

FEAST DAY MASS OF BLESSED TERESA OF CALCUTTA
ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL, EDINBURGH
HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN
SATURDAY 5 SEPTEMBER 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a great joy being here with you today with so many of our Missionaries of Charity and those who love and revere Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. Among those who have a great respect for Mother Teresa are the Lord and Lady Provost of the City of Edinburgh, who are here with us today, along with Sir Tom and Lady Farmer.

Obviously, this is not the first Mass which I have celebrated with Mother Teresa in mind: I celebrated Mass in our Cathedral on the occasion of her visit to Edinburgh on Sunday 6 June 1993, the Feast of the Blessed Trinity, when we welcomed her here to our Cathedral for the first time; on Monday 15 September 1997, I celebrated Mass here for the happy repose of her soul, following on her death; and then on Saturday 1 November 2003 at our National Shrine at Carfin, I offered a Thanksgiving Mass for the beatification of that saintly nun.

LIFE OF MOTHER TERESA OF CALCUTTA:

Mother Teresa in her own words really sums up the background to her life. She once stated: "By blood, I am Albanian. By citizenship, an Indian. By faith, a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the heart of Jesus".

And I think it is really as a holy person, one beatified by the late Pope John Paul II, and that citizen of the world belonging entirely to the heart of Jesus that we honour her today on her feast day.

Born and brought up in Albania on 26 August 1910, she left home in 1928 to join the Sisters of Loreto in Ireland. Her name in religion was Sister Mary Teresa after St Therese of Lisieux – and in December of that year she departed for India, arriving in Calcutta in 1929, initially teaching in a school for girls where she eventually became the school's principal in 1944.

Mother Teresa received what she named a 'call within a call' while travelling by train from Calcutta to Darjeeling in 1946 for her annual retreat. Mother Teresa believed that Jesus himself was calling her to establish a religious community, Missionaries of Charity, dedicated to the service of the poorest of the poor. Only after some two further years of testing and discernment, did Mother Teresa receive permission to begin this apostolate – and on 17 August 1948 in her now familiar habit, passed through the gates of her beloved Loreto Convent to enter the world of the poor.

Since that time, Mother Teresa has had a tremendous influence, not only on those 'poorest of the poor'; not only on the many thousands of girls and young women who joined the Missionaries of Charity, nor on the men who joined the equivalent religious congregation for them; but on the peoples of the whole world.

So many of us were brought to have greater regard for life in all its aspects through the outstanding example and the words of Mother Teresa.

THREATS TO LIFE AT ITS BEGINNING:

At this present time, we can indeed think of those threats to life: sometimes at its very beginnings and more recently increasing threats to life near its natural end.

Much has been written about the threats to life at its first beginnings, particularly during this past year when there were those commemorations of the **40th anniversary of the passing of the Abortion Act** in our Parliament at Westminster. Those of us who dared to complain at the millions of abortions which have taken place since the passing of that Act, have been pilloried. Those who have protested at the increasing number of abortions and at the ways in which our abortion rate has been increasing, particularly among young and vulnerable girls who so often are virtually forced to have abortions by their parents, are ignored. The statistics continue to rise – and nobody seems to heed the example of someone like Mother Teresa of Calcutta nor indeed the laws of nature nor the laws of our own Church, which indicate that it is patently wrong to kill the unborn in the womb. As Mother Teresa indicated: **“Life is valuable from the first moments of conception”**. And as she said in our Cathedral in 1994: “When you take in that little unborn child, the sick and dying man or woman, you welcome Jesus in” and she went on to add: “It’s a terrible evil if the unborn child is destroyed, unwanted, unloved, uncared for. I want you to know that I love and want that little child. Many people cannot have children, and it would bring them so much joy to have that child to love. If you find someone who has no one to love and care for them, I want them, my Sisters want them”.

THREATS TO LIFE NEAR ITS NATURAL END:

And, of course, we must be increasingly alert and alive to the **threats to life, particularly of the elderly and the critically ill, some near the point of death.**

I am, of course, referring to **euthanasia and assisted suicide**. There is a distinct difference as we recognise two forms: assisted suicide is when a doctor helps a patient to kill himself or herself by prescribing a lethal drug for the patient to take; this become euthanasia when the doctor gives the drug himself – for example by administering a lethal injection.

Across the Parliaments of the United Kingdom, determined attempts are being made to legalise euthanasia. In **2005 Jeremy Purvis MSP sought to introduce a Bill to the Scottish Parliament** that would have allowed doctors in Scotland to assist their patients to commit suicide. The ‘Right to Die for the Terminally Ill’ failed to achieve the support of 18 other MSPs in order to be considered by the Scottish Parliament. Although the Bill only attracted the public support of 7 MSPs, others were privately sympathetic to the proposal.

At **Westminster in 2006**, a more serious attempt was made to legalise euthanasia in England and Wales. The ‘Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill’ Bill, introduced by Lord Joffe, sought to allow a doctor to give a prescription for a lethal dose of drugs to an adult patient who was ‘suffering unbearably’ from a ‘terminal illness’, who had requested such a prescription and who did ‘not lack capacity’ to make such a request.

An organisation called **‘Care not Killing’** worked hard to oppose the Joffe Bill, lobbying Peers and collating a nation-wide petition, signed by over 102,000 people and present to 10 Downing Street on 12 May 2006. The Bill was defeated at its second reading in the House of Lords that same day by 148 to 100 votes.

However, we can be sure that further attempts to legalise euthanasia and physician assisted suicide will be made in our Parliaments. The threat of legally assisted suicide in Scotland is doubly concerning: not only would it endanger Scottish patients, but it would also lead to euthanasia tourism, as it is called, as already happens in Switzerland.

Margo Macdonald has successfully proposed that a bill to introduce assisted suicide and perhaps euthanasia be considered by the Scottish Parliament. It is expected that the bill will be produced in draft form by Christmas. We will then have a real struggle to ensure that our society and our politicians continue to support life and dismiss Margo Macdonald's misguided efforts. The opinion polls show a worrying level of public support for euthanasia and we must take this as our cue to convince our fellow citizens that every life is precious right to its natural end.

I urge you to ask the intercession of Mother Teresa at this critical stage in the life of our country and of other countries in the world. Mother Teresa also stated when she was in our Cathedral in 1994: "It's a terrible thing to kill by medication the old and the sick" and she added: "Pray for all countries where there is so much pain, suffering, and distress. Pray for us that we may be able to bring them the joys of loving". On the feast day of Mother Teresa, that is what I am asking of you today.

CONCLUSION:

I mention again the '**Care not Killing' Alliance**. This Alliance seeks to promote more and better palliative care, and to oppose moves to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia in the United Kingdom. This Alliance brings together about 50 human rights, healthcare and palliative care groups, disability rights and faith-based organisations; and concerned individuals, including both healthcare professionals and patients.

A new battle lies open before us. With the first hospice in Scotland having been founded by Catholic nuns, the Irish Sisters of Charity, in St Margaret of Scotland Hospice in Clydebank, I do appeal for increased hospice care in our country for everyone. Every move to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia in the United Kingdom must be opposed. I know that my own Catholic community is not alone in this forthcoming battle – I have mentioned those involved in that wonderful 'Care not Killing' Alliance!

And in that new battle, perhaps we need a simple battle cry or rallying call. It might be 'Care not Killing' or 'Life not Death'. Am I being simplistic when I suggest another: '**Don't kill your Granny!**'. This latter cry sums up so much of what is happening at this present time with regard to the ongoing destruction of family life: Don't have babies! Kill off those who are old, useless and less able! And, of course, I use the word 'granny' to apply also to 'granddads', and to all who are elderly and less able in our society. Just where would we be in society today if in our family life we did not have husbands and wives, children and elderly, infants in the womb needing care and protection, the elders in our family circles being lovingly looked after in their old age, either at home, in hospital or in hospice.

The approval of our Church for what I am saying could not be better seen than in the beatification of Mother Teresa of Calcutta by Pope John Paul II in October 2003. This was a further sign of approval by the Pope of the work and teaching of Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Now we must ask ourselves: “**What are we going to do about it?**”. Each one of us must answer that question – but I would stress that that call for life and the best of care for those who are approaching death is something which we must ensure if we are to be a humane society in every way.

And perhaps our personal consideration of what we are going to do should continue in this year when we prepare for the **centennial of the birth of Mother Teresa in 2010**. Archbishop D’Souza of Calcutta announced this preparatory year in the Missionaries of Charity mother-house in Calcutta on 26 August 2009 when he led celebrations of what would have been Blessed Mother Teresa’s 99th birthday. Sister Mary Prema, the present Superior General of the Missionaries of Charity, was here in Edinburgh just a few weeks ago. She also indicated with regard to this preparatory year: “The best gift we can all prepare for Mother’s 100th birthday is our sincere endeavour to be channels of God’s love and peace to the poor”.

May these words be an inspiration to us all. May God indeed bless us on this feast day, during the year ahead – and inspire all those who work for life at every stage.