

Chrism Mass 2013

Recent weeks have been a time of great joy for the Church and the priesthood, but they have also been a time of shame and humiliation. One cardinal finds himself unexpectedly elected Bishop of Rome. Another finds that the long shadows of his past sins have enclosed him in darkness and brought about his downfall – and we have to bear all this after many years of scandal concerning child sexual abuse by priests. We, priests of Jesus Christ, find ourselves deeply affected by these events. We know only too well our own vulnerability, weaknesses and inclinations, and yet we live close to the redeeming grace of Jesus in the sacraments and in his people, to whom we minister. It is this grace of God which has called Francis to be Bishop of Rome – a person who is teaching us the enduring value of humility as the only way to live, preach and serve the Gospel.

The very moving visit of Francis to Benedict touched me greatly. Francis gave Benedict an icon of Our Lady of Humility as a gesture of thanks for his ministry as pope, which Francis described as a humble and gentle pontificate. Those close to Benedict would describe him in this way too, even if this was not the image of him portrayed in the media; and certainly it was his gentleness and concern, aided by a remarkable memory, which was the overriding impression left with anyone who met him face to face.

Francis we have yet to come to know, but he has already given us strong clues as to the nature of his ministry. His name, his secondhand ring, the simplicity of his vestments, his emphasis on the poor – ‘a Church of the poor for the poor – and his black shoes are all being interpreted by the pundits so that we may better know our new shepherd.

One thing we should remember about him is that he is a Jesuit, a companion of St Ignatius of Loyola. His membership of the Society of Jesus must be the most important formative influence in his life. The colour of his shoes may be an indication of something very deep about his inner life – but they don't tell us that much about him except that he

might find them very comfortable. Why break in a new pair of shoes of when there are more important things to do?

The *Spiritual Exercises* are at the heart of Jesuit spirituality. As you know I was privileged to be led through these by a venerable and wise Jesuit last year. There is no doubt that they are a remarkable tool for anyone engaged in the work of the Church, especially evangelisation. For a priest who nowadays inevitably finds he has to spend much time on his own without the support of a community around him, or even housekeeper and curates, they enable the priest to stay focused on his calling.

In the second week of the exercises the retreatant is asked to make a choice: he can follow the standard of Lucifer or the standard of Christ. This is a fascinating meditation because it opens up different levels of meaning that strike right to the heart. The word 'standard' can mean a flag which we follow, or it can mean a guide and yardstick against which we measure our behavior and conviction.

Lucifer was the brightest angel in the firmament but fell from grace because of his pride – he thought that he didn't need God to be as he was, believing that his power and position came not from his creator but from himself. It is so easy for us, as priests, to be beguiled into that way of thinking too. We find ourselves in positions of authority and power, of influence and control, and almost without thinking we can let these go to our head and then we think we are invulnerable. But this is a priesthood of our own making, and not one which has been given to us by the Spirit of God at our Ordination.

Ignatius shows us that we can become overwhelmed by pride without noticing the slippery path we have been following. He suggests that it starts with riches. Of course we are not rich, but we can become attached to possessions and can even accumulate them. These become important to us, and spiritual detachment is hard to achieve when we are weighed down with things and stuff. The next step on this pathway is to seek honours and to revel in them. We can delude ourselves and think we are worthy of such things and feel

as a result that we are better than our fellow human beings, who can be used, abused and misused for our satisfaction. And the third step is pride, and then we find ourselves alongside Lucifer and Adam, blind to ourselves and our God. So it is too easy, very easy indeed, for us to fall from grace because priesthood lends itself greatly to these temptations. In my own life as a priest, I put a lot down to 'weakness' as part our human condition. I ascribe most of my own failings to this and this is my starting point in my ministry with others. But that is not sufficient to describe those failings and shortcomings which have plunged the priesthood into such depths as we find ourselves today. Pride is the problem. Pride is the excessive love of one's own excellence. St Thomas Aquinas rates it in this sense as one of the blackest of sins. By it the creature turns his back upon God, not through weakness or ignorance but solely because in his self-exaltation he is minded not to submit. St Gregory says that we suffer from pride when we regard ourselves as the source of our gifts and talents, or because, even if we admit that God has bestowed them, we believe this to have been in response to our own merits. We can become so full of ourselves, justifying our wrongdoings and weaknesses that before we know it we have been overwhelmed by pride. Riches, honours and pride can never be the norms of the priesthood, or of the Church.

St Ignatius offers us another way: another three step path to follow: poverty, insults and humility – the standard Christ sets us. Already Pope Francis has showed his concern for the poor through words and actions. And humility is the characteristic that marks him out and which he recognises in Pope Benedict.

Poverty is undoubtedly an evil for many people doing their best to make ends meet, to bring up their families and even to struggle for survival. But spiritual detachment and simplicity of life enable us to give true witness to the gospel and to serve the poor with credibility. And I applaud you, the priests of our Diocese of Nottingham, for the simple lifestyles you adopt and your closeness to the poor. Ignatius sees this as necessary for being able to bear the insults and contempt that accompany the life of one who follows Christ closely. The insults we receive in our priestly life because of our celibacy, our

message of love, our Gospel of peace, our standing up for the poor and the underdog, our defence of marriage and family life, because of the shame brought on us by the actions of our brothers and, sometimes, by ourselves can only bring us closer to Christ who was mocked and jeered at during his life, passion and as he was dying on the Cross. The end point of this as a follower of Christ, the ultimate standard by which we are measured is that of humility. The word humility signifies lowliness or submissiveness and it is derived from the Latin *humilitas* or, as St Thomas says, from *humus*, i.e., the earth which is beneath us. St Bernard defines it: 'A virtue by which a man knowing himself as he truly is, abases himself.' This definition coincides with that given by St Thomas: 'The virtue of humility,' he says, 'consists in keeping oneself within one's own bounds.' What good advice!

It is only as humble priests that we will be taken seriously and remain credible. That is the gift that Pope Francis has given to us in a time of crisis for the Church. It is the message that underlies his spirituality as a Jesuit, and that should not surprise us, because it is the Good News lived and preached by Jesus Christ.

May the mysteries of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus, which we will celebrate over the next few days, help us put aside our pride and teach us true humility so that we may be worthy priests of Jesus and servants of his people.

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Bishop of Nottingham

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