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Cormac was a man of "humble simplicity," says Cardinal Vincent Nichols



Pope and Nichols pay tribute to Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor

Cardinal Vincent Nichols announced the formal beginning of the time of mourning for his predecessor as Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, at the 10.30 Mass at Westminster Cathedral on Saturday. Cardinal Nichols had just received by telegram a warm tribute from Pope Francis to Cardinal Cormac, who died in a West London hospital, surrounded by family and friends, on Friday afternoon.

“Deeply saddened to learn of the death of Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, Archbishop emeritus of Westminster,” read the telegram signed Franciscus PP. “I hasten to offer my heartfelt condolences to you and to the clergy and faithful of the Archdiocese. Recalling with immense gratitude the late Cardinal’s distinguished service to the Church in England and Wales, his unwavering devotion to the preaching of the Gospel and the care of the poor, and his far-sighted commitment to the advancement of ecumenical and interreligious understanding, I willingly join you in commending his noble soul to the infinite mercies of God our heavenly Father. To all who mourn his passing in the sure hope of the Resurrection I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of consolation and strength in the Lord.”

At the cathedral Mass the only visible tribute were two open books of condolences facing the front pews. Behind the books was a large photo of Cardinal Cormac greeting Pope Benedict XVI in Rome. The framed photo was donated by the Vietnamese Catholic chaplaincy in London in November 2005. Facing the small display in the front row were relatives of Cardinal Cormac, his oldest nephew Pat Murphy O’Connor, Pat’s wife Bernadette, and their daughter, Cormac’s great niece, Niamh.

The emphasis in the brief Mass was on simplicity – the simplicity of life lived according to the Gospel, and the associated simplicity of a good death.

In his homily Cardinal Nichols mentioned that he had spent 20 minutes with Cardinal Cormac on Thursday afternoon, just 24 hours before his passing, and they had talked of the wonders of these moments he was living. The Gospel reading had been from Matthew 11: 25: “Jesus exclaimed, “I bless you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever, and revealing them to mere children ... shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in

heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

“As death approached Cardinal Cormac had that humble simplicity,” Cardinal Nichols testified. “He knew what was important and what was now passing. He was ready to be received into the Kingdom of God in its fullness.”

Cardinal Nichols paid tribute just briefly to the extraordinary life that had just come to its earthly end, but he did make time to recall both its virtue and its humour. “Not very long ago, on [BBC Radio 4’s] Thought for the Day, Cardinal Cormac referred to the moment of death of an elderly priest. He displayed his characteristic humour – there was a reference to a hidden bottle of champagne – but what resonated with me were the last lines – ‘the best way to prepare for a good death is to lead a good life’. All of us know that Cardinal Cormac lived a good life – his steadfast faith, his prayer life, his love of the Church, of his diocese, of his family, all expressed daily in simple actions. There are some here today who can testify that he died a good death, surrounded by family and friends, in great trust and peace.”

The first reading in the Mass was from the Book of Wisdom, 3:1.

“The souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God, no torment shall ever touch them. In the eyes of the unwise, they did appear to die, their going looked like a disaster, their leaving us, like annihilation; but they are in peace. If they experienced punishment as men see it, their hope was rich with immortality; slight was their affliction, great will their blessings be. God has put them to the test and proved them worthy to be with Him; he has tested them like gold in a furnace, and accepted them as a holocaust.”

Cardinal Cormac was certainly tested. By his own admission he made serious errors over the handling of the case of the paedophile priest Michael Hill; but also, in his own words, the good that came out of this was the appointment in 2000 of the Nolan Commission, whose recommendations remain a model for safeguarding across the Church and beyond.

There is no doubt that the journey of those years was an anguished one. But those who met him and knew him personally will remember first of all his humour and his bonhomie. Perhaps it is only the deepest faith that allows these to exist authentically together. After the Mass, Pat Murphy O’Connor told of how one or two people had come up to him and said how sorry they were for the death of his father. “He would have loved that,” Pat joked. Behind him, next to the photo of his uncle with Pope Benedict XVI, were the words “Eternal rest grant unto him O Lord, And let perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace.” Virtue paves the way to heaven, the cardinal knew, but the smiles on so many faces at the Mass suggested that humour can be a light on the way.

James Roberts - The Tablet