



**HOMILY PREACHED BY
MOST REVEREND MARIO JOSEPH CONTI
ARCHBISHOP OF GLASGOW
FEAST OF THE CHAIR OF ST PETER
22ND FEBRUARY 2002**

Dear Brothers and Sister in Christ

I celebrate with you today my installation as your Archbishop, and I do so on the feast of the Chair of St. Peter, an appropriate day for the Archdiocese of Glasgow which is proud to carry the historic title of *Specialis Filia Romanae Ecclesiae* – the special daughter of the Roman Church.

This ancient feast stands as a reminder to us of our living links of faith with St. Peter and the Apostles, and their successors, the Pope and bishops.

It was natural that I should look to St. Peter to find a word of direction and encouragement, and I found it in the first of his two letters contained in the canon of scripture: *You are a chosen race, he says, a community of priest-kings, a consecrated nation, a people God has made his own to proclaim his wonders.* (1 Peter 2,9)

St. Peter urges us to live in this present world, in the midst of its society, in such a way as to confound all those who may criticize our way of life, or disparage our message:

"For the Lord's sake, respect all human authority: the king as chief authority, the governors as sent by him to punish evildoers and to encourage those who do good. And God wants you to do good so that you may silence those fools who ignorantly criticize you. Behave as free people but do not speak of freedom as a licence for vice; you are free men and God's servants. Reverence each person, love your brothers and sisters, fear God and show respect to the emperor."

(1 Peter 2: 13-17)

I used this passage at last night's installation in order to express my hope that the Catholic Church in Glasgow may continue to influence from within the society of which it is part, and to seek from all those representing its various strands, their co-operation, in response to the hand of friendship extended to them.

This letter deserves our attention since it is a sort of blueprint for the Christian life left to us by the first Pope. It is an active plan of life, involving setting proper priorities, serving the common good, engaging in the Apostolate, bearing witness bravely, and building up the Kingdom of God in our world.

For the Christians of Glasgow, especially for laymen and women, this is a new and challenging task. We know it is no longer possible to leave the work of the Church to the clergy, to the religious, to the hierarchy, and this impossibility is not due simply to a reduction in the number of priests, but to a better understanding of the role of the laity, and consequently of a better understanding of the role of the ministerial priesthood.

"The laity", said the Second Vatican Council, "exercise a genuine apostolate by their activity in bringing the gospel and holiness to men (and women) and in penetrating and perfecting the temporal sphere of things through the spirit of the gospel. In this way, their temporal activity can openly bear witness to Christ and promote the salvation of mankind. Since it is proper to the layman's state in life for him to spend his days in the midst of the world and in secular transactions, he is called by God to burn with the Spirit of Christ and to exercise his apostolate in the world as a kind of leaven." (decree on the Apostolate of the Laity)

One of the most significant witnesses, and the one perhaps needed above all in our day, is that of conjugal fidelity, and parental love. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said of the apostolate of married persons and of families that it was: "Of unique importance both for the Church and civil society". They recalled that "the Creator of all things established the conjugal partnership as the beginning and basis of human society and, by His grace, has made it a great mystery of Christ and the Church".

We must do all we can to support marriage and the family. That will undoubtedly be one of my main priorities.

It is now some 35 years since the Second Vatican Council. The need expressed then has become ever more pressing because of the progressive secularization of our society, and its increasing reluctance to heed the official voice of the Church.

It is not as if that voice has not been heard. It has reverberated from this very place, through the powerful words and witness of my predecessor of happy memory. However words will only be heeded if those who speak can back them, not only with the example of their own lives, but the lives of the community they lead.

Today therefore the need is greater than ever for each man and woman, baptized into the Church, to live a life of holiness, of commitment, entering into dialogue with the men and women of our time, offering to all the gifts of wisdom of the Catholic Church, while at the same time respecting the sanctuary of another's conscience.

We have natural allies in this task, and I refer of course to our fellow Christians of other traditions. Our Holy Father has taught us to respect also the members of other great world religions, an increasing number of whom are found in our own city, and indeed in our own schools.

It was in this very city, at Bellahouston, in 1982 that our Holy Father invited us all to walk together "hand in hand". It is my intention as your bishop to do all I can to increase ecumenical understanding, friendship, and co-operation. What we have in view is the organic unity of the Church, a unity which Christ himself gave us as the necessary sign "that all men may believe". Indeed that unity was the "glory" that he offered to his Apostles at the Last Supper as the fruit of his own passion, death and resurrection. St. John reminds us that Jesus died "to gather into one the scattered children of God". (John 11, 51)

"This is your calling," says St. Peter: "Remember Christ who suffered for you leaving you an example so that you may follow in his way. He did not return insult for insult and, when suffering, he did not curse but put himself in the hands of God who judges justly. He went to the cross burdened with our sins so that we might die to sin and live an upright life, for by his wounds you have been healed. You were like stray sheep, but you have come back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls". (1 Peter, 2, 21-25).

It is by that humility and forbearance that we will help to overcome any residual sectarianism and bigotry which unfortunately has all too often marred the face of this great city. It will not be by the dismantling of our Catholic schools that bigotry will be overcome, but by learning in them that necessary attitude of respect and tolerance which I am certain our teachers already aim to instill in the minds and hearts of our youngsters.

You can depend on me to defend this invaluable legacy of our forebears, and to strive to ensure the highest quality of teaching and faith practice in them.

St. Peter has a message also for the shepherds: "Shepherd the flock which God has entrusted to you, guarding it not out of obligation but willingly for God's sake; not as one looking for a reward but with a generous heart; do not lord it over those in your care, rather be an example to your flock. Then, when the Chief Shepherd appears you will be given a crown of unfading glory." (Ibid 5, 1-4)

I take those words to heart myself.

The task of shepherding is however a shared one, and I look forward with pleasure and great expectation to meeting you my fellow shepherds, and brother priests at the earliest opportunity so that we can pray and plan together how best we can care for the lovely people committed to our charge. Without you I can do nothing. Together we can do a very great deal.

Finally I address the religious to whom we, both clergy and laity, turn for inspiration and support, the inspiration of lives totally dedicated to Christ, and the support of prayers offered constantly at the heart of the Church: "This Sacred Synod", said the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, "has high regard for the character of (your) life – virginal, poor, and obedient – of which Christ the Lord himself is the model. The Council places steady hope in the immense fruitfulness of (your) labours, both the unseen ones and the obvious". How rich this Archdiocese is with religious congregations of both men and women.

Glasgow is home also to new institutes and movements which are a feature of our time, a sign of the seasonal fruitfulness of the Church, which under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit provides for each generation's particular needs. My predecessor signally recognized this when he established as an Archdiocesan Congregation, the Sisters of the Gospel of Life, whose work I will support as best I can.

Those among you who are now retired from the active apostolate, must know that the very dedication of your lives, is itself an inspiration to us and a reminder of the transcendent values of God's Kingdom.

Our faith that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church is bolstered by our confidence in the prayers of the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, under whose mantle I place myself at the beginning of my ministry as your Archbishop, and to whom I commend this Church of her son our Lord Jesus Christ to whom be glory and honour for ever and ever.

Amen.

