...

*In the war against sin, in the fight for the faith,
Dear saint, may thy children resist unto death;
May their strength be in meekness, in penance and prayer,
Their banner the cross which they glory to bear.*

There is the challenge of today ... to be humble yet strong, faithful to the sacraments, to be people of prayer ...

That recipe for fidelity and happiness is the same for us at the start of the 21st century as it was for our forebears in the middle of the 19th, and the same too as it was for the first apostle of the Irish in the fifth century.

Let those hallmarks be the distinguishing feature of the Glasgow Irish today and for the years to come ... a humble people, a faithful people, a prayerful people.

In that way we will be faithful to those words we sing with such pride today:

*Thy people, now exiles on many a shore,
Shall love and revere thee till time be no more;
And the fire thou hast kindled shall ever burn bright,
Its warmth undiminished, undying its light.*

Amen