

## Address to Young People at the *Faith Summer Conference 2009*



### Introduction

Thank you for inviting me, and I am delighted to be here. It is tremendously impressive seeing so many young people - this augurs well for the future and fills me with hope.

You have asked that I say something about myself before going on to our main theme!  
Here goes !!

- (a) Exactly fifty years ago I offered myself for Priesthood. The Vocations Director of my home Diocese rejected me because of age {25}. On the point of departure, and perhaps he was feeling sorry for me, he then encouraged me to ; " try the Religious, they sometimes take older men". I took him at his word, and, thank God, the Discalced Carmelites guided me to Priesthood in the Westminster Diocese.
- (b) Ordained in 1967, I have been blessed in all my appointments ; Hospital and School Chaplaincy, Diocesan Mission Team, Allen Hall Seminary (Pastoral Director and later Rector), Sub-Administrator and Administrator Westminster Cathedral (Under Cardinal Hume) and 16 years as Bishop (Auxiliary of Westminster and Bishop of Lancaster).
- (c) Happenings in 42 years of Priesthood which have coloured my life and steeled me in ministry ;
  - the experiences of a Mission Team and working in 23 Parishes gave me a great sense of the Diocese.

- Primary School Chaplaincy in my first Parish: there was a fast growing West Indian Catholic population and yet no room for them in the Catholic School! I fought hard to remedy this, but the Governing Body, and the Head Teacher would not budge. This was a great disappointment, but the fight helped in cultivating within me a sense of justice which has been a great blessing throughout my ministry.

#### **(d) Day Centres and Night Shelters**

In this work in Westminster I developed a great empathy with the poor- something which has never left me. I learned that they had much more to give me than I had to give them.

#### **(e) Bishops' Conference**

For fourteen years I Chaired the Committee for Migrants, Asylum Seekers and Travellers. This work necessitated a lot of foreign travel, meetings with Government Departments and Ministers, also other Caring groups. All of this had a profound influence on me and I came to understand more fully the plight of Migrants and Travellers.

#### **(f) The Work of Evangelisation**

This work truly enthalls me and I have learned that the Gospel needs to be preached in its fullness – with honesty, courage and openness. All of us, especially Bishops are 'servants of the Gospel'; we are not masters over it. We are here to tell people what Christ said, not to make people listen to what I think!

I have found that proclaiming the fullness of the teachings of Christ has a startling effect on people, and especially the young, who respond with extraordinary generosity. So I invite and encourage you today to respond generously and courageously to the Good News.

I would like now to speak about the three virtues : Hope, Faith and Love.

## 1) HOPE

- I am convinced that unless we are a people of Hope we will be unable to live joyfully the reality of the Church. Without true Hope we cannot appreciate the tremendous gift that we have received. Without Hope we are unable to translate the promise of eternal life into everyday living. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2090) tells us that 'Hope is the confident expectation of the divine blessing and the beatific vision of God.'

Our Hope rests on the foundation of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. We say during Mass, just after the bread and wine have become the Body and Blood of Christ, *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.*

Because Jesus is risen, because He has sent His Spirit upon the Church and because Christ will return in glory, we are filled with life. We are offered life to the full now, and the promise of eternal life.

- And so I ask: 'are you a person of hope?'  
Does the life of Christ, and the promise of eternal life, have any bearing on the way you live your life? Does the life of Christ guide your actions, your choices?

### Story

***I want to tell you a true story about how hope can transform the most desperate situation through the life-giving power of Jesus. It's the story of the Vietnamese Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan. He was arrested in 1975 by the Communist government and imprisoned without trial for 13 years, 9 of them in solitary confinement.***

***Early on his captivity he was forced to live under house arrest in a remote village, 500 kilometres distant from his diocese. At that time he was the Archbishop of Saigon. He had to endure constant open and secret surveillance by the communist police.***

***He writes: 'Day and night I found myself obsessed with the thought: My people! My people whom I love so dearly: a flock without a shepherd! How can I reach my people, at the very moment when they most need their pastor? The Catholic libraries had been confiscated, schools closed, the men and women religious who taught in the schools forced to work in the rice fields. The separation from my people was a shock that devastated my heart. Then I thought: I will not wait. I will live in the present moment, filling it to the brim with love – but how?'***

