

Walsingham: seminarians called to be missionary disciples



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The Bishops of England and Wales met with seminarians and staff from across the country at Walsingham on Saturday 14 September. The meeting followed similar meetings in 2010 at Oscott College during the Pope's State Visit to the UK and on the anniversary of that visit in 2011 at Westminster Cathedral.

In his homily the Archbishop of Westminster, the Most Reverend Vincent Nichols emphasised the need for missionary discipleship as the fundamental vocation of all priests.

Archbishop Nicol's homily follows below:

A few days ago, I found myself travelling in a silver Mercedes to Canary Wharf for a meeting with leading figures in the financial and business world. I kept thinking to myself “What am I doing here?” What do I know about questions involving the regulation of the Finance industry? I also thought that I should be in a Ford Focus (or even a battered old Renault 4), heading off to one of the many economically deprived parts of London!

But then a phrase came into my mind, from the summer – WYD and reading. It consoled me, and also gave me a sense of identity and purpose as Canary Wharf drew near. The phrase is one often used by

Pope Francis to describe our fundamental vocation, a title given to us in baptism and lived out in our own particular vocation. I am a

‘missionary disciple’. That is what I am and why I am in this car. So I would like to think, out loud, a little more about what lies behind this call and how it helped me on that trip and in my ministry. After all, it is very much part of the life of a priest to find himself in different circumstances, in the different ‘areopagi’ of his parish, or, for me, of the Diocese. Why I am there? What have I to say? Who do I think I am? A missionary disciple charged with the message of the Gospel.

The first thought that consoled me was that my being a missionary disciple is not something that I have chosen for myself. The call comes from the Lord. My task is to discern and respond, day by day. It is not my decision. This is where the Lord wants me to be. This is his initiative. So no matter how uncomfortable I may feel in the silver Mercedes I am there only because he wants me there. So, this is the Lord’s business. To remember that is a great liberation.

The second thought was this: his call to me, to be a missionary disciple, is not first of all a call to fulfil a particular role. It is a call to be in the Lord’s company, to know his love, his presence in my heart, his life, his vitality in my veins. I am only a branch. He is the root and the stem. And he is with me here and now. But, and this is so important, cut off from him I can do nothing.

‘Being with the Lord’ is a journey and it is the heart of this discipleship. It is a life-long journey, a daily journey, full of moments of intimacy and joy, marked with moments of darkness, doubt and, of course, real failure. This is our daily focus, even in the back of the Silver car: to be with the Lord, to open our hearts to him, to simply let everything else fade away because without him we can do nothing.

Through this journey into being with the Lord we are, as it were, fuelled for our mission. One of the most important things of all on this journey is that we come to know and treasure his mercy, his deep acceptance of us as we are, his call to us through repentance into the transforming light of his face. This is why a crucial part of this journey, for all of us, is the Sacrament of Reconciliation, that grace of sorrow and joy combined, of weakness and healing together, of fear and freedom inseparably intertwined. There we experience the tender embrace of his mercy, a mercy that we must first experience if we are to minister it to others.

This journey of discipleship is not one we can ever make alone. It is only to be undertaken within the Body of Christ, within the Church, taking shape in a parish, a seminary, a diocese, in a family and in

true and noble friendships. There we are formed and shaped, equipped and encouraged, sustained and nurtured with sacraments

and love so that we truly become missionary disciples. In the silver Mercedes I had with me all the riches of the life of Jesus, instilled into me through the Gospels, through the prayer of the Church, through the lives of the saints. From those sources I knew how I was to behave in the dinner that was awaiting me: with respect, with reverence, with love, towards those I was to meet. I also had with me the Church's Social Teaching and the wealth of reflection and principle that it contains.

The conversation at the table of the Financial Services Authority was fascinating. Top professionals struggling with mechanisms of financial control that might restore lost confidence. I had a lovely quote to contribute, from Gandhi: we are dreaming of perfect systems which will mean that no one has to try to be good. So I spoke of the need for virtue in professional life, those qualities which we speak of as 'cardinal', which form character and behaviour and which alone make us trustworthy. I spoke of the duties of companies and businesses to foster such virtue rather than minimise them. My remarks were met with a moment of silence, not a hostile silence,

but more a curious silence. Afterwards most of the participants approached me to say that they appreciated my words very much indeed, how true they were, and that it needed someone such as me to say them in those circles.

We are indeed missionary disciples called to many different fields. I am called to focus on the world of plenty and the world of poverty – two key defining features of London. And in those worlds there may not be much public acknowledgement of the truths contained and proclaimed in our Christian faith. But there is a quiet openness to them which we have to know how to enter.

But there is more to this title 'missionary disciples'. Our discipleship is, of course, a following. To where are we called to follow Jesus? To the Cross. This following is a becoming conformed to Jesus Christ, "who did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave" and "was humbler yet even to accepting death, death on the cross" (second reading). As disciples, bishops and priests act with divine authority to be sure; yet that authority is God's gift only so that we may be servants, slaves of those for whom we are ordained. There's no place in our discipleship for arrogance, only that humility which causes us to follow Jesus to the Cross, to lay down our lives for others.

