

Episcopal Ordination of Raymond Brown

Speaking Notes of Father Séamus O'Connell

Whatever else one can say about Martha in this gospel story we have just heard, she is not indifferent. Like the Good Samaritan—whom we met last Sunday, she sees the need of the other. She sees the need of Jesus and his disciples and, in compassion, opens her home to them. But unlike the Samaritan, Martha has her limits. Her frustration and fatigue show themselves before the day is out. Like us all, she has her expectations: she expects her sister to support her in serving and she expects Jesus to acknowledge what's going on. But support she does not get! The Lord does not indulge her justified complaint. He doesn't engage with it at all. He puts something else before her: the action of her sister, who, "was sitting at the Lord's feet and listening to his word." (Luke 10:39)

Martha—and we—are left open-mouthed before Jesus. The tension is NOT resolved. And that tension reaches down into this Cathedral and into this Diocese today. Her fatigue is like the fatigue that characterizes being part of the Church in Ireland in these days and years. We are more like Martha than we think!

We often feel that things have passed the Church by, that the action is elsewhere, that people no longer remember or appreciate the huge work in education, the hospitals, the outreach, the service to emigrants, the heroic sacrifice of missionaries, in every corner of the globe, beautiful young women and men who literally gave everything for the sake of Christ—and who in the latter part of the 19th century and especially all through the 20th gave ... and gave ... and gave. That appears to have faded. All that appears to be left is the memory and the hurt from the betrayals and failures. And failures there have been. And betrayals.

We fool ourselves if we think that the leaching of life from the Church is to be ascribed solely to the horrific betrayals, and failures and the inaction which followed for so long. The real roots of the fatigue and of the lack of life in the Church in Ireland ... and indeed in Europe lie elsewhere. They lie at the heart of what is happening between Martha and the Lord.

Martha has her limits! Martha's big and generous and strong heart has blinded her to another part of life. Her generosity has blinded to the the other, to the guest. There is the person who is to be met. Martha is so busy giving that she cannot receive her guest. She is so preoccupied with looking after her guests, that she does not look at them. She looks through them.¹ But the Lord asks not just be served, but to be attended to! Without attending to him, her serving makes little sense. Like in a marriage, the shared project, the shared activity, makes little sense without the shared life. You know what I mean.

In the early Summer of 1989, the Diocese of Stuttgart got a new bishop, just like ourselves. In his first pastoral letter—which he titled, "A Letter to the Parishes of the Diocese," that new bishop noted that

without our own personal conversion, all the reforms—even the most necessary and well intentioned—will fail and, without our own personal renewal, will end in empty activism. Without listening to the Word, without discerning the will of God, without a spirit of adoration and without constant prayer, there will be neither renewal of the church nor new evangelisation in Europe.²

That was 24 years ago! What Bishop Walter Kasper had to say to the parishes of Stuttgart, still holds for parishes across Ireland today!

In a way, that is what Jesus puts before Martha! And the Church was and is a community of Marthas! WE are—a community of Marthas! But the Church in its fullness is a community of Marthas before the Lord. And here is the heart of the matter: before the Lord. Jesus invites Martha to remain in his presence, to be present to him, as he is to her.

What the Lord puts before Martha, is neither easy nor rapid. In the real world, change is slow, very slow and miracles have to be discerned.

This still remains new territory for us in Ireland; this way of being Church. There are some who would say that the Church in Europe is broken and needs to be fixed. It might be wiser to say that Church in Ireland, as we know it is leaving one place, and the Lord is bringing us to a new place; the second reading today:

‘When you were dead ... God made you alive along with [Christ]’ (Col 2:13)

It is God who does this, who brings us from death to life, from a dying Church to a living Church. The journey from death to life is not an easy journey for people in the real world. However, we are not alone: the Holy Spirit is in our hearts (see Romans 5:5) and our Father in heaven gives the Spirit of the live-giving Lord to all who ask (Luke 11:13; next Sunday’s gospel).

Our diocese is under the patronage of St Brendan, a person of faith and courage who set out on uncharted waters. Today, in Brendan’s wake, Raymond Brown is ordained as Bishop of Kerry. It is a very important day for us. It is a day of joy and a day of hope for all of us who comprise the Body of Christ in this place.

Ray, you come to us as a person of significant pastoral experience and administrative skill, and more—as a person of integrity and openness, a person of faith, a man of gentleness and respect, compassion and concern. You are someone who will be able to build on the significant legacies of our bishops since the Council, and who will gather us and find a way with us, as we are brought through these uncharted waters.

Today is a very important day for you too. As we say in Kerry, “You’re stuck with us!” In a real sense, God entrusts **you to us**; your life among us will be part of your way to eternal life (see Luke 10:25). These are big things, mysteries of faith. I pray that we may give you the welcome you deserve, that we may engage with you and be honest with you.

I have one thing to ask this day—that God help us the realize that Providence is at work among us all. If the Lord is with the Church, then the way will be full of surprises, like the way of Jesus with the disciples. A church which takes that way seriously is a church on the path to renewal. It is a Church which realizes that without Christ, there is no point in this endeavor. So let us not be afraid. Let us remember Bill Murphy’s episcopal motto *Nolite Timere!*

Do not be afraid!
Open, THROW OPEN the doors to Christ!
To his saving power ...
Do not be afraid!
Christ knows ‘what is in everyone.’ [see John 2:25]
ONLY HE knows it.

The words of the 58-year old Karol Wojtyła, in his inaugural homily as the newly elected Bishop of Rome in October 1978. The call of a saint, a saint of our time, a man of our age. May God who has begun this good work among us, bring it to completion.

[1315 words]

Endnotes

¹ Significantly, this is also what is happening in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32): the elder brother complains that he has always slaved for his father and his father never acknowledged. The father’s response implies that the elder brother has not seen his younger brother (the prodigal son) for what he is: his brother.

² Bishop Walter Kasper, Letter to the Parishes of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, 28 August 1989.