

Homily of Cardinal Seán Brady for opening Mass of the European Vocations Service Meeting in Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co Kildare on Thursday 28 June 2012

- **Theme of meeting: The Eucharist – source of every Christian Vocation:
Community, Testimony, Mission**
- **"The Eucharist reconnects us to the mission of the local and universal Church.
The Eucharistic Congress pulled back the veil on the enormous range of
apostolic activity that goes on every day in Ireland by lay faithful of every age,
by outstanding consecrated persons and missionaries and by the thousands of
outstanding priests of this country and abroad." – Cardinal Brady**

Cardinal Seán Brady, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland has this evening opened the annual meeting of the European Vocations Service (EVS) which is taking place in Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth from today Thursday 28 June until Sunday 1 July. The following is the text of Cardinal Brady's homily which he preached at Mass this evening in Maynooth to mark the opening of the EVS meeting. His Excellency Archbishop Charles Brown, Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland was present for the opening session of the meeting and for the opening Mass.

Homily:

Your Excellency, Archbishop Brown,
Sisters and Brothers from the Episcopal Conferences and National Vocations Centres of Europe,

On behalf of the Irish Bishops' Conference, I extend a very warm and heartfelt welcome to you all. We are honoured that you have chosen Ireland as the venue for this Annual Congress of the European Vocations Service. You come to a local Church renewed, uplifted and strengthened by an extraordinary moment of grace. Just ten days ago we concluded the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin. It was a truly remarkable experience. In fact, it is difficult to put into words just what an uplifting and grace-filled experience it was. Thousands of Catholics from all over the world gathered with the Irish Church for a week of reflection, celebration, testimony and prayer centred on the Blessed Eucharist. Many people remarked on the incredible atmosphere of unity, serenity and joy there was among us. It can only be attributed to the presence of Jesus himself in our midst. Even the occasional shower of rain could not dampen our joy or distract from the profound atmosphere of reverence that marked the daily celebration of the Eucharist. I hope that your experience of coming together, and of our Irish weather, will be the same!

It was wonderful and uplifting to meet so many people who share the amazing treasure of our Catholic faith at the Congress, especially so many young people. In fact, I hope you will be encouraged in your work of identifying and nurturing future spiritual leaders when I tell you that every day people had to be turned away from the talks and workshops. There is an incredible hunger for meaning in our world. There is an incredible thirst for God and for the truth and life we have to

offer. So, have no doubt that the harvest continues to be rich, even if the labourers appear to be few! Have no doubt that your work continues to be of vital importance to the mission of the Church.

Your reflection on the Eucharist as the source of every vocation over these next few days brings you to the very heart of that mission. Perhaps the most often quoted words of the Second Vatican Council are that the Eucharistic liturgy is ‘the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows’ (*SC*, 10). What is less cited, however, is an important phrase that follows: it goes on to say that the Eucharist ‘draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire’ (*SC*, 10).

This ‘fire’ of course, is the fire of God’s love. It is the fire spoken of by the disciples on the road to Emmaus when they spoke of their hearts burning within them as they met the Lord and recognised him in the breaking of bread. It is the fire of Pentecost, which at the very birth of the Church blazed in the hearts of the Apostles and made the Church, through them, the sign and instrument ‘of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race’ (*LG*, 1).

My brothers and sisters, who among us has not heard an echo of that love in our own hearts? Who among us does not know what our Holy Father, Pope Benedict spoke of when he said in *Deus Caritas Est*, that ‘Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’ (*DCE*, 1). Who among us has not been drawn to and strengthened in our vocation to priesthood, consecrated life or the committed lay vocation by the intimate, personal encounter with Jesus in the selfless words, ‘This is my body... do this in memory of me’, ‘This is the chalice of my blood... Do this in memory of me’?

As I reflect on the people who nurtured my own sense of priestly vocation, my own sense of the centrality and importance of the Eucharist for me and for the world, I realise it was always people who had a passion for the things of the Lord who inspired me. It was always people who, in spite of everything, including great suffering and set back, had a deep, intuitive sense of God’s love and God’s presence in the Eucharist who awoke in me the fires of God’s love that, however imperfectly, has prompted my daily ‘yes’ to the service of Christ as a priest and as a bishop.

