



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

"The Priestly Heart"

A reflection on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of all Priests.

We want today to give thanks to God for the gift of the priesthood, and to pray for the sanctification of all priests. We believe that the Merciful love of God that passes through the Heart of Jesus brought forth the great mystery of the priesthood. I want especially, to thank God for those celebrating a Jubilee this year. You remind each of us as priests, today, to give thanks for the gift of priesthood. I am sure that each one of us looks back to the day of our ordination with a sense of deep joy. We are grateful to God for His fidelity to us through the years, and grateful, too, for the people who have accompanied us in those years.

Many things may have changed. Certainly, when we look at ourselves, the hair may be lighter in quantity and in colour. The figure may be more substantial. Perhaps health is not so robust. But one thing that has remained throughout those years; the priestly heart. To each priest, I want to say today, "Thank you". Especially in these challenging months I know that many, many people have cause to be grateful for your fidelity, your generosity and your kindness. We all give thanks to God for your faithful priestly ministry.

You know, I grew up in a home where the image of the Sacred Heart was kept in our entrance hallway, in a place of honour. It usually had an electric votive light before it, which was rather gaudy, it has to be said. Yet there was something very comforting about opening the door to our flat and seeing this image aglow. It spoke of safety and security, the warm embrace of home. The light before the Sacred Heart was kept on all through the night. I remember especially as a teenager how its gentle glow provided a tender light in the dark as I returned home from

various social nights out.

We believe that in Jesus' heart we discover our deepest place of safety and security. There we are to make our home. He is the one who lights our way and illumines a path in the darkness. Devotion to the Sacred Heart is rooted in the truth that in Jesus, for the first time, the infinite love of God found a fitting resonance in the heart of a human being. In meditating on His Sacred Heart, we discover the true nature of who Jesus is. His was a heart on fire with love for His Father, seeking the Father's will and always at One in His heart with the Father. At the same time, His was a heart on fire for our world, especially for those most in need. The Gospels are filled with the accounts of Jesus' compassion, His service of the poor, and His loving outreach to those who seemed furthest from God.

Out of love for the world, he went to the Cross. To bring us, once more, access to the Father's house. From his wounded side flows blood and water, a sign to us of that great gift of the Sacraments, born from the open heart of the Saviour. In the sacraments, the infinite and the finite meet. What we see, touch, taste is one thing. What is given - God's life - is another. We long for that day when the sacraments may be celebrated fully in our Churches and all have access to them, once more.

In the priesthood, too, finite and infinite meet. St. John Vianney reminds us, "The priesthood is the love of the heart of Christ." The priest does not act on his own. The heart of the priest is united in a unique way to the heart of Jesus, who called him to this beautiful but challenging life. Today, perhaps more than ever, we priests are called to be men of prayer, abiding always in the heart of Jesus. We must be willing to die to ourselves, so that we can live more fully in the One who called us and made us His priests. At the same time, a priest must be a man for others. We are called to have the heart of the shepherd, always ready to lay down our lives for the sake of the sheep entrusted to our care.

Our sanctification rests in looking in two directions - to God, and to His people. We know we are weak, sinful. Sometimes we fail. We get

things wrong. We hurt others and need to seek forgiveness. All this the Lord knows, but He continues to call us. We are to deepen our own intimacy with Jesus, to rest in His heart and find there, the home which we need. We are sanctified, too, through our service of others, and to be for them a manifestation of the heart of Jesus

May I conclude these reflections by wishing all priests a very happy and blessed day today. May it be a day filled with the joy of the remembrance of your ordination day, in gratitude to God for His faithfulness to us, and in gratitude to God's Holy People, for their love, and personal accompaniment of us.

May we each make our home in the Sacred Heart of Jesus and find there the fulfilment of our lives and the resting place for all our longings.

Please pray for me.

God Bless you.

+Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth