

## Maynooth Union – 9 June 2015

### Address on behalf of the silver jubilee class Fr Martin McAlinden of the diocese of Dromore

It is an honour to offer these few words on behalf of our class. At least that is what I have been telling myself over the past few days when images of drawing the short straw came to mind.

Last week, a new class-piece was displayed on the cloisters. The class of 2015 have left Maynooth to begin their transition into ministry. They take with them enthusiasm and freshness, and many charisms to bless the lives of those they work with. I felt happy for them as I watched them go, but also concerned about what has changed for them now. They will miss the daily connections and friendships with classmates and the wider College community; the structures of prayer and support which can be difficult to keep going when you live on your own; even the coffee on tap here in Pugin Hall. In a time of transition there can be much to look forward to, but there is grief as well.

Our transition to ministry took place 25 years ago. I have no strong memories of leaving this place. I'm sure our class shared the usual mixture of feelings – some glad to get out, others finding the departure painful or difficult, most of us excited about what would lie ahead. We had our differences; I think they related more to music and sport and politics than to theology. In many ways we were ordained into a church that seemed stable and strong, where clergy still commanded respect and our numbers were large.

What I remember, more so than leaving was the excitement of June and early July when weekends were spent on the road, travelling the length and breadth of the country on the ordination circuit. We were delighted with ourselves in a honeymoon sort of way. It was World Cup year and Ireland had qualified for a quarter final showdown against the host nation Italy. But better than that, they had drawn with England in the group stage! There was a tremendous sense of celebration – my neighbours organised a street party after my first Mass; and we danced in the Burren until dawn to the Kilfenora ceili band at Diarmuid Hogan's ordination, until the Gardaí decided enough was enough and sent us home! And then there was the enthusiasm of first appointments, the awkwardness and excitement of finding our way in ministry, facing the reality of parish life with all its demands.

We were ordained by our bishops during those summer weekends in 1990, but it was the people and our families and our personal experiences that have shaped us into the priests we are today – their care, their support, their pain; the day to day practice of ministry; the opportunities and travel; the friendships. And on this jubilee day we give thanks for it all, for the privilege of ministry, and for the deep down desire that is hopefully still there, to offer our lives in service to something much bigger than ourselves.

In those early days we were blissfully unaware of the changes that were about to occur in church and in society, and the impact on our sense of vocation. We were a mere two years into ministry when the first scandal hit the media. Then, as the years went by, what had been relatively secure for decades, began to deconstruct. That reality has impacted and shaped us. Our priesthood has been marked by transition; I think we have lived in that uncomfortable place called liminality; that experience of betwixt and between in the midst of change when old ways have ended but no clear way forward has emerged. It's meant to be a short term place of waiting marked by chaos and

confusion and frustration, but not a permanent residence. The waiting has gone on too long for us. Waiting for an end to the vocation famine, waiting for the pastoral initiative or catechetical programme that will transform, waiting for an end to the trickle of scandal, waiting for some clue as to how to connect with young people, with families, with society.

For Seamus Heaney, waiting is not the answer, not the place in which to flourish, but rather 'getting started, keeping going, getting started again'. He calls this 'the essential rhythm not only of achievement but of survival. The next move is always the test' he writes, 'hope has to be maintained'. Hope demands courage and confidence and most of all vision.

We look to our leaders (at times frustratingly) for vision, just as people often look to us for vision (often with equal frustration). We pray for vision. But we can forget that in the early days we had our own vision. It was somehow connected to wanting to live the gospel, of being inspired by the person of Christ, about a conviction that in Him we live and move and have our being. Pope Francis has confirmed and affirmed what so many of us believe deep down about the gospel – that it is the source of our freshness and joy, the antidote to cynicism and discouragement. He is right when he reminds us that we will transform our lives by falling in love again with the gospel. Maybe our faith and enthusiasm have been dulled by disappointment or disillusionment. It is time to let our vision live again and bolster our confidence. Can we find time to talk about it during this reunion; to let it reclaim us and shape us once more?

Francis constantly calls us out of that mode in which so many of us have been living priesthood, namely maintenance, and into mission. And that mission is shaped by mercy. Mercy is something we can all do well because if we are honest, we need it so much ourselves. We all live in what the Archbishop of Dublin recently described as the grey areas of life. The grey areas include the mistakes we have made in ministry, the broken promises, those secrets and regrets we are ashamed of, the times we have let ourselves and others down, our experiences of discouragement. If today is to be a real celebration of jubilee then let it be a time to extend mercy and kindness to ourselves. Let us acknowledge the good we have wrought in ministry despite our weaknesses, maybe even because of them, and allow ourselves to be shaped by God's mercy. This is the way of forming a relevant community of faith that Francis describes as "bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than being concerned with being at the centre...caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures." It is the kind of merciful spirituality and gospel joy that will lead us out of liminality, and sustain us for the long haul.

On the feast of Columba, one of Ireland's greatest missionaries, I am conscious of our ancestors who journey with us, and particularly of our classmates Conor, Willie and Declan, who died too young. They will support us by their presence and their prayers as we journey into the future. In the words of the Collect for this feast let us pray for ourselves and our bishops, that we may be 'strong in faith, sustained by hope and one in the love that binds us to Christ.'