

Kildare and Leighlin Diocesan Congress: March 8-9, 2013:

Theme: LORD, INCREASE OUR FAITH

‘Praying the Faith: Mary treasured all these things in her heart’.

The Year of Faith

The Year of Faith began on October the 11th last, the day the Second Vatican Council commenced 50 years earlier in 1962.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church was published in 1992, thirty years after the Council began. It was a fruit of the Synod of Bishops which was called to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1985. The desire of the Synod was that the Catechism would provide a systematic account of the teachings of the church in the light of the Second Vatican Council. The final section of that Catechism, like the final act of this Congress, is devoted to Prayer. Faith and being Christian culminates in prayer.

And when we think of it, doesn't the story of our faith and our church begin also in prayer? I'm talking of the prayer of Mary at the Annunciation, 'Be it done unto me according to thy word': The faith of Mary that caused her to utter this prayer as her response to the invitation of the angel that has had momentous consequences for the world and humanity.

Pope Benedict proclaimed the Year of Faith to celebrate 50 years of the Council and twenty years of the Catechism. It is an opportunity for us all to rediscover the joy of faith, proclaimed and enunciated so richly in these

two events, which are expressions for our times of the treasure that is our Christian and Catholic Faith. The joy Pope Benedict talks of here is no superficial emotion, but rather comes from deep encounter with the truth in Jesus.

Lord, increase our Faith

The theme of this Congress is itself a prayer: 'Lord, increase our faith!' (Lk 17:5). And like the Catechism, after reflecting on the rich content of our faith and the living out of it in love, this Congress now concludes with a reflection on Prayer. The first two themes lead us inexorably to prayer: the first conference which opened up for us the wonder, the truth, and the mystery of our faith, as well as the second which reflected on the love that that faith demands. When we look long and deep at the story of Jesus Christ, his teaching and his love, a longing and an asking, a crying out, and a marvelling, - prayer in other words, - begins to arise in our hearts.

'Lord, increase our faith' is a cry from the heart. The cry came originally from the heart of the Apostles, in the 17th chapter of St Luke's Gospel. It comes in the context of a series of parables and teachings Jesus is giving his disciples. Commenting on this prayer of the Apostles in a talk recently, the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Charles Brown said: "'Lord, increase our faith!' If we ask, and we must, he will. Faith is in his gift, and we must ask". In these times of growing unbelief, we know the challenge communicating the faith has become. We're floundering, and have been for decades in this new climate. Have we been relying too much on ourselves, our programs and plans? Faith is fundamentally a gift of God arising out of his

revelation of himself, and we are fundamentally hearts that cry out to him, like the Apostles did.

'A heart that cries out...': it's almost a definition of a human being, isn't it?. There is a sense in which the human person is essentially a cry: a cry was our first expression of ourselves as new-born infants, and if we live long enough, what will be left at the end will be a cry too, albeit reduced to a whimper or sigh. The human person is always asking, always needing to ask and having to ask, always having to reach beyond his/her own limitations. We are unable to make in on my own. The consumer society has been built on the often cynical exploitation of this fundamental fact of human existence, and look how it has let us down.

When faith enters in, that cry that is you and me becomes a prayer.

What do we want to hear? What is the answer for which we cry? There's a little poem of that great American writer Raymond Carver that says it all. The poem is entitled 'Late Fragment' and was written while the man was struggling with the cancer that brought him to death at the relatively young age of 49 in 1988. It's in the form of a little conversation with himself:

'And did you get what
you wanted from this life , even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
Beloved on the earth'.

We are reminded immediately of the words heard by Jesus at his Baptism at the beginning of his ministry, and again on the Mount of Transfiguration as he was about to set his face for Jerusalem and the Passion that awaited him there on the Mount of Calvary: 'You are my Son, the Beloved...' St Luke is very clear that these words of the Father came while Jesus was praying after he came up out of the waters of Baptism, and again after he had led Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray. Prayer changes us for the better. It transfigures everything. And the good news we are crying out to hear is heard: 'You are my child, the beloved. My favour rests on you!'

