

# MASS WITH NEWLY GRADUATED TEACHERS

BUTE HALL, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

MONDAY 25<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2007

## INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege being here with you in the Faculty of Education in the University of Glasgow on this day when the professional graduate diploma in education is being awarded both to primary and secondary school teachers from all over Scotland.

The readings of this Mass have been very carefully chosen. In the Gospel reading we are reminded by St Matthew of the words of Jesus that: "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world!"

And then we are able to absorb the content of those first two readings. In the Book of Wisdom we are reminded by the sacred author: "I loved wisdom more than health and beauty"; and in the second reading from St Paul's letter to Timothy we realise that St Paul's exhortation applies to us all: "Make the preaching of the good news your special boast, your life's work, in thorough going service!"

I ask you all on this occasion to realise the wonder of your call, your vocation. You have been called by Almighty God to leadership in our community having been prepared throughout your life so far to take an adult place in our Church. Perhaps when you begin your apostolate after the summer holidays you might not be fulfilling a role of great responsibility in your schools – but you are being called to lead your pupils! And that is at the heart of your vocation namely **to lead your pupils more closely into the Body of Christ as well as educating them in academic discipline!**"

In my words to you today I want to consider three things: The leadership of our new Pope, Pope Benedict XVI; your leadership as a teacher; and important aspects which you must emphasise in leading your pupils closer to Christ.

## LEADERSHIP OF POPE BENEDICT XVI:

As teachers you are called to be leaders in your classroom or in your school community. I would like to say some words about the leadership shown by Pope Benedict XVI shortly after his election as Pope. One of the greatest privileges which I have had in recent times was not only my creation as Cardinal but being able to take part in a conclave to elect a new Pope – and that just two years ago.

With regard to the conclave, as soon as it was clear that Cardinal Ratzinger had the required majority he was approached by the designated Cardinal who asked if he would accept the appointment as Pope. He did so and then gave a first indication as to how his leadership would be put into practice.

He was taking the name Benedict because his predecessor was the Pope who worked for peace. Benedict was the name of one of the Patron Saints of Europe – the new Benedict would try to bring Europe back to its Christian roots. And Benedict the Abbot wrote in his Rule for monks” prefer nothing whatever to Christ” – the new Benedict would place Christ at the centre of all his endeavours.

I mention this to you quite simply because I think anyone in leadership at this present time, as our Catholic teachers of course are, must be clear as to what they are trying to achieve. Particularly at this present time Christ must be at the centre of all your endeavours. As we say in one of our popular hymns: “If God is for us – who can be against us!”

### **YOUR LEADERSHIP AS A TEACHER:**

At the present time of course there are increasing demands on all our teachers and particularly on our head teachers. Huge demands are placed on you by your employers, the education authorities, and by the Scottish executive as they strive to ensure continued improvement in educational attainment and in achievement more broadly. You have to work within a framework of national priorities set by the Scottish Executive and of local improvement objectives set by your education authority. You are expected to improve examination results, extend the curriculum, improve pupil behaviour, improve attendance, support, motivate and develop with your colleagues on the staff, and be open to partnership working with other children’s services. All of these tasks are seen as essential to the leading of the school providing 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and teaching.

And of course there are demands in providing Catholic education in your school. While some might say that these demands are in addition to all of your other duties I would suggest that they should underpin their whole enterprise of leading a Catholic school. The first call of Jesus to his disciples: “Go and teach all nations”, applies in a special way to yourselves. You are asked by the Church to ensure that your students learn what Jesus taught and understand how they can observe these teachings in the reality of their daily lives. In other words, your task is to help students know, love and serve God, and to bring that unity of love into your own school.

It is easy to hold onto the ideal – but not so easy to put it into practice. One might say that the way of life of the early followers of Jesus must continue to be the way of life for us all at this present time in our Catholic schools. So much depends upon you in the ways in which you not only live your lives but attract others to that lifestyle because of your membership of the Catholic Christian Church.

### **IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF YOUR TEACHING:**

Some time ago the then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Father Pedro Arrupe SJ addressed a gathering of the Alumni of Jesuit Schools. On that occasion he stated:

“Education for justice has become in recent times one of the chief concerns of the Church. Why? Because there is a new awareness in the Church that participation in the promotion of justice and liberation of the oppressed is a constitutive element of the mission which Our Lord has entrusted to her.”

“Today our prime education objective must be to form men and women for others, men and women who will live not with themselves but for God and his Christ – for the God-man who lived and died for all the world; men and women who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of our neighbours; men and women completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce”.

As Father Pedro indicated the above must indeed be one of the chief concerns of each one of us as members of the Church. Of course we must be concerned with the love of God and bringing our pupils closer and closer to a wonderful relationship with Jesus Christ.

However as Christians there must be that outreach to those who are suffering injustice of whatever kind here in Scotland or in so many places throughout the world. Our pupils must be completely convinced that “love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce”

### **Conclusion:**

In concluding my words to you I would ask you to be fully aware of the tremendous vocation which you have in being a teacher. You will have a very great influence over your pupils and indeed over your colleagues in the staff. In your school you must be fully aware that you represent Jesus Christ to all those for whom you are responsible and consequently you must model your life on the life of Jesus.

As you may know I myself am a qualified teacher in mathematics and science having gained my degree from the University of Edinburgh before studying for the Priesthood and after my ordination to the Priesthood obtaining my secondary school certificate in teaching from Moray House College of Education.

In my first school I remember indicating to my principal teacher of chemistry that I just did not know what to do with a particular class. I have never forgotten the words of that man to me: “I would ask have you ever shown Christ’s love to the pupils under your care in that class. You do not know what sort of background they come from; you are not aware of what sort of homes they are returning to. Here in this class might be the only place where they receive any care, compassion, consideration and love!”

And I would ask you to be happy in your vocation. One happy teacher will ensure that there are 20 happy pupils in his or her class; and one happy head teacher will ensure that there are 20, 40, 80 or whatever happy teachers in his school.

Remember as members of one body in Jesus Christ we are all united. As St Paul says “we belong to each other”. Consequently we must become more and more aware of our responsibilities; we must be more and more aware of the wonder of the vocation which is ours – doing our best to live that vocation and handing it on to others.