

Homily for the Celebration of Holy Mass to mark the Silver Jubilee of Ordination to the Diaconate of the Reverend Iain MacFirbhisigh on Friday, 22 June 2018 in the Church of St Mary & St Peter, Jersey.

It is either very trusting or perhaps foolhardy of Iain to invite me to give the homily this evening, knowing that both he and I have been rehearsing over the years what we would say in a eulogy if either of us died first. We are still waiting. But in the meantime, he has asked me to speak to the readings from Scripture he has chosen for this evening. And that is serious stuff, especially as we have just heard the challenge which Jesus gave to his disciples on the night before he died. Those disciples would develop into the bishops, priests and deacons of our present age. In washing their smelly feet, Jesus gave them an example of practical charity, after which he said to them: 'I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you'.

As so often can happen, that radical example of loving service was ritualised, not only within the church, but even by royalty as, for example, in the Royal Maundy ritual which the monarch still carries out, giving a pouch of money to a selected group of worthies, without having to get on her ancient knees to wash their feet, as did happen in Catholic England during the Middle Ages.

Yes, even the role of deacons, the diaconate, once an active ministry in the early church, later became a liturgical office, exercised only at Mass, even by priests dressed up as deacons.

In our own time, with the expansion of the Ministry of Deacon as a sacramental ministry in its own right, we've come to appreciate the significance of this role in the church's outreach to the poor, the marginalised, the sick and the bereaved. I'm glad to say that these are all pastoral concerns to which Deacon Iain has been fully committed, especially in the years since he has been retired from his professional work.

However it is also true that Iain has fully participated in the worship life of the Catholic Church in Jersey, officiating at the baptisms, weddings and funerals he has conducted and in all the pastoral preparation involved in the celebration of these services. He has even got his favourite families that produce brides for him to marry. And, at the other end of life, Iain carries out a thriving funeral industry. Like our local Funeral Directors he has certain families who claim him as their own. So they always turn to him in their hour of need whatever their church affiliation. Such families always appear to relish the fuller length of service that Iain offers, along with all the trimmings, which they don't receive from us priests.

While this church role, which Iain exercises when he is dressed up, is important, his ministry is even more important when he is un-dressed, if you catch my meaning.

The Society of St Vincent De Paul was known and much valued in Jersey when I first came here. However, faithful to the gospel, it sometimes hid its light under a bushel. That became impossible when Deacon Iain became involved, as he understood it as a very hands-on public form of ministry that was very appropriate to his vocation. Yes, it is always difficult to balance what Jesus says about being modest and self-effacing with being also being a light for others. So it has taken time for the SVP to become better known especially when it sometimes saw its sister organisations, like the excellent Grace Trust, being consulted by the States or whatever, when the SVP was less well-known in official quarters.

For the same reasons, Deacon Iain saw opportunities opening up when he joined me in bringing the international Catholic Social Action Charity, Caritas, to Jersey. As a result, we were able to develop what is now well known across the island as Caritas Jersey, which was first launched publicly at the end of the all Island Parish Mission, which itself owed much to Iain's initiative and promotion. Iain has been able to bridge the work of Caritas Jersey with that of the Society of St Vincent De Paul to ensure their harmonious collaboration.

Bishop Crispian once said in my hearing about someone that I was working with in Southampton, at times in a stressed relationship, that "we both deserved each other". That saying has stayed with me, particularly in my relationship with Iain which has been both challenging and rewarding. And we always say challenging when we mean that we don't always agree with each other, yet, often out of our different opinions on an issue there evolves a very satisfactory outcome.

So, it was with the all Island Parish Mission, which I knew would be both a headache to organise and a blessing to experience. Iain plunged into its organisation and it proved a great success insofar as one can measure the activity of the Holy Spirit among us.