***This was the response of hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. The archbishop had lost everything, the outward institutions of the Catholic Church had been destroyed, but because he responded to the gift of hope, grace was able to transform, from that moment, the 13 years of captivity he was to endure. Don't get me wrong, Archbishop Van Thuan suffered terribly, physically, psychologically and spiritually, but hope enabled the Lord to work miracles.***

***The next morning the Archbishop signalled to a 7 year old boy named Quang, who was passing his house returning from 5 am Mass. He asked the boy to get him paper. The boy's family began smuggling old calendars to him on which he secretly wrote messages to his people like St Paul's letters from captivity. Every morning the boy would pick up the pages the bishop had written and take them to his home, where his brothers and sisters would copy the messages by hand to be distributed to various Catholic communities around the country.***

***Writing secretly at night for months, Archbishop Van Thuan composed 1,001 messages that were distributed by the underground Church in Vietnam. Eventually, they were collected together and published as the book, 'The Road to Hope', which was then translated into 7 foreign language editions, taking the imprisoned Archbishop's reflections around the world. The Vietnamese communists could physically intimidate, torture and isolate the***

***Archbishop but they couldn't imprison the Holy Spirit working through his faithfulness and openness to hope.***

- The person of Hope knows that the living God holds everything in His hands. God guides and directs all things to His purpose. This means that God has a plan – I am not saying only that God has an overall plan for creation – but God has a personal plan for you.

Even when sinfulness and suffering try to interfere in God's plan, God can always bring good out of suffering and light out of darkness. This is the Hope which the resurrection brings: the suffering of the cross and the darkness of the tomb are overcome, abolished, when Christ walks in triumph out of death.

This is the hope which we hold: a hope founded on God's plan and God's triumph.

Hope is surely a virtue especially for young people. Be open to God's plan for you and be courageous in your response.

- The world you are growing up in is very different from the world in which I was a young seminarian and priest. At that time Ireland and England were still 'Christian' countries. By this I mean that the Christian moral ethos was still accepted by the people and institutions as normative for how the majority of people lived and how the law of the land was framed. Also, the Church was seen as an authoritative voice that was expected to be a source of wisdom and guidance about questions of ultimate concern.

Sadly, for various reasons, you are growing up in a country where the majority of people are totally misinformed about the nature and history of Christianity due to anti-Christian propaganda being passed off as 'neutral facts' by the educational and media elites.

In a society that promotes so called tolerance and respect for cultural diversity, anti-Catholicism is the last acceptable

prejudice. The Holy Father, like Pope John Paul the Great before him, is regularly the object of poisonous ridicule and vilification that would not be acceptable against any other religious leader.

Also, weekly now we hear of Christian nurses, social workers, civil servants and pharmacists being disciplined and even sacked for professing their faith in the work place!

- Cardinal Van Thuan needed hope to witness to the Faith before a 'hard' totalitarian regime. Each one of us here will need the gift of hope to witness to the Faith before the 'soft' totalitarian influences emerging in this country, and in much of Europe and the USA.

In the face of such hostility and intolerance it would have been easy for Catholics to withdraw from social work, the medical profession, politics and public life and retreat into the private sphere. And this is what the enemies of true Christianity wanted!

God is calling you. He has a plan for you for the good of the wider Church. It is the virtue of Hope which helps you to overcome your initial hesitation and misgivings. What is more, this virtue of Hope makes it possible for you to conquer the voices of doubt, especially when you think you are unable to follow Christ or not worthy to do so. Hope tells us that He has His plan for you and will give you everything you need to be able to do His work.

## **2) FAITH**

- The second virtue which I would like to speak about is Faith. I encourage you to be a person of vibrant, confident and inquisitive Faith.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (179) tells us that 'Faith is a supernatural gift from God.' In other words, in order to believe we need the presence and help of the Holy Spirit.

I believe that the Holy Spirit is offered to every human being to ignite Faith. Every human being is invited to respond to this gift in a conscious and free act of Faith.

