

Homily for Funeral Mass of Fr John O'Mahony SMA preached by Provincial Leader Fr Fachtna O'Driscoll SMA - 14/11/2008

Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10
 Titus 3: 4-7
 John 14: 1-6

I had to send a text message on Wednesday evening last to Bishop John Moore SMA in Bauchi, Nigeria. I took the opportunity to also tell him of John O'Mahony's death, in case he had not heard it. His reply text offered sympathy to all and then said "John was a giant in every way". John's physical frame had increased somewhat over the last months especially; but it is not his physical stature that merits him the title of giant but rather his pioneering and unique contribution to the spread of the gospel through the use of modern means of communication. His establishment and management of the Catholic media centre in the archdiocese of Kaduna, Nigeria will stand the test of time. Here he trained more than 2000 Nigerians in the craft of radio and TV production and made more than 200 religious radio programmes and 30 TV programmes per year. Of John it can be truly said: "he was a legend in his own life time".

I will say some more in the course of this homily on that great work in the world of media. But it is vital during a funeral Mass that we place it all in its proper context. We gather here today to pray John home to the God he tried to serve faithfully all his life. We gather in sympathy with his family, who, like all of us were shocked on Wednesday by the suddenness of John's death. We gather in faith and in hope because without hope the heart would break. Our hope is centred not on anything we knew about John; it is centred rather on our conviction that the words we have just heard in the gospel are indeed true. *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me...I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too"*. These words console us that John is on the way to and will be raised up with the rest of humanity at the last day. John lived his life according to this faith that Jesus is *The Way, the Truth and the Life*. He devoted 46 years of his life as a missionary priest in the SMA to share that belief with others. And he died in the tender care of the nursing staff of Blackrock Road, having run the race to the best of his ability.

It is appropriate that John, a true blue Dub, should be buried on the feast of St Laurence O'Toole, one of the patrons of the archdiocese of Dublin. And I believe it is a nice fit too that the reading of the morning Mass on Wednesday when he died was the section from St Paul's letter to Titus that we read here this morning. This carries the central core teaching of the Christian faith and yet it is one that we so often miss. Particularly at the funeral of a priest there is an added danger that we will miss it. I have made this point before many times at funeral liturgies but it bears continuous repeating. The point is captured best in the very words of Paul himself, so I will repeat them here: *"It is not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy that he saved us, through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life by washing us. God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for."* The key here is that salvation is never earned; it is received as a free gift. Our good deeds do not earn us salvation. Our good deeds are a response to the goodness of God who through his incredible love has saved us, unworthy as we are. We do good deeds not to earn reward but simply because that is how a follower of Jesus Christ ought to behave. John's good deeds too were inspired by the conviction that at our best that is how a follower of Jesus ought to behave.

John was born on June 19th, 1937 and grew up on St Canice's Road, just off the Ballymun Road in Dublin's northside. His rearing followed a conventional pattern: solid teaching by the Christian Brothers in St Vincent's, Glasnevin and a huge interest in a wide variety of sports, many of which he played with no little skill. He was a noted hurling goalkeeper and represented Leinster colleges and might well have been Dublin senior goalkeeper had he not chosen a missionary career. He was also a very good tennis player and brought this skill with him into the seminary. I believe it was through the tennis club too that he first made friends with Fr Jimmy O'Connell SMA, a friend all his life. Many were their journeys together, especially during their holidays from Africa, until growing illness for both of them gradually made such journeys no longer viable.

During his seminary days in Dromantine John's many talents really blossomed. I have mentioned his prowess in sports but he was also a gifted singer, orator and actor. His peers regard John as one of the finest, if not the finest, actor of their generation. So, it was perhaps inevitable that after an initial tour working in a rural parish he would devote his ministerial life to communicating the gospel in a bold and dramatic way. He could see that

servicing an area measured at 300,000 sq miles and a population estimated at close to 50 million required radically new techniques to complement the traditional work of missionaries.

When John reached Nigeria, Vatican II was in full swing. The Church was beginning to address the need to avail of all modern technologies in order to reach the greatest number of people with the good news. John was assigned to study radio and TV production with the Radharc team in Dublin and subsequently set up the Catholic media centre in Kaduna. He raised most of the funds for this programme himself. And this was no ordinary centre, it was no bush effort. Rather it was constructed to the highest standards and managed with a high degree of professionalism. The radio studio was modelled on RTE and gave top quality technical performance.

John gave meticulous attention to every aspect of every task. For me, that quality stands out beyond all others in the character of John O'Mahony. You can only imagine the pains he took to maintain and promote this media centre. He built up around him a competent and talented team of laity and religious. John was meticulous to the very end of his life; had illness not struck him lately he would by now be preparing his Christmas cards. Every card was unique, prepared with total focus and attention. Sometimes, perhaps, others grew impatient with John's need for order and precision. But John was a man who believed that there is more to life than increasing its speed. Isaac Newton, when asked how he had come upon the theory of gravity, replied: *"by thinking on it continuously"*. I believe that would characterise John's approach also. When we were colleagues together for a time in the Maynooth house John decided to purchase a personal computer. I was amazed that prior to purchasing, John spent at least three months studying voluminous brochures until he finally found the type of computer he reckoned would best serve his needs. And, only then did he purchase.

Our opening reading from Isaiah tells us *"how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of one who brings good news."* John brought the good news to the mountains and valleys of Northern Nigeria through his radio productions, TV shows and publication of religious books and liturgical translations. Many were produced in the local Hausa language that John spoke with great fluency; his radio programmes and Hausa music tapes enabled folk in the remotest villages to hear the Word. Local catechists could use these programmes to prepare the catechumens for the sacraments, and Christians were assured of a solid teaching.

Towards the end of the 1980's John realised that if the media centre was to survive it would need to be indigenised and so he handed over management to Fr Martin Dama, a local Nigerian priest. It would seem in hindsight that this was a very timely move because after just a brief spell as vice Regional in Nigeria North he had to come back to Ireland for hospital treatment. Doctors were mystified by the symptoms. Many diagnoses were offered, including Lyme's disease as the condition seemed to have a parasitic cause, but none seemed to fit the condition. John's health did gradually improve though he never truly fired on all cylinders again. However, he was deemed well enough to embark on a new missionary venture. His generosity in taking on the task of Rector of the recently established SMA formation house in Nairobi, Kenya is to be commended. He gave his best to this task as he had done to all before.

A year into his assignment to Kenya illness was to dog him once more. Eventually it became apparent that his condition was extremely serious. He underwent surgery to remove a brain tumour. While he did recover significantly the best medical advice deemed it to be imprudent to return to Africa on fulltime assignment. This was a huge disappointment to John, but once he could accept that the situation was outside his control he adapted readily. Never being one to relish being inactive, he sought and was given a pastoral assignment in the diocese of Elphin. This assignment too came to a halt when a second tumour growth necessitated repeat surgery. From this time forward John resided in the community in Claregalway where he gave valuable assistance in the community affairs and was a frequent stand in to parishes in need of a priest to celebrate Mass. He enjoyed seven good years in Claregalway and was able to give some time to personal tasks that had to be put on hold throughout a busy mission career.

The sheer volume and variety of illness that afflicted him for sixteen years eventually took its toll and so John retired to the community at Blackrock Road where medical care was available to him round the clock. In recent weeks his condition deteriorated rapidly but it was still a shock to find on Wednesday morning that the Lord had called him home.

John will surely be missed by family, friends and confreres: his zest for life, his lovely sense of humour, his wit, his entertaining company and his sturdy manliness.

Ar dheis lámh Dé go raibh a anam dílis.