Mary treasured all these things

I mentioned at the beginning that our faith is a treasure, born like the church itself, in the prayer of Mary at the Annunciation, her response to hearing the word of God. The word 'treasure' is the one that is used twice of Mary's reaction to the events of the Infancy of her child, Jesus.

In Chapter 2, verse 19 of his Gospel, St Luke tells us that after she had given birth and the shepherds had left, 'Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart'. 'These things' refers to the experiences she's just had around the birth of her child and the visit of the shepherds, all she has heard and seen.

Then 42 verses later in Luke 2:51, at the end of the episode in which they lost their 12 year old in the Temple, Luke again tells us 'His mother treasured all these things in her heart'.

The word 'treasure' has to do with what is rich to me, what has most value to me. To treasure then means to value above all else, - as Jesus clearly

valued his time aside with the Father. What St Luke is telling us then is that Mary was profoundly a woman of prayer

Christian prayer begins in treasuring and pondering these things: the events of Jesus' life and the words he spoke, the way of life he wants us to adopt. That's where Mary shows us the way, with regard to our own life and experience. Mary is the first Christian, and always the model for every Christian. She is 'Mother of the Church'. That ancient title of St Ambrose was given to Mary officially by Pope Paul VI during the Second Vatican Council. That Mary is Mother of the Church is a truth recovered for the church by the Vatican Council and proclaimed in the Constitution on the Church, 'Lumen Gentium'. 'This sacred Synod intends to describe with diligence the role of the Blessed Virgin in the Mystery of the Incarnate Word and the Mystical Body' –LG 54 – Mary is to be seen always in relation to her child, Jesus and in relation to his Body, the church, the people of God, you and I, believers, followers, amongst whom she is the first, and the mother of all.

It is easy to 'treasure these things' when the events and words are all positive, as after the shepherds had come and gone. Before telling us Mary treasured and pondered all these things', Luke tells us that everyone who heard what the shepherds had to say 'were full of amazement', and after he tells of Mary treasuring and pondering, Luke goes on to say how the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.

On the other hand, when Luke tells us the second time that Mary treasured all these things in her heart, a couple of verses earlier, after Jesus had said to his parents – was it a rebuke? - 'Why were you searching

for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' Luke tells us 'But they did not understand'. The pain of the mother in not understanding her own child is to be treasured in her heart too. The painful as much as the pleasant, what breaks the heart as much as what fills with joy is to be contemplated, prayed. That's what Mary teaches us. That's the example she shows. Prayer in this contemplative sense is for all of us, because all our lives are a mixture of what pleases and what pains, and all the greyer areas in between. All our experiences, be they welcome or unwelcome, are to be the subject matter of our prayer. The 'distractions' we have at prayer may be the very things we should be praying about...

Ronald Rolheiser talks about Mary 'pondering', and he tells us that what it means is that Mary, at the Temple when Jesus was twelve, and most especially standing helpless at the Cross on Calvary as her beloved Son was tortured and died, was able to hold the terrible tension and pain of these long moments without wilting or breaking down or sinking into despair. To ponder in this sense is no joke; prayer in this sense is no joy. It is all endurance.

Christian prayer then begins with the Gospel, the Word of God, in treasuring and pondering the sacred text, its meaning and content, its comfort and its challenge. It begins in the meeting, the encounter between my experience and the Word, in the silence of my own heart. And the Word of God will illuminate and transform that experience.

- In a moment of desolation or loneliness, hearing the word 'The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want' can restore warmth and hope to my heart

- 'Give us this day our daily bread': these words taken to heart on a day when I fear my inadequacy will be exposed can restore confidence and peace.

Moments of prayer and reflection in order that we may 'treasure and ponder' our experience in the light of the Word of God are essential. That's what Mary, our Mother, teaches us. It's no accident that artists throughout the ages depict her so often in a posture of prayer, especially her Annunciation. The Church too, of which she is the model, is a Communion, a Body that prays. That is our stance in the world. And there's nothing soft or uninvolved about it as a stance, but the very opposite: it means intense engagement, carrying and holding the world in all its suffering as in all its joy.