You young people are being called, invited to respond to God's gift of Faith in you by giving this conscious and free act of believing. Our Faith-response to God's gift to us, is to be a personal adherence to God which involves the whole of who we are. Faith, then, in us should be adherence of the mind and the will; it is to be shown in our thoughts, our feelings, our actions and expressed in our bodies.

- What do I mean by *adherence*? What I mean by *adherence* is to *stick fast to*. So, with our whole person, with everything that we are, with our minds, our hearts, our actions and our bodies we *stick fast to* God. We stick fast to God in a personal way and we stick fast to the Truth God has revealed.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (177) says, 'To believe has a twofold reference: to the person and to the truth.' What it is saying is that: to believe reaches out in two ways – it reaches out to the person of Christ – and it reaches out to the Truth Christ shows.

When a Christian says, 'I believe', she or he is saying to God, 'I believe in you', and she or he is also saying, 'I believe what you have revealed, what you have shown to us.' In fact, we can say that it is precisely because of our Faith in the person of Jesus that we believe what He reveals about the truth of God, the truth of the world and the truth about what it means to be a human being.

- One of the best examples of this is to be found in the Gospel according to John Chapter 6. Let me set the scene. Jesus is in the town of Capernaum and has been teaching in the synagogue. The synagogue was the place in any town outside Jerusalem where the Jews met to pray, and to study the Scriptures and the Law of God. Many people were following Jesus at that time. They were impressed with His words and

they were attracted by His miracles. In fact, you could say that so far He had been a great success. So far...! In the course of His teaching He said, clearly and without any ambiguity, something which many of them found very difficult to understand and almost impossible to accept. Jesus told them, 'Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you cannot have life in you.' (Jn6, 53)

Many in the crowd were so appalled by this that they reacted violently against him, or with incomprehension, and began to leave Him. Disciples, followers, friends and allies said that these words were 'intolerable', and they walked away – they left Him.

- What do you think was Christ's response? Did He chase after them and tell them He would change His teaching? Did He suggest that they could explore ways of making this teaching 'tolerable'? Did He promise that if they came back He would find a way of expressing it which was perhaps less direct and extreme? No – He did not!

This is because He was not expressing a policy, but a truth. A policy can be modified, manipulated and changed. A policy can be 'spun', as the modern expression goes, so that it will gain agreement.

But a Truth remains a truth and does not change; it cannot be manipulated, modified and certainly not 'spun'. A Truth does not change, but it develops as the consequences of the teaching are seen in ever widening circles.

Not only did Jesus not chase after those who walked away – He then turned to those who remained standing close to Him. He turned to face the twelve apostles and He said, 'Will you also walk away?' (Jn6 67)

- It was St Peter who spoke up on behalf of the twelve apostles. He said, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.' (Jn6 68-9)

Do you see how Peter responded? His believing reached out to the person, Jesus: Peter believes the person: he believes that this man Jesus from Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of God. And because Peter trusts the person, so he believes the message: 'You have the words of eternal life.'

This is what the *Catechism* means when it says, 'To believe has a twofold reference: to the person and to the truth.' (CCC177)

- You are believers; that is why you have come to this conference. I am a believer with you. Sometimes we find believing difficult, a challenge. Look at me; I am 75 years old – a priest and a Bishop. I too sometimes struggle. I struggle to live-out my belief; I struggle to understand the mystery of God; I struggle to express it and to teach it; I don't often *feel* faith. Whenever I experience these occasions of struggle I turn to Jesus, taking St. Peter as my guide and say: 'Lord, to whom shall I go? You have the words of eternal life.'

Peter saw clearly, before he fully understood, that Jesus' words are not the words of a social policy but words of truth, words of life and words which point the way. Believers in Jesus like St Peter, like me and you, we strive to follow His way simply because He has said it – and we trust in Him, even more than this, we love Him, we love him with all our hearts and minds and strength.

So Jesus turns to me and you today and He addresses us with the same words He said to Peter, 'Will you also walk away?'

