

Homily 29 October 2012

It seems a long time since Fr Peter Haverty and I were students in Rome. Our time there overlapped until Peter went to Spain for his final year, to be ordained in Madrid in 1962. Since then, Fr Haverty has spent 40 of his 50 years as a priest in this diocese of Salford. He has endeared himself to us in so many ways. He never misses a deanery conference. He gives us retreats and days of recollection. He hardly ever misses a priest's funeral. In fact he has become such a part of our diocese that we might easily forget he belongs to the Prelature of Opus Dei. It's good therefore that he is with us tonight so that we can celebrate with him his priestly golden jubilee.

A little time ago I read of a priest looking back over his 50 years of priesthood and saying: "It's not the cruise I signed up for!" That may well strike a chord with many of us.

We were the generation growing up during and after the 2nd World War. The Catholic Church and the priesthood enjoyed a certain kudos. Servicemen returning from Italy retained a very favourable impression of Pope Pius XII. Brave churchmen imprisoned under Communist regimes were in the public eye. They bore witness to faith and freedom. Men like Archbishop Stepinac in Yugoslavia, Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary, Fr Aedan McGrath in China.

Even the film world weighed in, with Bing Crosby in *Going my Way* and *The Bells of St Mary's*, and other films such as *Monsieur Vincent* about the life of St Vincent de Paul, *On the Waterfront*, *Guilty of Treason*, Alec Guinness in *The Prisoner* – all films portraying a healthy, manly image of the priest.

It was a time of optimism, of rebuilding after a terrible war. Even serious historians were carried away. I remember Fr Hertling in 1961 and Fr Papa in 1962 – professors of Church History in Rome – both saying "The Church has never been healthier than she is today." New parishes opened, new churches and schools were built.

On 11 October 1962, Blessed Pope John XXIII opened the 2nd Vatican Council. Being present in St Peter's that day was a life-changing, life-enhancing experience. But the winds of change began to blow, and blow strongly. Our cruise was sailing into

unchartered waters. English in the Liturgy! Ecumenism! Collegiality of Bishops! The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity! *Gaudium et Spes!* And so on.

And what did the Council say about us priests? It was on the point of saying almost nothing. A document *De cura animarum*, On the Care of Souls, was withdrawn. Thanks though to the insistence of very many bishops, a Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests was approved, in the nick of time, on the day before the Council ended in 1965. You know the Decree. I've no need to go into it in detail. I pick out one sentence: "Each and every priest ... is joined to his brother priests by a bond of charity, prayer, and every kind of cooperation."

Bishop Foley of Lancaster had spoken on behalf of many English speaking bishops. Yes, a priest's vocation meant that he had to stay close to God. Of course. But there seemed to be no mention of the priestly apostolate *of the care of souls*. Bishop Foley pointed out that Vatican2 was a "pastoral" Council. It would not achieve its purpose, he said, "principally by a new liturgy or by new scriptural or doctrinal insights but rather by a truly pastoral apostolate." This meant in effect that priests needed to know their people. This, he said, could only come about by visiting them in their homes. Perhaps that was later reflected in the Council's document which spoke of those who have fallen "even away from the faith. As good shepherds, they [priests] should not cease from going after them." In the debate in the Council Bishop Lever of San Antonio in the USA spoke up for curates. He said that in dioceses curates made up more than half the number of priests and they "did much more than half the work." We can only dream about those days!

But are we really sailing in unchartered waters? Not really. There are so many navigators who have gone before us. Benedict and Bede. Francis and Dominic. Ignatius Loyola. Charles Borromeo. What about our own Ambrose Barlow and John Southworth? Or more modern models like John Henry Newman and Elizabeth Prout and Teresa of Lisieux and Jose Maria Escriva? What of my own two bosses, Fr Johnnie Corbett and Bishop Holland, both of whom sailed to Normandy as chaplains on that fateful day, 6 June 1944?

See the article by one of our bishops in the current edition of *The Sower*. "Amid a 'new evangelization' ... we look to these holy witnesses to our faith for examples and prayers as we face the spiritual struggles of today." We are not on our own! We have

so many “witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us.” They urge us towards that victory which faith assures.

Blessed Pope John Paul II came to this parish in 1982 and he then made the same point. He lauded our local Lancashire martyrs and said: “England is fortunate to have *a distinguished legacy of holy priests* ... Rejoice in the memory of many holy priests from this region who lived each day the fullness of their vocation ...” and “the countless other priests who continue to serve as *models of holiness* for the clergy of today.”

Blessed John Paul went on to speak in Heaton Park of the closeness of priest and people. “*The Church, too, must be a family*, bishops, priests, deacons, religious and laity, supporting each other and sharing with each other the individual gifts given by God. Every priest relies on the faith and talents of his parish community. If he is wise he will not only know the joy of dispensing God’s grace, but also of receiving it abundantly through his parishioners as well. *The partnership between priests and people is built upon prayer, collaboration and mutual respect and love*. That has always been the tradition of these islands. May it never be lost.”

Blessed John Paul encouraged us each year for 26 years with his annual Maundy Thursday Letter to Priests. Pope Benedict XVI too has so often strengthened us in the faith. He wants to help us, in his own words, “to rediscover and reinvigorate [our] awareness of the [extraordinary and indispensable] gift of grace that the ordained ministry is, for him who receives it, for the whole Church, and for the world, which would be lost without the real presence of Christ.”

We know all too well of clerical failings. We share a sense of sorrow and shame for them. But we have far more to celebrate in priesthood, as I hope we do this evening.

Some of us are coming into port ourselves. We may at times have felt a little seasick. Maybe a little nostalgic for when the sea was calmer, and wondering whether the present crew is up to scratch. I read this letter earlier this year. It was written on St Joseph’s day, 19 March. It’s a letter from a senior parish priest of Aughton, in the Liverpool diocese. He writes:

“I am now an old man, just short of eighty, and I love the old ways and the old customs better than new ones ... For the Catholics I found in Lancashire fifty years ago were incomparably better than what we have at present.”

Before you jump to any conclusions, I should point out that, yes, the letter was dated St Joseph's Day, 19 March, but in the year 1789. Written by Simon Bordley, widely known as a 'character', to Bishop Gibson of the Northern District. You'll find the full text in Hemphill's book on the Early Vicars Apostolic.

In spite of Fr Bordley's misgivings long ago, the barque of Peter still sails on. The wind is in our sails once more. The crew is more international. It's young, enthusiastic. The Church is crossing new waters but she is better equipped. The documents of Vatican2, the Catechism of the Catholic Church are powerful engines of renewal. There may well be an increase of secularism in our world. Relativism may be rife. But can't we feel a new confidence? A new spirit? A Year of Faith? 'Catholic Voices' are beginning to make themselves heard.

It was one of the early saints who said: "The Church may be storm tossed but never wrecked." Peter is still captain. We are on course. "Not the cruise I signed up for?" No. Different. Perhaps even better.