It is this inner activity that constitutes and constructs the Church, not the external structures. These are necessary to support and serve that inner life that is often hidden and always a mystery.

In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, after the Ascension of Jesus, St Luke tells us of the eleven Apostles "all these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."

'Including the mother of Jesus': there Mary is, mentioned almost by the way, amongst the women and the apostles, hidden in the heart of that small group or family that was the church in embryo. And that's where Mary still lives. People who are little know it, the poor in spirit. She is loved and cherished, people approach her as one of their own. It is her hiddenness and smallness at every juncture in the Gospels that make her foundational, strong, essential and approachable in the story of our Christian lives and faith.

Mary and Martha

There's another Mary in the Gospel who is worth remembering in this context too. The story is in Luke Chapter 10, 38-42:

“Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman called Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me’.

But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her”

There's a rebuke here too. Jesus can be very clear and very directive. Especially, it seems, with his friends, those closest to him. There is much more to him than meek and mild. His compassion or mercy, because it is true, can be very demanding. ‘Mary has chosen the better part. It will not be taken from her’. And the better part is to sit at his feet and listen to him. To his words. To his heart. To his life. And to prioritise this listening and take time with it.

This story speaks powerfully to a world of busyness, of workaholism, of being owned by the firm, of being fast-moving and ‘up to speed’ and multi-tasking. It speaks powerfully too to a world of noise and constant

chatter, of i-phones and earphones. It invites us as a priority to prayer. Before all else. And surely that is what marks the man or woman of faith. And it's what our exhausted world needs.

Mary has chosen the better part. But Martha is also honoured in the church as a saint. That gives all of us who have been jealous or angry or rebuked or shown up as small-minded a lot of hope. Jesus himself came to serve he told us, exactly what was preoccupying Martha. 'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10: 45, Mt 20:28 – context is the ambition of the apostles, the mother of James and John wanting her sons to have the highest place...) And all the little and big tasks and moments that consume our days are important. Work is holy too.

When I was a child, we were told that the way to greet a person in the field working as you passed by was 'God bless the work!', and people always did say it. On entering a house, my father used to say 'Dia anseo isteach'. God save all here. And look at the extraordinary wealth of prayers in the oral tradition of our people for accompanying every moment and task of the day moment and task of the day. An tAth Diarmuid Ó Laoghaire, in his wonderful collection 'Ár bPaidreacha Dúchais, first published in 1975, has 539 examples of such prayers of the people, with which they sanctified every moment of their days. Prayers when rising, when catching the first sight of the sun, before and after meals, on the way to mass, and on the way home, on lighting the fire, before starting work, before heading out on a journey, in time of trouble or worry, when drinking somebody's health, when passing a graveyard, when the clock strikes, before opening your mouth to speak, on lighting the light

at night. I could go on and on. And this tradition is still alive. And always has been for men and women of faith who are workers, Marthas.

Essentially, Martha and Mary represent the two complementary sides of a faith-full person, all that we are called to live and integrate in the truly balanced life that Jesus exemplifies. Work and Prayer. Effort and rest. And prayer is both, and both are prayer.

Pope Paul VI on a visit to Nazareth on 5 January 1964, spoke of the home of Nazareth as a school of the gospel, where, if we ponder, we learn three lessons: the first lesson for us today is the lesson of silence (the lesson of the two Mary's whom we've been considering), the second is the lesson of family life (family as communion of love: that's a lesson we learn from both the family of Nazareth and the family of Bethany) and the third is the lesson of work – what Pope Paul called 'the severe and redeeming law of human work'. Its nobility and value derive from those for whose sake it is undertaken. And in the story of Martha and Mary, the nobility and value of Martha's work derive from Jesus, for whose sake she 'was worried and distracted by many things'.

