**Homily for the Feast of St Boniface – Cathedral, Plymouth**

Happy Feast of St Boniface! It is really good to be able to say that to you and so good to be here this morning with you and to celebrate this great man who grew up in our diocese and who received his Christian formation here. I am particularly pleased to see the Chapter of Canons here and it is good not to be greeting you behind a grill! You will all know St Boniface well but I hope you will not mind if I share some simple thoughts on him. It’s just that I find myself encountering this great Missionary monk in a new way since living here.

Today he speaks to us across the centuries. He does so by helping us to discover what it means to be pastors who evangelise, pastors who remain united with the Apostolic See, and pastors who recognise the unity between a fully human culture and our faith.

You will know that Boniface – known as Wilibrod at that time - was first evangelised as a boy by holy missionaries who were entertained in his home. The faith is these islands was less than one hundred years old when various priests came to this part of the country. Boniface was struck by their humility and their goodness. Their witness became the source of his conversion. We should never doubt what our witness can bring to those around us, even when this witness seems not to bear immediate fruit.

Boniface knew the effect of silent witness. He also knew the reality of failure in his own proclamation of the Gospel for his first mission to Friesland went nowhere. He returned to England after two years seemingly with his dreams of being a missionary in tatters. But he did not stop.

After a number of years and comforted and sustained by a visit to Pope Gregory II, and with the Pope's support, Boniface embarked on the preaching of the Gospel in Germany. He fought against pagan worship and reinforced the foundations of human and Christian morality. With a deep sense of his call, and ours, he wrote in one of his letters: "We are united in the fight on the Lord's Day, because days of affliction and wretchedness have come.... We are not mute dogs or silent observers or mercenaries fleeing from wolves! On the contrary, we are diligent Pastors who watch over Christ's flock, who proclaim God's will to leaders and ordinary folk, to the rich and the poor... in season and out of season..." (cf. Epistulae, 3,352.354: mgh).

Here is a Shepherd after the heart of the Lord. In many ways I think St Boniface could be declared the Patron Saint of the New Evangelisation in our diocese as he encourages us never to doubt that we are called to evangelise nor to underestimate the power of our witness in the faithful offering of our lives. We do so, ‘in season and out of season’.

The second most important element that emerges from the life of Boniface is his faithful communion with the Apostolic See. The Successors of Pope Gregory II also held him in the highest esteem. Gregory III appointed him Archbishop of all the Germanic tribes – the Bishop of the whole of Germany! He sent him the pallium and granted him the faculties to organize the ecclesiastical hierarchy in those regions (cf. Epist. 28: S. Bonifatii Epistulae, ed. Tangl, Berolini 1916). Pope Zacchary confirmed him in his office and praised his dedication (cf. Epist. 51, 57, 58, 60, 68, 77, 80, 86, 87, 89: op. cit.). In a letter to this Pope, Boniface writes, "I never cease to invite and to submit to obedience to the Apostolic See those who desire to remain in the Catholic faith and in the unity of the Roman Church and all those whom God grants to me as listeners and disciples in my mission" (Epist. 50: in ibid., p. 81).

One result of this commitment was the steadfast spirit of cohesion around the Successor of Peter which Boniface transmitted to the Church in his mission territory, uniting England, Germany and France with Rome. These Christian roots of Europe were to produce abundant fruit in the centuries that followed.

We live in a time when Europe has in many ways become tired of its Christian roots. We also live in an Ecumenical age. Now, more than ever, we must hold true to the centrality of our esteem and love for the Holy Father as successor of St Peter. How vital is this office for the unity of the whole Church and the coherence of our witness. I believe that the Chapter of Canons and I can encourage one another to remain faithful to this deep Catholic instinct and truth.

Boniface also deserves our attention for a third intuition. He encouraged the encounter between Christian culture and the local cultures in which he lived, even if they seemed at first to be far from the Gospel. Indeed, he knew that humanizing and evangelizing culture was an integral part of his mission. For example he composed a treatise on the *Ars grammatica* in which he explained the declinations, verbs and syntax of the Latin language. Please don’t fall asleep! But this was for him not some heady exercise, but a means of reaching more people, of providing education so that all encountered a deeply Christian spirit and sensibility which helped them live in a more human way. In passing on the ancient Tradition of Christian values, he grafted on to the Germanic populations a new, more human life. As a true son of St Benedict, he was able to combine prayer and work, the pen and the plough.

We must ask ourselves what would be the *Ars grammatica* of our day? I do not have any easy answers to that question. But surely part of it must be an engagement with the world of information technology and the internet highway. For all of its problems and challenges we must use it as a vehicle to continue to engage with the culture especially of our young people. They need to be helped to develop fully in their own humanity and in their appreciation and love of Christ and His Church, and we must use the tools and methods which they inhabit and which can reach them.

Boniface's courageous witness is an invitation to us all to welcome God's word into our lives, to love the Church passionately, to feel a common responsibility for her future, to seek her unity around the Successor of Peter. At the same time, he reminds us that Christianity, by encouraging the dissemination of culture, furthers human progress. It is now up to us to respond to such a wonderful heritage and to make our witness fruitful for the benefit of this generation and those to come.

There is one last thought which moves me very deeply. Boniface's ardent zeal for the Gospel stayed with him his whole life long; it never fails to impress whatever our age. At the age of 41 he left a beautiful and fruitful monastic life, the life of a teacher and man of prayer, in order to proclaim the Gospel to the stranger and the simple. Yet again, almost at the age of 80, he went to a region in which he foresaw his martyrdom, and indeed it happened. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for his sheep, not once, but continually.

By comparing his ardent faith with our own often lukewarm faith, we see what we must do. We see how we are to renew our faith by drawing close to Christ. We must do so in order to give the precious pearl of the Gospel as a gift in our time.

St Boniface Pray for us……..

Rt Rev Mark O’Toole

Bishop of Plymouth

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