

***Homily for Gathering of Jubilarians – Annual Maynooth Union – St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, June 7th, 2016***

On Friday last, in the Church of the Holy Rosary, Castlebar I was at the funeral of a colleague, a man who had served as Priest for 63 years before passing away to his eternal reward last week. Coming away from the ceremony, I bumped into another colleague who is present today, a Golden Jubilarian and we were looking forward to and planning for this occasion. In the course of our conversation and perhaps in tune with the occasion we were just coming from, we wondered if the celebration of birthdays and jubilees are genuinely occasions to be looked forward to or not? Along with the happiness and festivities, such occasions are invariably tinged with nostalgia and reminder of the advance of old age. There is no doubt that there is a certain element of that in such a gathering today, but overall it is a great opportunity to pause, to meet, to look back, to reminisce, to reflect - individually and collectively and look forward to the future, energized by the company and presence of each other sharing similar journeys. And of course Christ the Good shepherd is very much with us, in our midst, guiding us in doing that. As with all our efforts we are guided by Psalm 127:1 “Unless the Lord builds the House, the builders labour in vain.”

Our gathering of *jubilarians* and *anniversarians* covers a huge range from the recently ordained to near *centegenarians*.

### ***The Seven Ages of the Human Being***

A well known American entertainer once categorised the 7 ages of the Human Being as: Pre-schooler, pepsi generation, baby boomer, mid-lifer, empty nester, senior citizen and organ donor! As we gather to celebrate our Jubilees this categorisation reminds us all of the transience of life, of the gradual progression towards our own mortality. In the meantime we live life and get on with the business of what our middle dean here in Maynooth used to say “Priesting”. “Priesting in the service of the Lord”.

### ***Fiche Bliain ag Fás***

Our Irish teacher in school in *An Cheathrú Rua* in South Connemara in the early 1980s was a great man for words of wisdom and he used to extrapolate the title of the Classic book from the Great Blasket Island author Muris Ó Súilleabhán *Fiche Bliain ag Fás*. According to our *Múinteoir Gaeilge* the 4 major categories or epochs of our lives were - *Fiche bliain ag fás, fiche bliain faoi bhláth, fiche bliain ag meath agus fiche bliain is cuma ann nó as thú!* Twenty years, a growing, twenty

years in your prime, twenty years in decline and finally twenty years not really mattering whether you are in it or not!!!

Whatever category we are in, one year on, 5,10, 15, 20, silver, ruby, golden, diamond, platinum or just simply an anniversary of ordination we relish the opportunity to return to the location that was for us the well-spring, the source of our spiritual, philosophical, scientific and theological awakenings and early priestly formation after the seed of vocation was sown in our homes and parishes. We rejoice in being back here today in our *Alma Mater*, St. Patrick's College for this jubilee time and share our memories, our experiences and situations with each other. We remember in prayer and fond memory those we have lost through death and to various alternative pathways in life. We pray, also for the staff here in Maynooth in their important work of priestly formation.

### ***Presentation Grace***

Every year on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November I look forward to being with the Presentation Sisters in Tuam as they celebrate their foundation, Presentation day. They have a tradition of singing the *Grace before meals* to begin the festivities with the words of St. Paul to the Phillipines, 4:4 *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice*. Today we rejoice with the Lord on this jubilee

occasion. We rejoice and thank God for the wonderful gift of priesthood, for the privilege of being able to work in vineyard of the Lord, for the fact that we have the health and energy and life to do that. We pray during this sacred time of Eucharist and through our interaction with each other for a renewal of the enthusiasm, idealism and energy that we were so full of as young men here x number of years ago!

### ***Jubilee Meaning and Biblical Connotations***

There is a beautiful richness to the term Jubilee with all its connotations. The concept of jubilee in the Bible is worth reflecting on. In the Old Testament Moses set out for the people of Israel the will of God for money and property and the land. According to Moses, every 50 years the land and property is to be in some sense rested and something of that given back to the Lord in celebration of what has been won and lost in the economy. This time of rest and celebration is to be called a Jubilee. The celebration of Jubilee is signalled by a trumpet and this celebration is a joyous occasion of thanksgiving bringing things back to where they ought to be. It's a thankful time of celebration and joy and realising the providence and presence of the Lord, the creator, the giver, the sustainer!

## ***Celebrating Jubilee***

For a priest, religious or lay-person the celebration of a significant jubilee is very much in parallel with these rich concepts. All the Jubilees that we so joyfully celebrate today are milestone occasions not only for us ourselves but for everyone associated with us, because we are so much a product of the people we come from and minister to. It is a time to take time out, to pause at a significant interval time, after diligent work and love and life and faith and to rejoice in the Lord for all that has been!

## ***Changing times***

The landscape in which the priest exists since our class were ordained in 1991 has changed utterly. Most of our class were still primary school children when Saint John Paul came to Ireland in 1979. The various Church scandals, rise in secularism, rapid change, decline in faith practice and time of upheaval just began to set in and hit the accelerator - scarcely before the Holy Oil was dry on our hands. At times over the past few years our work as Pastors seemed like (to offer you a choice of metaphors) that of Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill, or the experience of Jarlath with the broken chariot wheel or the experience swimming constantly against a strong tide, a current that was firmly going the other way.

## **Magnanimous in victory, gracious in defeat!**

The late Fr. Ollie Hughes, God rest him, President of St. Jarlath's College trainer of many Hogan Cup winning teams used to echo again and again the mantra *magnanimous in victory, gracious in defeat*. So often it is in the experience of failure and loss that the greatest lessons are learnt.

I have seen it so often in my own life and I'm sure most of us have seen it again and again that it is in the experience of defeat and suffering and sadness that we often learn most and that we are true to the message of the Cross of Jesus Christ. St. Paul reminds us clearly of this - that it is when we are truly weak that we are in fact at our strongest and most close to our calling to take up the Cross and follow Our Lord.

I recall back in the late 1990s being at a clergy gathering at the height of the abuse crises. Morale was very low in the Church at the time because of what had emerged and the terrible handling of the situation. However, Fr. Frank Fahey, former Mayo man of the year and guardian of Ballintubber Abbey gave a spiritual and consoling perspective and courage to all present. He pointed out that it is perhaps when we are *suspended* on the Cross with and in solidarity with Jesus

Christ, in union with those who are suffering and most affected that we are at our most genuine as priests, even more so than when things are going swimmingly well for us in life. *Magnanimous in victory, gracious in defeat!*

### ***Story of Broken Pot***

The following story captures this in simple terms. An elderly Chinese woman had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. One of the pots had a crack in it, while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water. At the end of the long walk from the stream to her home, the cracked pot arrived only half-full. For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishment. But the poor cracked pot was ashamed of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it perceived to be a bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream. “I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house”. The old woman smiled.

“Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot’s side? That’s because I have always known your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them. For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table. Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.”

### ***The Grace of Perseverance***

Meanwhile, back at the ranch as they say (!) - we are all still here, we are still rolling the boulder up the hill, the chariot wheel may be well dented, we are still swimming against that proverbial tide, our spirits might be bent and bowed a little, but certainly not broken. *Is gaire cabhair Dé ná an doras.* The help of God is closer than the door, we genuinely know in our hearts and souls. Again we retreat to the Great Blaskets, this time Peig Sayers for wisdom and faith whose exhortation at a time of great personal loss was: *Tá Dia láidir agus máthair maith aige.* God is strong and we know that His blessed mother has special place in her heart for us as priests of Jesus Christ.

### ***Promise of Elijah***

The words of Elijah in today’s first reading are like balm to our

souls: “The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” As we return again and again to the Lord for our daily sustenance in prayer and the Eucharist the Lord continues to strengthen us with food and nourishment that we need for the journey.

### ***Support and inspiration of the faithful***

Apart from the obvious spiritual well-spring and foundation of our lives as Priests, I have found the unswerving loyalty, support, dedication, understanding, patience and tolerance of the people we minister to truly inspiring and so encouraging and I am sure this has been the experience of so many here today. *Go dtuga Dia luach saothar dóibh!*

### ***Light of the Earth and Salt of the World***

What powerful images for reflection Jesus gives us in today’s Gospel, the early section of The Sermon on the Mount, light and salt! As Christians we are called to be light to the world, as Priests we are challenged to be even more bright stars radiating the presence of Christ to those in our pastoral care. We are also challenged to be salt of the earth. We know the great qualities of salt: Flavouring qualities, Cleansing qualities,

Healing qualities, Preserving qualities, Melting ice, Quenching fires.

### ***Religious Significance of Salt***

From the religious point of view salt is the symbol of preservation from evil of those preparing for Baptism and for blessings. It's the Symbol of Permanence and Preservation. It's the Symbol of wisdom. Semitic Scholars tell us that salt is the Symbol of friendship and solidarity, uniting diners at a banquet. Jesus encourages us never to lose our edge of being salt of the earth and light of the world.

In reflecting on these two great images of Jesus we return again to the words of Elijah that are echoed towards the end of the first reading: "The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah".

### ***Sursum Corda***

This jubilee day is a day of joy and one to uplift our hearts. There is a retired Christian brother in Tuam, in his 90<sup>th</sup> year and any time we meet, his greeting is *Sursum Corda*. Lift up your hearts. Today we lift up our hearts in joyful thanksgiving for the privilege and gift of our vocations and all we have in life.

### ***Sacristy in St. Jarlath's***

Every morning as I get ready for Mass in St. Jarlath's College the words from 1 Thesolonians 5:16-17 greet me on the wall:

*Always be joyful:*

*Pray constantly and for all things give thanks.*

### ***Conclusion and final remarks***

To conclude, the esteemed editor of this publication always advised us that we ought to aim at writing what we wanted to say in a homily so succinctly that it would fit on the back of a postage stamp. On this occasion that reads simply: rejoice, give thanks and look to the future with hope in the Lord.

### ***Kahil Gibran 1883-1931***

The final words I leave with the spiritual poet Kahil Gibran "I slept and I dreamed that life is all joy. I woke and I saw that life is all service. I served and I saw that service is joy."