Often, Iain has been my trouble-shooter, tackling difficult issues from which I shied. I remember coming back from my sabbatical in California 10 years ago, knowing that I had in January to launch the Diocesan Appeal 'Living our Faith'. I wondered how I would get it off the ground, finding a team to work with me to achieve this. I need not have been anxious, as Iain seized the challenge and secured a number of excellent people to form a fundraising team, which enabled us to raise or have pledged over £600,000 for diocesan projects.

Thank you, Iain for that and for other things like developing Stewardship groups, taking seriously, as you did, all that we learned on our diocesan paid trip to Chicago some years ago for the Stewardship Conference.

Iain has been great at drumming up support and organising participation for such celebrations as St Patrick's Day, where he can fill this church with a variety of people attached or semi-detached to our normal worshipping communities. Aided by his obscure surname Iain never lets us forget that he is a true son of Ireland. However, at the same time, he is clearly a very loyal and committed Jerseyman.

Iain is a man on a journey of faith, which is sometimes expressed through real journeys in the pilgrimages he has taken to the Holy land, to Rome and to Lourdes. Despite his disability he has managed to be an enthusiastic leader of such pilgrimages, which have enriched the life and faith of many Jersey folk and even a few from Guernsey.

At this point I should acknowledge that in the preparation of pilgrimages, as in so much of the work in which Iain is engaged, there stands behind him a remarkable woman, his devoted wife, Cheryl. Although we speak of the permanent diaconate, we also need acknowledge that in most cases it is the married diaconate which has enriched the Church both with an insight into the possibility of a married priesthood, but, more importantly, manifests for us now an experience of the diaconate as shared by a man with his wife in a common ministry of service. For if the Deacon is the man who washes feet, it is the wife who holds the jug of water and the bowl for him to do this. Hers is sometimes a more difficult role. Although in some cases deacons' wives appear to wear the stole, Cheryl has given us an example of discrete and loving support, which has enabled Iain to continue his diaconal ministry in sickness and in health. Thank you, Cheryl.

For a man who was once a bus conductor, a bank clerk, a travel agent and the Coordinator of Centre Ville in St Helier, Iain has been really quite religious, really! Yes, he has often put me to shame by his appeal to the Holy Spirit, in prayer, to resolve difficult issues where I was looking for a political or diplomatic solution. Indeed, deep in the bowels of the earth, in the basement of his house, he has a personal study, a snuggery, where he can not only hide from household chores, but spend time in prayer and in thinking up new ideas to inflict on the parish priest. But isn't that the role of deacons?

I remember once in my previous parish, recovering in bed from an operation for a hernia, and laying there thinking up new ideas to inflict on my Bishop. I believe I irritated him by writing a long letter about the need for us to coordinate the work of the deans in our diocese, as his local leaders and stakeholders, by having a Meeting of Deans once a term at Bishop's house for him to consult us etc. Surprisingly he did take this up, probably with much muttering. I have often responded in like manner to Iain's bright ideas. I suppose it is an upward spiral that leads deacons to pester the priest, the priest to pester the Bishop, the Bishop to pester the Archbishop, the Archbishop to pester the Pope and the Pope to pester, well, God, I suppose. Life for my successor will be easier, with less diaconal pestering, as Iain has said that he would now be stepping down gradually from his commitments or, did I really hear him say that?

Oh dear, I had better stop soon. I fear I have provided plenty of material for the eulogiser at your funeral, but little by way of commentary on the sacred Scriptures you proposed for this Holy Mass.

In truth, the scriptures speak for you, as you imply, when echoing the words of St Paul, that all you want now is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death”. Surprisingly you admit that you are not yet perfect and that you are still trying to capture the prize for which Christ Jesus captured you. You plan to race to the finish, racing for the prize to which God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus.

And you end by reminding yourself, and reminding us, that “our homeland is in heaven and from heaven comes the saviour we are waiting for, who will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into the copies of his glorious body”. That is your hope, that is your prayer, that is the promise of Jesus Christ to whom in love you have dedicated your life, both at your wedding and at your ordination.