Jesus first home was with Mary of Nazareth, his second with Mary of Bethany, Martha and Lazarus. They were equally places of prayer and work and the communion of love.

A good definition of a Christian home and family is that it is a school of the Gospel, like the home of Nazareth and the home of Bethany. Without these schools of prayer, our churches will be empty, our faith will die.

A famous Irish literary figure declared on the radio some years ago that he had come to the conclusion that death brought annihilation. I was talking

to a man of strong faith who met this famous figure shortly afterwards at a function, and he said to him 'I was shocked to hear you say that you believe now that there is no afterlife'. The man admitted he had lost his faith. My friend asked him how come. His answer was instructive. 'The difference between me and you', he said 'is that I gradually stopped praying'. If in this Year of Faith we are to renew and deepen our faith, then we need to deepen our prayer life, on our own and with others.

Prayer : Friendship with Jesus.

For our recently retired Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI, faith is essentially a relationship, a relationship with Jesus Christ, a love relationship. [Look at the quotation from him (Homily Sunday 24 April 2005) on the back of the Congress brochure: 'There is nothing more beautiful than to know Christ and to speak to others of our friendship with him'.]

'I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father', Jesus tells his apostles in John 15. Abide in me, he tells them, as the branch abides in the vine. Pope Benedict returns to this theme of friendship with Jesus over and over. The teachings of the Church and the commandments are indeed essential to our faith, but ultimately these are at the service of the invitation to friendship with Jesus in deepest intimacy. Communion with Jesus who is the Christ means nothing less than communion with each other, our fellow human beings. So the Trinity of Love will live and be visible in our world now, today. It is for us to choose this communion day after day. We do so above all in celebrating the great prayer that is the Holy Eucharist with our brothers and sisters in faith: the Mystery of Love, the Mystery of Faith.

All the other Sacraments are prayer too, moments of deep intimacy with God in Jesus, God who is Love. The Mass is to be prayed, never performed or simply 'attended'. The sacred host we receive is to be consumed in contemplation. 'D'un morceau de pain, il a fait tout son evangile' – 'Out of a morsel of bread he has made his entire gospel', Brother Christian de Chergé (Monk of the Monastery of Tibherine in Algeria, martyred in 1996) said. And it's true. The Eucharist invites us all to become contemplatives, men and women of adoration, people who like Mary, pause and ponder. In the world of individualism, activism and consumerism, such people are the real subversives.

Christian prayer is never alone or in isolation, but always in communion with our brothers and sisters in faith. Jesus taught his disciples to say 'Our Father' when they prayed, not 'My Father'. Christian prayer takes us out of isolation and loneliness immediately, and into communion. In the Hail Mary similarly, we say 'pray for us sinners now...'

Becoming a prayer.

On Wednesday February 27 last, Pope Benedict gave his last audience in St Peter's Square in Rome. Mons John Kennedy of Dublin, commenting that evening on the RTE News, said he had been Professor, Prefect & Pope, and now he was going to pray. I was very struck by this succinct way of describing Pope Benedict's life. Like every Christian's life, Pope Benedict's life is a journey that must always culminate in prayer. And prayer not just as word or silence, but prayer as what we become: one with God. "Now I'm just a pilgrim, beginning the last part of his journey on earth" - Benedict said in his last message on 28 February, before

withdrawing into silence and obscurity in his city-centre hermitage,
withdrawing into prayer. The entire life of the Christian from the moment
of Baptism can be seen as a pilgrimage into prayer.

Prayer for the follower of Jesus is born from Scripture and the Word of
God and it's what the Christian herself or himself becomes in the end: a
prayer incarnate.

Could we end then with the fine prayer with which Pope Benedict
concluded his first Encyclical, 'Deus Caritas Est' – 'God is Love':

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
you have given the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son – the Son of God.
You abandoned yourself completely
to God's call
and thus became a wellspring
of the goodness which flows forth from him.
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
so that we too can become
capable of true love
and be fountains of living water
in the midst of a thirsting world.