

Maynooth Union – 9 June 2015

President of the Maynooth Union Address

Fr Tom Corbett of the diocese of Killaloe

Your Excellency, Archbishops, Bishops, Very Reverend President, fellow priests, distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you all to this celebratory dinner of the Maynooth Union of 2015. Failte Roimh Cách don ocaid specialtá agus luchairéach seo I gColaiste Phadraig, Ma Nuat; go mbfainimid go leir taithneamh as ár gcomhludár inniu.

May I offer a special welcome to Archbishop Eamonn Martin as Primate of All Ireland and wish him every blessing in the years of service we hope he has before him. May I also extend a warm welcome to Archbishop Kieran O'Reilly, recently appointed Archbishop of Cashel: I congratulate him with a tinge of sadness; we miss you in Killaloe and offer you every blessing in the years ahead. I welcome our newly appointed bishops: Bishop Cullinan and Bishop Doran and wish them all the wisdom and strength they will certainly need to lead the church into the somewhat uncertain but inviting future.

I welcome all the classes and priests, old & young, strong and weak who have honoured this occasion. I welcome the classes who are celebrating over 50 years of priesthood and thank the many members of diamond jubilee class for their presence and for their great service and long years as priests of Ireland. As the Nuncio said recently, priests in the parishes are the unsung heroes of the Irish Church and we certainly sing in your honour here. Of course I welcome with special warmth the 50 year class; I hesitate to ponder their fifty years; it might make them feel old; May I assure them they look like men who have borne the heat of the day and are bearing it still with the grit and strength and joys of a Maynooth formation. I do look back with gladness of heart at the companionships and friendships of our Maynooth days and thank you for it. I wish Bishop John Buckley many happy years of retirement and thank him for his long years of service, I welcome the younger men; the forty years ordained and former President, Dermot Farrell, who honoured me with an undeserved class piece and still wonderful memories; with the younger, you are ploughing the furrow, to use a phrase; you are learning to till the field of the Church, sometimes lovely and fertile, and sometimes rocky and uncomfortable, with the loving care and dedication you can see in many of us older folk! I thank Fr. Gerry Campbell and Fr. Diarmuid Hogan of the 25th year class for the uplifting liturgy and sermon and Fr. Martin McAlinden for the engaging after dinner address.

There are two Maynooth men still living whose role in Maynooth formation was very special, Father Enda McDonagh who celebrates his diamond jubilee this year and Ronan Drury who celebrated his 91th birthday recently. Countless priests owe them a great thank you; Thank you Enda for the gentle way you helped us into the world of Vatican II with courage and perseverance; you helped us negotiate many inspiring pathways into the life of the men and women endowed with the “esse christianum”. Enda showed us the pathway; Ronan Drury helped us ask the way in accents a little modulated from the merely provincial and in the Furrow gave us not only accent but something to talk about. Ronan, congratulations and envious good wishes on your 91th birthday (you are a human and medical phenomenon). Fr. Brendan Devlin, celebrating his diamond jubilee, who learnt very quickly in my class that we didn’t all speak French in the provinces! Thank you Brendan for all your extensive linguistic help over the years. I thank Michael Olden, happily with us, for his grounded wisdom and humanity as president and servant of Maynooth.

A great Maynooth man passed to God recently; Liam Ryan was a reconciling presence among us; he was a man of great energy who gifted the college with new departments and many good stories; Liam, rest in peace!

The priest is still a huge and very helpful presence in the lives of Irish people. Sometimes it seems what he stands for is rebuffed; but the streams of love, service, generosity and energy that still flow strongly in the activities of parishes and church groups bear witness to a reality that must be analysed and ever worked for; the flock may be getting smaller, the Christian understanding may still have to find its feet in a world of rapid change, but men and women still want to find a helpful truth in the Gospel and want a home in the Church. Indeed the joy that greeted the restoration of the lovely Cathedral in Longford is witness to this; congratulations and thanks to the people of Ardagh and Clonmacnois, to Bishop Colm O’Reilly and Bishop Francis Duffy, the priests and all concerned.

The priest still plays a central role in preaching the gospel, making salvation real in Eucharist and Sacrament and reaching out to all who are searching for something better in a sometimes puzzling and overpowering world. Archbishop Martin spoke eloquently about what our faith has to offer and of the great Catholic desire to reach both in truth and love to all. Here the priest can be pulled in painfully different directions depending on his experience and personality. This room contains an enormous reservoir of priestly experience, gained perhaps joyfully in welcomed service of people and personal situations in life; or painfully in the struggles with obedience, celibacy and self – who am I. And there is evidence that priestly experience may be difficult to assess because we wish to remain private about our own joys, our pains and our struggles. As priests we have experienced celibacy, obedience and service in different ways and we continue to have different languages and life styles to try to identify who we are as Catholics? Some find a balance and develop in faith and priesthood; others may become disillusioned and struggle on or leave. Some again may reach out and find fulfilment in their service; others may reach out and fall over unless sustained and helped.

The balance may be hard to keep but we remember what Augustine said “In omnibus Caritas”. If older clergy are more “liberal” than some younger clergy; It is simply true that a young person’s experience in to-day’s world may be very different from the older experience, but it is equally true that many older clergy are more conservative than some younger clergy. Such uncharted words as “liberal” “conservative” may be truly unhelpful in trying to describe priests in a church that wants to help people to believe, to hope and to love an invisible God and a sometimes difficult neighbour.

To conceive and express the reality of a church which situates itself clearly in its mission to the world and for the world needs more than sociology and opinion polls. Our homeland is in heaven but while still on earth we can learn with the help of the Bible that, what may appear as “setback,” can come to be seen as a providential call to go forward. The Babylonian exile led to a renewed Israel! We are not yesterday’s men! We bear a future which God in his providence reveals to us in his ways and in our times. We await the future in hope and we thank God for it as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Thanks to the Maynooth Union Committee, to the College President, Hugh Connolly, to the very helpful secretary, Paul Prior and to all who provided this lovely occasion and dinner this evening.