

## **Homily for St. Dominic's Community – September 8-9 2018**

Bearing in mind the significant and sensitive nature of what I am about to say to you, I have written it out in full and it will be available for your reflection on St. Dominic's website from tomorrow evening. Something is going to happen here next week, which I have actually foreseen for over 40 years due largely to the vision of my first parish priest, who spoke about it often to me, and my own experience - something I have spoken to you about many times, and something I have tried subtly to prepare you and myself for. Bishop Patrick came to see me last weekend to tell me that due to an unforeseen situation in the diocese, Fr. Emmanuel will not be coming to join us as from next week; in fact, nobody will be coming, because there is nobody - we have no priests left. Nothing can be done about this and no one is to blame, least of all our bishop. Bishop Patrick has the most unenviable job imaginable. We in our little bubble in this part of the diocese can have no real idea of the challenges he has to face daily from so many directions. Not only is he my bishop now, but he is also my friend – we have known each other for 46 years since we studied together in the seminary. Because he is my bishop, and also my friend, there is nothing I would not gladly do to help and support him, even at significant cost to myself. This is what the service and the ministry of the priesthood means but also the implications of a long friendship. In typically humble fashion he told me that if there was any flak flying around after this decision was revealed to point it in his direction. I told him that there would be no flak, no recrimination, anger or resentment. We would all accept the favour he has asked of us with good grace because we know there is no alternative, nor is there likely to be in the foreseeable future. This is also a situation which to some extent I have invited on myself. Last February, my dear friend and mentor, Fr. Brian Dazeley, who is now 81 and living in retirement in Leicester, came to see me and told me that if, after Fr. Daniel has to take his leave of us, there was no one to replace him, he would be willing to do what he can to help us. This was a most generous offer which was communicated to the vicar general and before the bishop came to see me last Friday week, he phoned Fr. Brian, who was at that time on a train in France going on his holiday, to see if the offer was still on the table – which it was. Accordingly, when he returns from seeing his sister in Greece in a couple of weeks' time, there will be some discussion as to the extent of his involvement with us, maybe the odd weekend, we will see. Since Fr. Brian is one of the two priests I have always admired and respected most in this diocese, the other being of course Fr. Terry, I was delighted at the prospect of working with him

but would not want to place too heavy a burden upon him because he is supposed to be retired! I am also truly grateful for the continued ministry and wise presence of Fr. Terry, the gentle support of Fr. Geoffrey, who has come among us quietly and humbly in his own retirement and the consolation of the ministry of Rev. Robin, our pastoral team and Eucharistic ministers.

All this being said, a huge challenge awaits all of us, and things can never be the same again for me or for you. We must accept this situation with generosity, devotion and determination to ensure that our three communities can develop and flourish in the Lord's service. Bishop Malcolm used to say that the shortage of priests could either be seen as a disaster or an opportunity, and I sincerely hope that we will regard it as the latter – an opportunity to do and be what we always should have been, and maybe, if truth be told, were not always allowed to be, namely the Church as 'the People of God' as the Vatican Council called us, to build on the generosity and commitment of so many people, to involve and include in our service of the Lord many more people who might, up to now, not have thought of it as their responsibility and duty and who thus backed away, leaving the work to older and more devoted souls. Accordingly, the project that lies ahead will be called "Widening the Circle of Love". A circle of love already exists around the Lord here. It would be patronising and insulting to say any other. We will never be able to thank those people who serve quietly and faithfully every day in our communities and have done so in many cases for years. Our communities would surely collapse without them.

#### *Remarks to the individual communities*

But we all have to become involved, so here's what not to do:

Don't write to the bishop because you're angry – he has plenty of complaints to deal with as it is!

Don't feel sorry for me – help me!

Don't tell me to look after myself – I was rather hoping that you might want to look after me a little and am very grateful to those who actually do so each week already!

Don't tell me I need to get someone to do this or that or the other – that someone is you!

Do write to me in a letter or email, with your thoughts and suggestions, as long as they include yourselves! I will be seeking advice from a good few people and will then produce a document outlining where we might go together from here.

