



Homily for the Blessing of the Shrine of Our Lady

at Abercynon

Sunday 20th October 2019

St. Thomas Catholic Church, Abercynon

Archbishop George Stack

This time last Sunday I was in St. Peter's Square in Rome for the canonisation of St. John Henry Newman. It was an amazing occasion, and a time to give thanks for the holiness, intelligence and dedication to the poor of this extraordinary saint.

Newman was born in 1801 and grew up as an evangelical/protestant Anglican. Ordained a priest in the Church of England, he taught at Oriel College, Oxford. He was so brilliant at theology and philosophy, in scripture and in ancient languages, that he began to explore the writings of the ancient Fathers of the Church. These were the saints and martyrs of the first two centuries who coming straight after the apostles and gospel writers, linked the Church with its apostolic foundations. He was a founder member of the Oxford Movement of the Anglican church. Today we call the members High Anglicans. Gradually he was convinced that the Reformation had done irreparable damage to the sacramental and apostolic life of the Church of England and the fullest expression of the will of Jesus for his Church lay in the Roman Catholic Church.

He became a Catholic because he had nowhere else to go. He wrote the hymn:

Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom.

Lead thou me on...

I do not ask to see the distant scene.

One step enough for me.

His conversion caused consternation in the media, in the university and in the Church of England itself. He was even treated with suspicion by the Catholic bishops of the United Kingdom. He was far too clever for them. But he remained faithful and devoted to the care of his beloved poor in Birmingham.

He loved Our Lady, but not in the over emotional devotional way he observed in his fellow Catholics. He wrote that it was St. Athanasius in the second century who first brought the circumstances of the Incarnation of Jesus home to human minds and *“engraved indelibly upon the imaginations of the faithful, as had never been before, that man is God, and God is man, that in Mary they meet, and that in this sense, Mary is the centre of all things”*. (Newman. Difficulties faced by Anglicans II. p.87).

Newman died in 1890 having lived through virtually the whole of the 19th century having made a profound impact on the intellectual and spiritual life of the country.

Another great churchman lived for part of the 19th century, also, and for a time he taught at St. Beuno's near St. Asaph in Wales. Gerard Manly Hopkins was a Jesuit, a great intellect, and a great poet. He loved nature and the beauty of Wales. He wrote for example:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed.

And he finished with these words:

And for all this, nature of never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.

I mention Gerard Manley Hopkins because one of my favourite of his poems is about Our Lady. It which his love of nature with a title of Mary from the beautiful Litany of Loreto with which we are all familiar. It is called “Rosa Mystica” – The Mystical Rose.

The rose is a mystery, where is it found?

Is it anything true? Does it grow upon the ground?

It was made of earth’s mould but it went from men’s eyes.

Is Mary the rose then? Mary the tree?

But the blossom, the blossom there, who can it be?

Who can her rose be? It could be but one:

Christ Jesus our Lord, her God and her Son.

In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine,

Show me thy Son, mother, mother of mine.

In 1858, whilst Newman and Manley Hopkins were at the height of their theological and poetic powers, a peasant girl in the south of France saw a lady in white garments with a blue sash around her waist and stars around her head. When Bernadette asked “*Who are you?*” the lady replied “*I am the*

Immaculate Conception". Bernadette would not have had a clue what those words meant. But they meant a great deal to the teaching of the Church and to the priest and bishop to whom Bernadette brought her message in simplicity and faith. You will notice in the grotto at Lourdes, and here in Abercynon, that Our Lady stands on a bed of roses. Beautiful but full of thorns. The agony and the ecstasy. Manley Hopkins again:

What was the colour of that blossom bright?

White to begin with, immaculate white.

But what a wild flush on the flakes of it stood,

When the rose ran in crimsonings down the cross wood!

The lady told Bernadette to dig at the mud at the foot of the grotto and wash her face in the water of the spring which would emerge there. She must have looked demented with her mud-covered face. But she had faith. And we all know the story of Lourdes and the symbol of water for baptism and new life.

Need I say more about the beautiful shrine which was created here by your forebears? It is a place of nature, a place of beauty, a place of running waters. It is place of danger, too, where the two fast flowing rivers of the Taff and Cynon come together. It is a place of faith also. But faith has to be kept alive. Human memory is a fickle thing – as we know all too graphically with the diseases of Dementia and Alzheimer's. And what a joy it is that through the dedication of Fr. John Phillips and the commitment of so many faithful people that this shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes has been remembered, it's forgotten and broken parts, its members, have been put back together again as an act of faith and devotion. Once again it will be a place of inspiration to all who come here to do honour to the Mother of God.

Is it an accident that the stained glass windows of the beautiful church of St. Thomas, Abercynon, are filled with red and white roses.? It is no accident that in the grotto at Lourdes, and here in her shrine at Abercynon, Our Lady stands on roses – which are both beautiful in colour and surrounded by thorns, the symbol of the Passion of her Son.

As we re-dedicate her shrine this morning in these beautiful valleys of Wales, how significant that we make once more our own the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine
I shall look on thy loveliness, mother of mine.*