- I want to tell you another true story, about a young Chinese Catholic who would not walk away from her Lord:

### Story

***During the 1940's when the communist revolutionaries took over Mainland China, a persecution of the Catholic Church began throughout the country. One day the Red Army came to a town that had a Catholic community and parish church. They imprisoned the parish priest in his own presbytery near the Church. After they locked him up***

***in his own house, the priest was horrified to look out of his window and see the Communists proceed into the Church, where they went into the sanctuary and broke into the tabernacle. In an act of desecration, they took the ciborium and threw it on the floor with all of the Sacred Hosts spilling out. The priest knew exactly how many Hosts were in the ciborium: thirty-two.***

***When the Communists left, they either did not notice, or didn't pay any attention to a small 11 year old girl praying in the back of the Church who saw everything that had happened. It must have been then that she made up here mind not to walk away from her Lord.***

***That night the little girl came back. Slipping past the guard at the priest's house, she went inside the Church. There she made a holy hour of prayer, an act of love to make up for the act of hatred. After her holy hour she went into the sanctuary, knelt down, bent over and with her tongue received Jesus in Holy Communion, (since in those days before Vatican II it was not permissible for laymen to touch the Sacred Host with their hands.)***

***The little girl continued to come back each night to make her holy hour and receive Jesus in Holy Communion on her tongue. On the thirty-second night, after she had consumed the last and thirty-second host, she accidentally made a noise and woke the guard who was sleeping. He ran after her, caught her, and beat her to death with the butt of his rifle. This act of heroic martyrdom was witnessed by the priest as he watched grief-stricken from his bedroom window.***

- I feel totally humble before the faith of this young girl, who so loved the Lord that every night for 32 nights she risked her life to protect and adore the Eucharistic presence of the Lord. I don't know if I would have had the same courage as this brave Catholic, none of us will know until we are faced with a similar choice.

Usually, the choices facing us are not so stark and dramatic, but you will all face choices in your lives to stick with the truth or walk away from the truth. At present we are witnessing a mass apostasy from the faith in this country and the rest of Europe. Even some of the Catholics remaining in the Church, attending Mass, are walking away from the Lord by rejecting the truth of the Faith as preserved and taught by the Pope and those Bishops who remain in communion with him.

We are witnessing a crisis in the Church regarding obedience to the teaching authority of the Church. People are replacing the Magisterium of the Pope and Bishops with the pseudo-Magisterium of the autonomous conscience, which has been reduced to the exercise of personal preferences and choices.

In certain circles in the Church, the Faith – as expressed in its fullness in the Catechism of the Catholic Church – is seen as outrageous and intolerable. But instead of walking away they stay in the Church and pretend not to have heard what the Lord has said, or behave as if he meant to say something else entirely. At least Jesus' first disciples had the honesty and integrity to walk away!

The disloyalty and disobedience of so many contemporary Catholics is so far removed from the loyalty and obedience of the young Chinese martyr as to be unrecognisable as being the Catholic faith.

- However, I am confident, looking out at all these young faces, faces which express hope, faith and love, that you will respond as Peter did. Just trust in Jesus and, whatever your struggles, whatever your challenges and failings, cling to the words of Jesus as the words of truth, words of life and words which point the way.
- This brings me to another aspect of Faith. Just as Faith has a twofold reference (as the CCC says) and 'reaches out' to the Person and the Truth; so also, I would suggest, Faith is both 'taught' and 'caught'.

What I mean is this: Faith, we know, is a gift from God. This gift invites a response from the individual – a response in Faith, to believe. But this response is not made in isolation. It is personal to each of us but it is not disconnected from others who believe. What I mean is that in order for Faith to be 'caught' (by the individual) it needs to be 'taught' (to the individual).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (166) says, 'No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith just as you have not given yourself life...Each believer is a link in the great chain of believers.'

What a wonderful image! We are all links in a chain, a chain which stretches past our teachers and parents and priests, past our grandparents, past the great saints of the long-ago, all the way back to the apostles and St Peter, who spoke to Jesus face to face.

Recognising this 'great chain of believers', brings about two consequences: Faith needs to be taught; once it is caught, Faith needs to be lived.