The fact is that the problems that face us as a Church and here in these communities in particular have nothing to do with just having one full-time priest working among us. They are here already but maybe have been highlighted by what now faces us. The biggest problem is how Catholic people look at their life in the Church now. There is no doubt in my mind and I have spoken to you often about it, that we have lost sight of the Lord and got ourselves over concerned with somewhat peripheral matters. We live in a bit of a bubble here and often we don't want to look outside. We resist change and can become inflexible easily and this is not a good thing. These are hard things to say and to face but we must admit them in order to do something about them. So often now my faith is about 'me', not 'him' – what I feel, what I want, what I need, what I think, and even what I expect or demand. This is nothing new but seems to be on the increase these days with the advance of social media, pressure of marketing and the impression that these things give us namely that we are the most important person in our lives and no one else really matters. The implications of this are devastating. We have allowed our children to become addicts, literally addicts, to their phones which they perennially have attached to themselves as a sort of lifeline, to the point that they no longer know how to speak to people or look them in the face! This is not a good thing and only serves to re-inforce that introspection and self-interest in them from a young age. When opportunities are offered to them in parish groups or activities to help them relate better to Our Lord and to others – children's liturgy, uniformed bodies, plays, societies, parish events and so on – they often decline or are made to decline by their parents, either because it's not 'cool' or they are perceived to have many more important things to be doing. With adults, many are frightened of a commitment to the Lord because it might ask something of them that challenges their assumptions about what is really important for them that they are not prepared for, or maybe willing to accept. We have had problems in regard to two particular matters here – Baptism and First Communion. So many parents want to bring their children for baptism clearly not for the right reason, and then disappear from the church community immediately after they have brought their children into it. You will have seen this from the notes in this summer's newsletters. For many also, the First Communion is also the last communion. We have a big day and never see them again. How many parents who should have been present at our preparation sessions, for example, just came along, dropped off their children and then came back to collect them without actually being involved themselves? And where

are those parents and children now? We must seriously question ourselves here about our attitude. It is easy to convince ourselves that we are too busy for the Lord while at the gym, coffee shop or sharing facetime with friends. Is all this really important? We have convinced ourselves too often that it is. This is what we might call ‘creeping secularism’, as opposed to what Pope Benedict called “aggressive secularism”, which seems to be prevalent now in my native land of Ireland as well as many other places. Secularism – living our lives without any reference to Almighty God and his son, Jesus Christ – can creep up on us even with our noticing it. We slowly fade away from weekly Mass-going, we think of ‘going to church’ a bit like going to the cinema for our entertainment when we feel like it, we want the perceived ‘benefits’ of Catholic life such as the sacraments and good education, without necessarily feeling committed to that life and that Lord ourselves. The biggest challenge we face here is that we do not necessarily recognise it as a challenge. We do not see our church as a community, a family of believers, devoted to Our Lord and each other, with duties and responsibilities to Him and each other that spring not from outward obligation but the inner love of a life lived close to the Lord.

What is about to happen to us here will not be addressed by ‘strategies’ or ‘tinkering’ with management structures, but only by a complete re-evaluation of who we are and who we might be in the service of Our Lord, how we can form our children and young people, look after our elderly and reach out to those in need all over the world. Quite simply, it is about living the gospel each day – actually living it and not just talking about it. The will to do so comes from prayer, not the prayer of asking for things for ourselves, but a real meeting with Jesus Christ.

This weekend, our bishops and many people from our parishes are in Liverpool for the Eucharistic Congress. This will be for them an opportunity to explore what it means to love and honour Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, be it sharing him in the Holy Mass or adoring him in prayer. To finish with Bishop Patrick’s words: there are three things that matter – ‘encounter’ – with the Lord as our Saviour and God in our prayer; ‘discipleship’ – wanting to serve and follow him which follows on from this meeting, and ‘mission’ – the desire not just to live the life as his followers but to encourage others to do the same, and proclaim his message either with or without words as the truth of living for all people at all times.

The situation in which we now find ourselves is not, nor ever was, about ‘me’ as your priest, and how ‘I’ am going to ‘manage’. It is a situation which has highlighted what all of us can and might be, and given us the opportunity to create the Church of Jesus Christ among ourselves and everyone. This is not a disaster, but a wonderful challenge placed before us. We do not resent it, but embrace it. I, for one, am up for it, and even looking forward to it and I hope and pray that every single one of you will be equally enthusiastic and cheerful rather than disappointed and downhearted about what Our Lord is now calling all of us to do.

*Father Frank Daly*