

MASS OF THE OILS

Tuesday March 30th

I and my brother bishops from England and Wales spent the last week of January and the first week of February in Rome. We were there for our Ad Limina visit, an occasion when every five years we present a report to the Holy See on what has been recently happening in our dioceses. The meetings with the various Congregations and Councils of the Holy See were important, but the highlight has to be the time spent collectively and individually with Pope Benedict.

To meet with him personally is to reinforce that sense of communion between ourselves and the Holy Father which is at the heart of being Catholic. He is gentle, courteous and polite – not a bit as he is sometimes portrayed by a hostile Press. He listened intently to what I had to say about the diocese and about all that we are trying to do and he certainly confirmed me, his brother bishop, in my faith and ministry.

Our Mass today comes in the middle of the Year of the Priest, an important time of work and prayer for vocations. In many ways, the climax of the year will be celebrated here in the Cathedral on July 24th when James McAuley and Phil Harris are to be ordained to the priesthood and anointed with the Oil of Chrism, shortly to be consecrated. I hope that many of you will celebrate with me on that day.

Today's readings are rightly interpreted as referring to the ordained ministry, though, clearly, not exclusively so. When Isaiah writes that "you will be named priests of the Lord, they will call you ministers of God", he is surely referring to the whole body of the priestly people, who form God's people and the community of the disciples of Christ.

But let the ordained ministry hold pride of place this morning. When he spoke to us, Pope Benedict exhorted us to be "close to your priests and rekindle their sense of the enormous privilege and joy of standing among God's people as *alter Christus*." I hope to be able to do that for you today. Speaking of his forthcoming visit to us, he reminded us that, in beatifying Cardinal John Henry Newman, he would be beatifying not just a saintly and scholarly man, but also a priest who served for many years as a much loved parish priest in one of Birmingham's poorer areas, The Holy Father spoke of him as a wonderful example of the irreplaceable role played by the priest in the life of the Church. I can only echo that.

In speaking with Pope Benedict with pride about the life of the diocese, as evidenced through the growing implementation of the Pastoral Plan, I could not resist telling him of the extraordinary generosity and faith in the future of the diocese, shown by priests, deacons and people alike in the pledges that have been

made to the *Living Our Faith* campaign so far, even though we still have some way to go before we reach our ultimate target. It is entirely appropriate that, in this Year of the Priest, the first application of some of that new money should go to establish and properly resource a Vocations Promoter. Fr Mark Hogan has agreed to take on this responsibility and hopefully, with your prayers and support, his efforts and those of the team he will be forming, will bear fruit in encouraging vocations to the ordained ministry.

But let me speak again of the Pastoral Plan. It has no meaning and purpose if all it does nothing more than simply put our own diocesan house in order. That's part of the purpose of the restructuring that is taking place, but only so that we can more effectively face up to and live with the stark imperative of today's Gospel. Christ is the anointed one and he invites us, who are his disciples, to share in his anointing together with all the consequences that flow from it.

As individuals and as a diocese, we have to bring good news to the poor. This is not just an idea to which we pay lip service. It means an option for the poor, coming to terms with the genuine needs of those numerous pockets of poverty in the diocese. Real poverty – and there's plenty of it around – has to be one of our major concerns. So, too, is the plight of so many of our brothers and sisters, trapped or imprisoned physically or spiritually in a labyrinth of laws and regulations, or by misguided attempts to legislate for equality at the expense of legitimate human rights. We have to live and cope with the consequences of abuse of all kinds. This is the real world in which we proclaim the Gospel. Opponents accuse us of discrimination and of destroying personal freedom, but we must stay true and faithful to the Gospel because, as Pope Benedict tells us, "fidelity to the Gospel in no way restricts the freedom of others – on the contrary, it serves their freedom by offering them the truth." That truth is good news for us and for all.

Bringing that good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives, new sight to the blind and setting free those who are downtrodden by today's world of legislation and regulation: all these works, undertaken by those anointed by the Spirit – us, Christ's disciples – have to be our agenda if we are to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Everything we do in the diocese has to be grounded in today's Gospel. But this calls for brave and generous leadership. I know that this is being given by your priests and deacons, my brothers in faith and ministry, and my current series of visits to the leadership groups of the Pastoral Areas, clearly confirms this. But those, on whom the burden falls, need your continued support and encouragement. Cherish, therefore, your priests and deacons as beloved brothers, tell them how much you treasure what they do for the Lord and for you and pray for all of us today as we renew our commitments to serve the Lord and you. Pray that we will always be living signs of Christ in your midst.