- Faith is taught. It is now the Church which carries into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century those 'words of eternal life' which St Peter recognised on the lips of Jesus. Christ has given his Spirit and His Truth to the Church.

The Church is the living 'chain of believers'. I ask you young people, I encourage you, I exhort you, I entreat you – as an older and, dare I presume, wiser link in the 'great chain': listen to the Church! Follow her ways! Make her teachings your own! The Church speaks for Christ; she carries his words, words of eternal life.

Faith is 'taught' by the Church. She puts out the teaching of Christ to be 'caught' by you. And when you have caught it, live it! When you live it you become teachers of the Faith too – by your example. You are part of that 'great chain of believers' and others will link to you and come after you.

Remember earlier I said, 'Faith is an adherence of the mind and will' – it is a 'sticking fast' to Christ and His teaching, which

involves our thoughts and desires. It is expressed in our actions and our bodies. In other words, the whole me believes and adheres to Christ and His truths – at least this is what we strive for.

And so strive to adhere with the mind! Take opportunities to understand your faith, ask questions, investigate answers, explore ways of expressing faith, listen and discuss. Let the truth of Christ form your mind. God does not intend us to be blind in our faith, but open-eyed; use your minds to believe.

Faith is also an adherence of the will. That is, the believer says, 'I want to be close to God, I want to give myself to God.' The believer says, 'I want to receive and live the truths which God reveals, which God shows to me.'

### **3) LOVE**

- This brings me to the last virtue which I would like to explore with you. I have said that we should be people of Hope, we should be people of Faith. Now I say, the Good News compels us to be people of Love.
- St Therese of Lisieux, whose relics will be touring the country in September, said, 'If the Church was a body composed of different members, it couldn't lack the noblest of all; *it must have a Heart, and a Heart BURNING WITH LOVE*. And I realize that *this love alone* was the true motive force which enabled the other members of the Church to act; if it ceased to function, the Apostles would forget to preach the gospel, the Martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. LOVE, IN FACT, IS THE VOCATION WHICH INCLUDES ALL OTHERS; IT'S A UNIVERSE ALL OF ITS OWN, COMPRISING ALL TIME AND SPACE – IT'S ETERNAL!' (*Story of a Soul*. Capitals are of the saint).

Love is the heart of the Church. Love is the heart of the believer, the person of hope, the person of faith, the Christian and Catholic.

Notice that this young woman, St Therese, the same age as many of you here, grasped this most important point – Love is

the motivating force, for the apostle to preach, for the martyr to die: can I also add, it is the motivating force for the Bishop to teach the truth, for the priest to preach and lead, for the deacon to serve, for the religious sister to give her life to the Church, for the Mother and Father of families to give and nurture life; and, dare I say? Love is the motivation for you as a young person to use your idealism and your energy to step away from that which is attractive but so destructive in our present culture and say, 'I will not live as a slave to money, celebrity, hedonism and empty passion.'

- I'd like to tell you this true story from the life of St Therese that shows us the power of love to conquer the darkness of doubt:

### **Story**

***A person of deep and committed faith since her childhood, Therese was tormented by the agony of trials and temptations against the faith during the last months of her life as she physically struggled with TB, and the disappointment she had to endure of not going to Saigon, to be a missionary in Vietnam. She describes her trial of faith as the 'night of nothingness'.***

***About it she wrote: 'The darkness, borrowing the voice of sinners, says mockingly to me: "You are dreaming about the light, about heaven; you are dreaming about the eternal possession of the creator of all these marvels; you believe that one day you will walk out of this fog which surrounds you! Advance, advance; rejoice in death which will give not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.'***

***Therese then writes these startling words, 'I don't want to write any longer about it; I fear I might blaspheme; I fear even that I have already said too much!'***

- Therese was faced with the dimming of hope, the loss of faith, which to be honest many, if not most of us, have to face at some time in our lives.

**The obvious question that this episode from Therese's life is, How did she endure the thought of the 'night of nothing'? How did she persevere through these temptations against the faith?**

**Love is the answer, her love for Jesus, and for her fellow Carmelite sisters and for the whole of mankind! Therese had an intense love for the person of Jesus expressed in her devotion to His Holy face.**

**Her response to the temptations against the faith was to deepen her devotion to the face of Jesus. This is what she writes:**

**'Lord, hide us in the secret of your Face! The smallest movement of Pure Love is of more use to the Church than all other works. So it is of the utmost importance that our souls practise love much, so that consuming themselves rapidly, they scarcely stop here below and promptly come to see Jesus, Face to Face.'**

- Therese thinks intensely of this Face to Face encounter with Jesus which she hopes for in the blackness of temptations against the faith. So, instead of trying to run away from the darkness, Therese expresses her love with greater devotion to Jesus.

This is why it is so important that now in the vigour and health of your youth you foster devotional practices, such as the Rosary and Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, so that grace can build up your relationship of love with the Lord.

Love will enable you to embrace Christ and His truths, and weather the trials and temptations that life will inevitably bring. If you have a strong devotional life to Jesus and Mary, you will not be tempted to forget God during the dark times.

- In my document, *Fit for Mission? Church* I wrote a passage which provoked an extraordinary response in the Church in Britain. I did not expect it to do so because what I wrote is nothing more than what our Church teaches. I would like to read those words to you now:

'Pope John Paul II once observed that the Catholic Churches in Europe were 'tempted to a dimming of hope', with Christians sharing in the bewilderment, disorientation, uncertainty and hopelessness of fellow Europeans. The Holy Father concluded that at the heart of this continental state of agitation and distress was a 'forgetfulness of God', through the promotion of a vision of man apart from God, apart from Christ. (Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa*, 9).

I would also propose that for those within the Church who have not succumbed to a 'forgetfulness of God', some are at times showing signs of forgetfulness about being Catholic! As your bishop, observing this forgetfulness taking place among us has been a source of great sadness to me:

- Those who ignore their responsibility to God and neighbour, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who deliberately miss Sunday Mass, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who never pray, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who deny they are sinners and avoid confession, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who live oblivious to the suffering of the poor, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who dissent from the authority of the Church, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who use contraception, IVF and embryonic stem cell research, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who use pornography, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who have sex outside of marriage, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who sexually abuse others, particularly children, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who commit homosexual acts, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who procure an abortion or assist another to have an abortion, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who exploit their power and position, forget they are Catholic.

- Those who physically or psychologically bully another, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who cheat on benefits or taxes, forget they are Catholic.
- Those employers who exploit their workforce, forget they are Catholic.
- Those who have racist, sexist or homophobic attitudes, forget they are Catholic.'

I went on to say that we must wake from the weariness that has taken hold of the Church in this country and renew our strength and vitality – to remember again what it is to be a Christian and a Catholic.

I propose to you today that it is Love, the kind of love St Therese speaks of, the beating heart of the Church and the Christian, which can wake us up and renew our strength and life.

Therefore, going back to my 'list of forgetfulness', I would like to express it from the point of view of Love compelling us and urging us:

The one who loves:

- Will not ignore their responsibility to God and neighbour.
- Will not deliberately miss Sunday Mass.
- Will pray to God as a loving Father.
- Will not deny they are sinners and avoid confession.
- Cannot live oblivious to the suffering of the poor.
- Will not dissent from the authority of the Church.
- Will not use contraception, IVF and embryonic stem cell research.
- Will not use pornography.
- Will not have sex outside of marriage.
- Will not sexually abuse others.
- Will not procure or have an abortion
- Will not commit homosexual acts.
- Will not exploit their power and position.
- Will not bully others.
- Will not cheat on benefits or taxes.
- Will not exploit their workforce.
- Will not have racist, sexist or homophobic attitudes.

- My dear young people, the Church, that 'living chain of believers', is passing to you. You are a new generation of followers of Christ. Be generous! Be courageous! Be a people of Hope! Be faith-filled and faithful to Christ and his Church.

And binding all these things, integrating them, making them alive: let love of Christ, of His Church and of His people be the Beating Heart of your life!

**+Patrick O'Donoghue, Emeritus Bishop of Lancaster**