

Address - Meeting with the Bishops, Dominican Convent, Dublin 7

Convent of the Dominican Sisters (Dublin) - Sunday, 26 August 2018

Dear Brother Bishops,

As my visit to Ireland comes to a close, I am grateful for this chance to spend a few moments with you. I thank Archbishop Eamon Martin for his gracious words of introduction and I greet all of you with affection in the Lord.

Our meeting tonight takes up the fraternal discussion we shared in Rome last year during your visit ad Limina Apostolorum. In these brief remarks, I would like to resume our earlier conversation, in the spirit of the World Meeting of Families we have just celebrated. All of us, as bishops, are conscious of our responsibility to be fathers to God's holy and faithful people. As good fathers, we want to encourage and inspire, to reconcile and unify, and above all, to preserve all the good handed down from generation to generation in this great family which is the Church in Ireland. It is true, the Church in Ireland remains strong; it is true.

So, my word to you this evening is one of encouragement – in line with my homily – for your efforts, in these challenging times, to persevere in your ministry as heralds of the Gospel and shepherds of Christ's flock. In a particular way, I am grateful for the concern you continue to show for the poor, the excluded and those in need of a helping hand, as witnessed most recently by your pastoral letters on the homeless and on substance misuse. I am also grateful for the support you give to your priests, whose hurt and discouragement in the face of recent scandals are often ignored or underestimated. Be close to your priests! For you, as bishops, they are the closest of your neighbours.

A recurrent theme of my visit, of course, has been the Church's need to acknowledge and remedy, with evangelical honesty and courage, past failures – grave sins – with regard to the protection of children and vulnerable adults. Among these, women who were mistreated. In recent years, you as a body have resolutely moved forward, not only by undertaking paths of purification and reconciliation with victims and survivors of abuse, but also, with the help of the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Church in Ireland, you have set in place a stringent set of norms aimed at ensuring the safety of young persons. In these years, all of us have had our eyes opened – painfully – to the gravity and extent of sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience in various social settings. In Ireland, as elsewhere, the honesty and integrity with which the Church chooses to confront this painful chapter of her history can offer an example and a warning to society as a whole. Continue on this path. Humiliation is painful, but we have been saved by the humiliation of the Son of God and this gives us courage. The wounds of Christ give us courage. I ask you, please, to be close – this is the word, "closeness" – to the Lord and to God's people. Closeness. Do not repeat the attitudes of aloofness and clericalism that at times in your history have given the real image of an authoritarian, harsh and autocratic Church.

As we mentioned in our conversation in Rome, the transmission of the faith in its integrity and beauty represents a significant challenge in the context of Ireland's rapidly evolving society. The World Meeting of Families has given us great hope and encouragement that families are growing more and more conscious of their own irreplaceable role in passing on the faith. Passing on the faith essentially takes place in the family; the faith is passed on in everyday speech, the language of the family. At the same time, Catholic schools and programmes of religious instruction continue to play an indispensable role in creating a culture of faith and a sense of missionary discipleship. I know that this is a source of pastoral concern for all of you. Genuine religious formation calls for faithful and joyful teachers who are able to shape not only minds but also hearts in the love of Christ and in the practice of prayer.

Sometimes we can think that faith formation means teaching religious concepts, and we don't think of forming the heart, shaping attitudes. Yesterday the President of the nation told me that he had written a poem about Descartes and said, more or less: "The coldness of thought has killed the music of the heart". Forming the mind, yes, but also the heart. And teaching how to pray: teaching children how to pray from the very start. Prayer. The training of such teachers and the expansion of programmes of adult education are essential for the future of the Christian community, in which a committed laity will be increasingly called to bring the wisdom and values of their faith to their engagement in the varied sectors of the country's social, cultural and political life.

The upheavals of recent years have tested the traditionally strong faith of the Irish people. Yet they have also offered the opportunity for an interior renewal of the Church in this country and pointed to new ways of envisioning its life and mission. "God is eternal newness" and he impels us "constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond" (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 135). With humility and trust in his grace, may you discern and set out on new paths for these new times. Be courageous and creative. Surely, the strong missionary sense rooted in the soul of your people will inspire creative ways of bearing witness to the truth of the Gospel and building up the community of believers in the love of Christ and zeal for the growth of his kingdom.

In your daily efforts to be fathers and shepherds to God's family in this country – fathers, please, and not stepfathers! – may you always be sustained by the hope that trusts in the truth of Christ's words and the certainty of his promises. In every time and place, that truth "sets free" (Jn 8:32); it has a power all its own to convince minds and draw hearts to itself. Whenever you and your people feel that you are a "little flock" facing challenges and difficulties, do not grow discouraged. As Saint John of the Cross teaches us, it is in the dark night that the light of faith shines purest in our hearts. And that light will show the way to the renewal of the Christian life in Ireland in the years ahead.

Finally, in the spirit of ecclesial communion, I ask you to continue to foster unity and fraternity among yourselves – this is very important – and, together with the leaders of other Christian communities, to work and pray fervently for reconciliation and peace among all the members of the Irish family. Today, at lunch we were seated, myself, then [the bishops from] Dublin and Northern Ireland... all together, everyone. There is another thing that I always say, but it bears repeating. What is the first duty of the bishop? I say it to everyone: it is prayer. When the Greek-speaking Christians complained that their widows were being neglected (cf. Acts 6:1), Peter and the apostles created deacons. Then when Peter explained the matter, he concluded by saying: "We [apostles] will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word". So I throw out a question and each of you can answer it at home: how many hours a day does each of you devote to prayer?

With these thoughts, dear brothers, I assure you of my prayers for your intentions, and I ask you to keep me in your own. To all of you, and to the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, I impart my blessing as a pledge of joy and strength in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am close to you: keep moving ahead with courage! The Lord is very good, and Our Lady is watching over you. When things get a little difficult, pray the *Sub tuum praesidium*, because the Russian mystics say that at moments of spiritual turmoil, we should go under the mantle of the Holy Mother of God, *sub tuum praesidium*. Thank you very much! Now I will give you my blessing.

Together let us pray the Hail Mary.

May God bless you all, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Thank you very much.