You know well that this is no easy calling. Sometimes we may find ourselves speaking against God:. The first reading can apply to us: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt", from our former happy, comfortable lives, "to die in this wilderness? [I don't much like this parish. I'd much rather be in the

leafy suburbs] For there is neither bread nor water here: we are sick of this unsatisfying food". [I'm not referring to the catering arrangements here today at Walsingham!] . Yes, we sincerely long to be humble servants; nevertheless, our hearts are not always with the Lord (psalm). Day by day we need to be healed of our moaning, saved from despondency before the awareness of our weakness. This comes only as we enter into the cross of Christ, into a depth of self-giving that springs only from love.

This is why the celebration of the Mass is so essential to the journey of discipleship. There we are taken up, again and again, into the pure and total love of Jesus to which we want to respond with the gift of ourselves. To be part of the Mass is the highest act of discipleship because there we offer ourselves to be nailed to the cross with Christ; and there he comes to us so that, step by step, day by day, that loving response of our hearts may become, by his grace, a reality in our lives.

Today we celebrate the Triumph of the Cross, the Exaltation of the Cross. It is so fitting, for the Cross is at the very centre not only of our discipleship, but also of our mission. Let me tell you one more thing about my sense of mission – but no more cars!

Often, as a celebrant and preacher, I am quite dissatisfied. I have not spoken well. The congregation seem restless and distracted, the servers are shuffling around behind me. I am not doing my job very well at all. But then a great peace can come to me. I am here, as a priest, at this and every Mass, to do one thing above all else. It is to lift Him up.

That is the phrase, the image repeated often in the readings of our Mass. Moses lifts up the bronze serpent. God raised Jesus high. The Son of Man must be lifted up. He must be lifted up because from him flows healing, because he is the glory of God the Father, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life.

So when I am a celebrant at Mass, and I am weary, dissatisfied or distracted, I remember the one thing that matters. I lift him up: his body, broken and given for us; his blood, poured out for us. And, for those moments, the church falls silent, all heads are raised and bowed. It happens.

I remember an evening, some years ago, when I was meeting people in a north London parish who were becoming Catholics. I asked each of them "Why?" They had fascinating stories. One lady said she had been coming to the parish with her husband and children for many years and now wanted, properly, to be part of it. I asked her why. The sense of community? No. The singing? No. The

sermons? Certainly not! Then why? Slowly she responded: ‘Well, I don’t really know why, but whatever it is that takes place on that altar affects me very deeply.’

My task is to lift Him up. The work is His.

So, by our constant remembrance of the Lord’s goodness in calling us, from being with Christ on the cross, from our celebration of the Eucharist, from the confessional where we kneel as penitents, we’re sent out to lift high the Son of Man so that everyone may have eternal life in him. We’re sent out to be, by our lives, an exaltation of the Cross proclaiming that: “God so loved the world so much that he gave us his only Son...sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but so that through him the world may be saved” (Gospel). But, let me assure you, sometimes raising up the standard of the Cross is very hard. It is heavy, very heavy, with the burden of the flaws and failures of our human nature. We can do it only with Him.

Missionary disciples. That is our fundamental title, shared with all the baptised. Two words, one reality; two dimensions, inseparable. To be one with him in a shared life; to be one with him is a shared mission ‘to make all things new.’ We have to imitate, make our own, his manner (even his manners) and his pathway. Only by the

Way that goes over the hill of Calvary will we be faithful disciples who truly proclaim the central, saving truth that in Jesus alone is the fullness of love, mercy, salvation and life to be found. Only in him is the strangle-hold of death and sin defeated. Only in him is there a sure and certain way to the Father, to that completion of all things in the blessed communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the life for which we have indeed been created.

It is a joy for us to be together today, to celebrate this Mass, to stand, kneel together before him who so wants to be lifted up before us, so that we may gaze on him and be recreated in him, formed as his missionary disciples.

And in our presence, in such a special way here in Walsingham, is our Blessed Lady. We turn to her to show us how to embrace her Son, how to lift him up so that others may receive his welcome. On the day after his election, Pope Francis entrusted his ministry to Our Lady at St Mary Major’s. At the Shrine of Aparecida this summer he

reminded us again that when the Church looks for Jesus she always knocks at his Mother’s door and asks ‘Show us Jesus’. “It is from Mary that the Church learns true discipleship. That is why the

Church always goes out on mission in the footsteps of Mary.” Mary is the perfect icon of the Spirit-filled Church bursting out from behind the closed doors of that Pentecost Upper Room. Here at Walsingham today, we knock at the Mother’s door, the Mother who stood at the foot of the Cross, the Mother who has been exalted because of her humble obedience to her Son, that she may teach us the pathway of our vocation that we may indeed be missionary disciples, to the glory of God the Father, Amen.

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