

Address of the President of the Maynooth Union to Annual Dinner

7 June 2016

Archbishop Martin, members of the Irish Episcopal Conference, Very Rev. President, Fellow Priests, members of staff, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Is occaid fíor specialta nuair a thagann easbaig agus sagairt ó Mha Nuad agus a gcairde le cheile chun chaidreamh agus comhra faoi na laethanta atá thart agus atá le teacht. Cuirim failte roimh go leir agus tá suil agam go mbainfaidh sibh as an tam seo. Bunaíodh Cumann na Sagart le linn an Maynooth Union in 1916. Traoslaim leo agus gabhaim buíochas leo as ucht an obair iontach atá deanta acu. Guim rath De orthu ins na blianta atá le teacht.

The Maynooth Union is a remarkable Body of priests with a distinguished history of achievement. It is a great honour to welcome you all to this Maynooth Union Day of 2016. This Union is a union of people dedicated to service as a way of life, to faith as the fuel of that life, especially important in this year of Mercy and dedicated to love God and neighbour in a sometimes unsettling world. Inevitably we differ in our level of faith and service and the Lord decides how many years of life we are given to serve but we thank God for the good we do and continue to hope to do.

It is then a very special joy to welcome the priests here who have served their people for sixty or more years; to the Diamond Jubilarians I say special congratulations. Thanks and the very choicest blessings on this special day; you have borne the heat of the long days without getting too burnt! The union is delighted to welcome you back down memory lane and hope you are travelling happily there.

I welcome and salute the Golden Jubilarians of the Class of 1966. I welcome with particular warmth Bishops Hegarty, Lee and Murray

and thank them for their episcopal service in sometimes convulsing times. I congratulate you all on your long service and on the way you have dealt with the last 50 years. You are the babes of Vatican 11 and have grown gracefully with it, the sands shifted but you successfully made the crossing. I thank you for the goodness and hope you have inspired in so many people in that time. I congratulate too with warm personal memories the Silver Jubilarians; I hope they are experiencing joy and fulfilment in their ministry and still profit from the wisdom, they received from their Maynooth teachers or at worst that they have not forgotten some of us taught them! I thank them for the prayerful Mass and homily to-day and wish them every blessing in the years ahead. Finally I welcome all the other classes who are celebrating to-day, hopefully still strong in faith and healthy in body.

To live in the present Era with its marvels and its horrors challenges us to face almost overpowering questions of faith and practice. To help us on our journey into the future we look to great people of our past and present - our Saints, our Prophets, our Leaders and all people of goodwill to inspire and enliven us.

In Ireland, this year we are remembering and celebrating the events of 1916. We must not forget or fail to celebrate the faith of the men and women involved and we must remember too the devoted service they sought and received from the Priests of the Dublin Diocese. One of those who died was Thomas McDonagh, a native of Cloughjordan and of the Diocese of Killaloe.

In January, 1912 he married Muriel Gifford, a sister of Grace Gifford, who married Joseph Mary Plunkett before he was executed in 1916 and whom we remember in the song "Grace".

Thomas McDonagh celebrated his new wife in the following lovely words:

"Now no bitter songs I sing;

Summer flows for me now;
For the spirit of the Spring;
Breathes upon the living bough;
All poor leaves of why and how?
Fall before this wonder, dead:

Joy is given to me now, In the love of her I wed.”

Surely a tribute to true love and to the God who is love.

Pope Francis in his recent Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* writes feelingly about the culture influence of our modern mastery of science and technology. He analyses what he calls “the excessive anthropocentrism” which today under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds” He calls for a new spirituality and a new life style. He makes it clear that for us Christians openness to the God of Love who is present in our cosmos, our world and our history is an essential driving force to this new way of being .He points to the Eucharist “as the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of an exhaustible light” (p.117) Surely a massive challenge to those who celebrate and the priests who preside. And indeed in speaking of the cosmic Eucharist he warns us in a Pentecost homily of the “threat of an institution which is self referential closed in on itself.” He speaks of the courage “to take to the streets of the world and to reach the very outskirts of existence”.

Are we priests ready for this, are the parishes ready for this, is the church ready for this or dare I ask is it too late? I find myself, at times anxious about the institutional and perhaps middle class church I work with; great people but with a long history of institutional direction and facing towards the middle rather than towards the outskirts of existence. I visited Sceilg Mhchil recently and became uncomfortably aware that my spirituality could not even imagine

living like these Christians of earlier times! The outskirts or the margins can be difficult when one is happier near the center; the streets can be rough when you live in a house with double locks and surveillance cameras; and in this year of mercy we pray that the merciful father will deepen our faith, broaden our horizons, strengthen our hope and love and forgive us the failings that we have as human beings living in a world and church trying to find a new direction. Above all, give us courage.

Courage and renewed hope from the fact that the priest is still a welcome and important presence in the lives of people at the times they need him most: the struggles of life and their moments of joy. It is at these times when the priest is most compassionate, loving and tender that people realise his important role as witness to Christ in our world. The Christian understanding may still have to find its feet in a world of rapid change but men and women still want to experience the life found in the gospel, preached by the priest and lived in the church. This room contains an enormous reservoir of that priestly relationship between priest, people and Christ which offers hope and energy to cooperate with God for a spirit filled future and a holy church in a needing world.

A word of thanks to the Maynooth Union Committee and to Paul Prior, its energetic secretary, for all his work and help in organising this impressive event.

We share a great calling and great opportunities. We thank God for all the great good and wonderful energy of the Maynooth priest at home and abroad. We look forward with joy and hope in our hearts. I am uplifted by the words of Thomas McDonagh which I quoted earlier:

“Now no bitter songs I sing;

Summer flows for me now;

For the spirit of the Spring;
Breathes upon the living bough;”

My wish for all of you who celebrate priesthood today is that you find new joy and peace and I pray that the summer flows for you now and always. May the Lord help us to trust in his presence and realise his kingdom in heaven and on earth.

Ad multos annos