

Mass of Thanksgiving for Bishop Crispian Hollis to mark his 75th Birthday

Cathedral Church of St John, Portsmouth Homily given by Monsignor Nicholas France, Provost of the Cathedral Chapter

19 November 2011

*“Glory to him whose power, working in us,
can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine;
glory be to him from generation to generation
in the church and in Christ Jesus”*
(Eph 3.21)

It was once the custom to begin a sermon or homily with a quotation from Scripture. I have done so today, taking a sentence from the second reading of this Mass, for it sums up the purpose of our celebration and, more significantly, the role of the Holy Spirit in working through Bishop Crispian during these past seventy-five years to achieve infinitely more than he could have asked or imagined.

In many ways we are here, not to say “thank you” to Bishop Crispian, but to thank God for the long life of our Bishop, especially for the twenty-three years during which he has led us in the steps of the Good Shepherd. And with this prayer of thanksgiving we should include the clergy and people, living and dead, who during this time have united themselves under the leadership of their Bishop in building up the kingdom of God in our diocesan Church of Portsmouth. We also give thanks for the Bishop’s recovery from his recent operation and that he is well enough to lead our liturgy today. We pray that the healing process in him will continue.

This is not a funeral, nor am I preaching a panegyric. All our previous bishops, except one who became an archbishop elsewhere, have died in office. Bishop Crispian did say to some of us last year that it would have been tidier for the diocese, in having a clean break while preparing for his successor, if he had died in office, to which we replied that we fully agreed!

However, instead of the inevitable drama of a funeral exit, with burial in the newly created crypt before the altar of this church, we are experiencing a more ordered and modest handover, from one Bishop to his successor, from one generation to the next. Instead of a death in a blaze of glory and fulsome obituaries, we shall witness the handing on of the baton, in the form of the crozier, from one Bishop to another in seamless continuity. And while our new chief pastor takes possession of Bishop’s House, Bishop Crispian will humbly get into his car and drive away by himself to his retirement cottage in that Somerset village, which was once his childhood home. Although he says he is looking forward to that day, I am sure there will inevitably be for him, and for ourselves, some real sense of bereavement.

At an ordination or installation of a bishop promises are made. The expectations of a diocese are usually high, although often unrealistic. Only time will provide the answer. And, then frequently, it will be overlooked that a bishop is a human being, not Superman.

When Bishop Crispian was installed as the seventh Bishop of Portsmouth in January 1989, I had been commissioned to write the introduction to the Order of Service for the Mass that day. Recently I was shown a copy of what I had long forgotten I had written. I believe I may yet have to compose another for our next bishop's ordination or installation! Twenty-three years ago I wrote of how proud we were to be given a pastor of such proven worth. I gave a brief biography of Roger Francis Crispian Hollis, born in the West Country of convert parents, educated by the Jesuits at Stonyhurst, followed by national service with military action in Malaya, before university at Oxford, subsequently going to the English College in Rome, where he was ordained priest in 1965. After a very short curacy, Father Hollis became a university chaplain, later Religious Adviser to the BBC, before a spell as vicar general of his home diocese of Clifton, to which he will be returning on retirement. After only 18 months as an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Birmingham, he came to Portsmouth as our bishop.

In my introduction to the installation rite all those years ago, I wrote of how in our diocese we are well used to blending the charisms of our bishops with the good spirit and traditions of our diocese, hopeful that both bishop and diocese will learn from each other and establish together a fruitful marriage. Surely, that expectation has been fulfilled. These past years have not only seen a strong relationship forged between the Bishop and his people, but one fruitful in new life, in new ways of being church, in new ways of being parish, and in new ways of sharing faith.

During the Hollis years, there has been both consolidation and development in many areas of diocesan life. In our schools, there has been a willingness to seize opportunities offered by changing governments, while holding fast to basic Catholic values. In the training of seminarians and in the on-going formation of clergy and laity many new initiatives have been adopted, some more workable than others. In missionary outreach, particularly in our sister diocese of Bamenda in Cameroon, and in overseas development projects through Cafod, Bishop Crispian has inspired parishes and people to be outgoing in their concern for their neighbours beyond Europe. And within our diocese we have welcomed and accepted the gifts of those from other cultures and countries which now enrich our congregations. I am sure the Bishop will cherish in his memory the annual Rite of Election each Lent, when in a full cathedral he welcomed those preparing for baptism or reception into full communion with the Catholic Church at Easter.

Inevitably, over the years there have been disappointments for the Bishop and for all of us, as Jesus warned his apostles there would be. I am thinking in particular of the sad loss of L S U College in Southampton, the painful if necessary closure of some church buildings and the decline in the number of people attending Sunday Mass on a regular basis, as is revealed in the Diocesan statistics. However, as the Lord reminds us in his parables, we can but sow the seed. He alone is the harvester.

Any relationship takes two to make it work. It is the same in a diocese. A Bishop can only lead if he is able to persuade people to follow him. Bishop Crispian's form of leadership has not normally been top-down, for he has preferred to encourage people to discover for themselves the way ahead for the church in our diocese. This was particularly manifest in the preparation for the Diocesan Pastoral Assembly, held in Reading in the summer of 2005. It was one of the highlights of the Bishop's years among us. From this assembly came the Diocesan Pastoral Plan "Go out and bear fruit" which has been, and I pray still will be, the vision document for the development of our diocese in the years to

come. In addition, wishing to collaborate pastorally with both laity and clergy, the Bishop entrusted the Diocesan Pastoral Council with much responsibility in the formation and implementation of his pastoral policies. He summed up his own vision for the revitalisation of our church in the words 'Communion and Mission'

For many a bishop there is a tension between the pastoral and administrative demands made upon him. Bishop Crispian has over the years developed a very effective Curia as his administration, realising that to be a good pastor you have also to be a good administrator, while not trying to do it all oneself. In pastoral and liturgical formation, in youth ministry, in the direction of schools, in promoting stewardship, and in developing spirituality, in IT and communications, he has been well served, and so has the diocese, by a dedicated team which has provided the "pastoral arms" of the Bishop in reaching out across the diocese to our parishes. Bishop Crispian also created over the years an excellent department for finance and church property and an able body of diocesan trustees, leading to an appeal for a Priests' Retirement Fund, to which the people of the diocese readily contributed, and more recently the bold appeal, "Living Our Faith", which will have made a lasting contribution to the sound financial future of our diocese. I must also acknowledge the foresight of our bishop in investing in both personnel and resources to ensure that our diocese is second to none in its Safeguarding Commission.

In his pastoral care of the diocese, I know the Bishop would also like to pay tribute to the vicars general and his devoted chancellor, and I also include his faithful secretary, Yvonne, who have collaborated with him over the years, together with the deans of his cathedral, especially Canon David Hopgood, his friend and companion in Bishop's House these past fourteen years. And it is Canon Hopgood who has been responsible for the restoration and beautifying of this cathedral church, of which I know Bishop Crispian is so proud. This is truly a house of prayer and a gate to heaven. It has been here that the Bishop has over the years, for so many different occasions, celebrated the holy liturgy, which he has always carried out with true devotion.

In ecumenical and civic relationships Bishop Crispian has led us boldly. In the first place, he was a founder member of Churches Together in Hampshire, in Berkshire and in other areas of our diocese. Secondly, he has been a close collaborator for the common good with other church leaders, in particular Bishop Michael Scott-Joynt of Winchester, who has also recently retired, yet, happily, is with us here today. We are equally delighted that the Anglican Bishop of Portsmouth, Christopher Foster, has also kindly joined us for this mass. In Portsmouth the civic support our Bishop has given to this two cathedral Naval city, not least its football team, has been recognised by the renaming of Edinburgh Road outside his house as Bishop Crispian Way.

I have spoken about the bishop's relationship with the people of the diocese. But what about his relationship with his clergy? It has been said by a Catholic psychologist that celibate Catholic priests expect too much from their relationship with their bishop, whom they sometimes assume to be more than their spiritual father in God. He said that priests seem to relate to their bishop as a father figure in different ways. Some approach him with an almost childlike dependency. Others are more adolescent, more argumentative, contrary and at times hurtful in what they say or do in gestures of independence. While a further group of clergy are more adult and mature, treating their bishop with respect and confidence, as grown up sons might relate to their father. While bishops are often amused, at least at first, by the antics of their rebellious sons, they can also be

disappointed and hurt when trust given has not been returned. A bishop's gold mitre can become a crown of thorns when a priest refuses to participate in diocesan life and meetings or, more especially, when a priest gives up his ministry and turns his back on his vocation. For Bishop Crispian, I am sure, the most painful issue he has had to deal with has been the criminal conviction of some of his priests for child abuse, real or virtual, while his heart has gone out with profound sincerity to the victims who have suffered from the betrayal of their trust in their onetime pastors. On a happier note, I should record the generous collaboration with their Bishop of the many permanent deacons he has ordained during his episcopate. Perhaps his experience of these married men, together with their wives and families, has led Bishop Crispian to support the ordaining of married men to the priesthood, beyond the limitations that have only allowed him to ordain married former Anglican clergy as Catholic priests.

A bishop has a role, wider than his diocese alone, for, as a member of the College of Bishops, he shares in the episcopate of the whole Catholic world. For this reason Bishop Crispian has contributed to the work of the Bishops' Conference in England in the field of communications, education and in European affairs. With this wider vision of his role in the Church, our Bishop has not always been uncritical of the Roman Curia and some of what he considers the more regressive responses of the Vatican in recent times to current issues.

In our first reading today Jeremiah spoke of his trepidation in responding to the call of God, first given him in his mother's womb, that he might be a prophet to the nations. To be a bishop today is to be a prophet of God's holy word in a secular society, while having a vision that can look beyond the immediate horizon. Yet whatever his age, that sense of trepidation must always remain with a bishop in all that he has to do and say and in the responsibilities he has to carry, anxious that he be acceptable to the Lord. I believe that beneath Bishop Crispian's cool and detached manner this natural trepidation has remained. Yet in his trust in the Lord, fortified daily in his hour of silent prayer each early morning, he has been given the courage to do whatever has been required of him. His prayerful example, seeking the face of Christ, as the first priority for all of us, will be one of his abiding gifts to the people of this diocese. In prayer Christ has called him friend, not servant. And in prayer Bishop Crispian has united himself with his diocesan Church, knowing that we can only be fruitful when together we are true branches of the one vine, which is Christ. "Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more we can ask or imagine; Glory be to him from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen"