

**MASS MARKING OPENING OF THE MARY AIKENHEAD CENTRE AND
HOSPICE OPEN DAY – ON THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY ON THE DEATH OF
MARY AIKENHEAD, FOUNDRRESS OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY**

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

ST MARGARET OF SCOTLAND HOSPICE, CLYDEBANK

THURSDAY 2ND JULY 2009

INTRODUCTION:

Today marks two very special events in the life of the Sisters of Charity – as well as in the life of St Margaret of Scotland Hospice and all who come here to receive every spiritual and physical help in their old age and ill health.

I know that in speaking to you today I speak to very many people who value the standards set by Mary Aikenhead; and who admire those same standards held by the Sisters of Charity, their co-workers and their great family of friends all actively involved in the Hospice Movement particularly this Hospice at the heart of the community here in Clydebank.

I know that many of the facts about the life of Mother Mary Aikenhead are known to you all – similarly with the history and the apostolate of the Hospice. However on this 150th anniversary of the death of Mary Aikenhead and on the opening of the new Centre prior to the Open Day it adds a certain completeness to our celebrations if I recall some particular dates and events to your minds.

**MOTHER MARY AIKENHEAD – FOUNDRRESS OF THE RELIGIOUS SISTERS OF
CHARITY:**

Mary Aikenhead as many of you know was born in Cork in 1787, initially baptised into the Anglican Communion, but became a Catholic in 1802 before moving to Dublin where she witnessed something of the widespread unemployment and poverty in the Capital City. Mary was moved to serve the poor in whatever way she could but realised she could not join an enclosed religious order and at that time all the religious congregations in Ireland were indeed enclosed.

However along with a Father Daniel Murray later to become Coadjutor Bishop of Dublin she planned the founding of a new religious congregation of Sisters of Charity – involved in that more active life of caring for the poor.

She could not have had better spiritual formation herself going at the request of Father Murray to the famous Bar Convent in York belonging to the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary founded by Mary Ward in the 17th century – Mary Ward whose life and apostolate are being ever more seriously considered at this present time for the wonderful example of religious life which she exemplified and which she handed on to her Sisters.

After her formation in Ignatian spirituality in York, the first members of the new Order took their vows with Sister Mary Augustine as she became when appointed Superior General. Approval of the Order by Pope Pius VII soon followed – with, in addition to the traditional three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Sisters took a fourth vow, namely to devote their lives to the service of the poor.

Soon many other Irish women joined this young congregation ensuring that various convents and homes for the poor were established in different parts of Ireland. Soon calls came from abroad including France and Australia for the Religious Sisters of Charity to continue their apostolate there. Mother Aikenhead indicated the aims of her Congregation as being to “attend to the comforts of the poor, both spiritual and temporal; to visit them at their dwellings and in hospitals; to attend them in sickness; to administer consolation in their afflictions; and to reconcile them to the dispensations of an all-wise Providence and to the many trials to which they were subject”

Some of the hospitals established by the Sisters still continue their work to this very day with St Vincent’s Hospital in Dublin being opened in 1834 and St Vincent’s Hospital in Sydney in 1857. Education work also formed part of the vocation of the Religious Sisters of Charity both in Ireland and Australia – and further missionary work continued even while Mother Mary grew more seriously ill in other parts of England and Scotland as well as USA, Zambia, Nigeria and Venezuela. When she died peacefully in 1858 on 22nd July she left her Congregation in a flourishing condition, in charge of ten institutions, besides the numerable missions and branches of charitable work.

ST MARGARET OF SCOTLAND HOSPICE CLYDEBANK:

It was in 1950 that St Margaret of Scotland Hospice was opened here in Clydebank being the first hospice ever to be opened in Scotland. I myself came with my family to Scotland in 1949 living in Clydebank which had been devastated after the wartime blitz – but the opening of the Hospice appeared like a wonderful beacon of hope to all of us in our parish at St Stephen’s Dalmuir at that time as well as a similar beacon of hope to all around in the Archdiocese and in the City.

When a newly appointed Sister of Charity arrived in Clydebank to assist the Parish and the School in the area she was approached by a man in the advanced stages of throat cancer – looking for help. As a result of a request to Dublin a nurse was sent over with two beds – and so began that wonderful history of the St Margaret of Scotland Hospice here in Clydebank.

I myself have had occasion to visit the Hospice especially when friends and parishioners, priests and lay people were here being helped in their illnesses with the most wonderful palliative care – following the initial aims of Mother Aikenhead herself. The sick would be visited in their dwellings and in hospitals, they would be given help in all their difficulties, and they would be helped in every way with regard to residential care when needed near the end of their lives.

That apostolate has continued from that time right up to the present – with the Sisters, their staff and their very many friends determined that this wonderful apostolate will continue in St Margaret of Scotland Hospice at this present time when there is an even greater need for it than ever before.

The Sisters and their advisers have seen the need for this new Mary Aikenhead Centre which is being opened today, which will thankfully ensure that here at St Margaret’s an unparalleled level of care will be given to all who come here at what might be described as the most reasonable of prices.

Very many people would prefer to die at home – but sadly palliative care suitable for a dying person is not always able to be given at home. That is why the Mary Aikenhead Centre is not only a useful part of our health service – but is rather an essential part of the loving care which we should be giving to those in need. The people to be cared for in the Mary Aikenhead Centre would otherwise be in an entirely unsuitable hospital bed or, worse, neglected at home. Patients coming here are the most ill and normally having additional complications. Referring physicians know that there is nowhere else that can care for them – those concerned with suitable care for their dying loved ones see possible removal of this provision as almost a criminal act.

I think that the **moral need** of a hospice such as St Margaret of Scotland's here in Clydebank and for others elsewhere is one which we must be considering in our Christian country. At the beginning of this week I was involved in debate concerning the moral issue concerning the possible replacement of Trident – after listening and reading a great deal about the financial, diplomatic, military and political arguments relative to the retention or rejection of the nuclear warheads. I said then that “national defence is one of the cardinal duties of the statesman” – but far more important are the moral duties of a Cardinal!”

Consequently, I speak out hopefully clearly and unequivocally when I say that increased palliative care – to the very best levels for the dying at home as well as to the extraordinary levels achieved in hospices such as St Margaret of Scotland – must continue to be funded and funded unstintingly by our local authorities as well as at national level. In saying this, I cannot but reflect on the enormous sums involved in replacing the current Trident Nuclear System. Ministry of Defence sources say that the project could cost up to £65 billion over 30 years – although the Scottish National Party put the cost at more like £100 billion. How many hospitals and hospices could be built with such extraordinary sums of money.

CONCLUSION:

If you have time, I say to guests today to pay a visit to the new history room in the Hospice. It is rarely acknowledged that the hospice movement in Scotland started here in Clydebank because the Sisters of Charity saw, literally, people dying without appropriate care. That appropriate care has continued from the 1950's until now. St Margaret's started the movement and has remained the leading example of hospice care as independently vouched by numerous inspections and feedback from patients and their families.

Sister Rita, the Chief Executive of the Hospice, has indicated elsewhere that “elderly care is a Cinderella of the Health Service, money is always diverted away!”. We must ensure that this does not continue to happen. While we ourselves are active and able, we must make representation to those in positions of responsibility on every occasion to ensure that money is diverted from less worthy aims to this greatest of all aims – namely to help those who are nearing their end of life and in any sort of need to peacefully meet their Maker.

May God indeed bless all who work in this Hospice and all who are coming here to receive every assistance which they need, as we prepare to officially open the Mary Aikenhead Centre under the patronage of the Foundress of the Sisters of Charity, whose 150th anniversary we celebrate at this time.