This is why we cannot separate the mission of helping others to discern their vocation before the Lord from our devotion to the Eucharist. In the words of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, ‘The service of love is the fundamental meaning of every vocation’ (*PDV*, 40). In the words of the *Pastoral Guidelines for Fostering Vocations to the Priestly Ministry*, published by the Congregation for Catholic Education earlier this year, ‘every Christian vocation, is the history of an inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him.’ This dialogue takes place most perfectly and most fruitfully in the Eucharist. Whatever our vocation, as the title of your programme suggests, every Christian vocation has its source and sustaining power in the Eucharist.

This was never more evident to me than when I visited the vast array of vibrant and committed movements, organisations and agencies of Catholic life active here in Ireland who had put up magnificent displays of their work at the RDS stadium in Dublin during the Eucharistic Congress. The Eucharist reconnects us to the mission of the local and universal Church. The Eucharistic Congress pulled back the veil on the enormous range of apostolic activity that goes on every day in Ireland by

lay faithful of every age, by outstanding consecrated persons and missionaries and by the thousands of outstanding priests of this country and abroad.

While this involves a reflection on all the dimensions of vocation arising from our Baptism, it is important to give particular attention to the urgent need to foster vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life.

The renewed emphasis on the vocation and role of the lay faithful encouraged by the Second Vatican Council has naturally received particular attention in the years since the Council. What was particularly striking for me at the Eucharistic Congress, however, was the number of lay faithful, of every age, who expressed concern and prayed regularly for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and the religious life.

While all are equal before God, and all the baptised have their share in the common priesthood of Christ, the document on *Pastoral Guidelines for Fostering Vocations to the Priestly Ministry*, published by the Congregation for Catholic Education in March reminds us that 'The Gospels present vocation as a marvellous meeting between God and human beings. This is the mystery of being called, the mystery that involves the life of every Christian, but which is manifested with greater clarity in those whom Christ invites to leave everything to follow him more nearly. Christ has always chosen some persons to work together with him in a more direct manner for the realization of the Father's plan of salvation' (n.6).

Given the particular challenge posed by the decline in vocations to priesthood and the consecrated life in Western Europe, it is important that the work of bringing the vocation and mission of the lay faithful to full fruition in the Church does not undermine the importance and particular character of the vocation to the priesthood and the consecrated life. In parishes, in families, even in the secular world this has always been recognised and expressed in an open recognition of the special character of those who are singularly and publicly committed to intimacy with the Lord and to the universal mission of His Church in the ordained priesthood and religious life. While elitism or an exclusivist clericalism have no place in a proper understanding of Christian vocation, celebration, encouragement and active support for the particular intimacy, closeness and centrality of the role of the sacramental priesthood is an important and vital part of the life of the Church which has the Eucharist and the other sacraments as its source.

In choosing to reflect in a particular way on paragraph 17b of the document *In Verbo Tuo... New Vocations for a New Europe*, you have brought to the forefront of your reflection the stark reality that without the priesthood, there is no Eucharist. Without the Eucharist, there is no Church.

The document helpfully highlights a number of areas that require our attention and effort if this crisis of the Church in Western Europe is to be addressed. These include:

- A general recovery of our confidence and joy in the particular mission and role of the ordained priesthood. As a Christian community we should not hesitate to celebrate and rejoice at the gift of a vocation to the priesthood that has been nurtured, matured and affirmed by the proper authority and discernment of the Church. The link between the priesthood, the Eucharist and the other sacraments is so intrinsic and essential that it is completely proper that the whole Christian community should actively encourage young and

indeed older men to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to discern a possible vocation to the priesthood. As those responsible for encouraging and supporting vocations to the priesthood we should be open to concern of some that we have become hesitant about speaking of the particular importance of the vocation to the priesthood for fear of undermining efforts to encourage a wider sense of baptismal vocation among the lay faithful. The two are not mutually exclusive but mutually complimentary. A proper understanding of the ordained priesthood encourages and rejoices in the full, proper and active participation of the lay faithful in their vocation and likewise the lay faithful should rejoice, celebrate and actively encourage the particular vocation and ministry of the ordained priest.

- The document also highlights the importance of the family as the first school of the virtues of Christian life and the natural ‘womb’ of priestly vocation. I encourage you, as I encourage families to renew their sense of mission and importance as the seed bed of vocations to the priesthood, especially through their example of family prayer and concern for those who are in need. By supporting and encouraging the fundamental vocation of parents to Christian family life, as the domestic Church, we will also provide the fertile soil of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. This is as aspect of your work and mission that I encourage you to consider.
- The document further highlights something which we all know from our experience of young people in the local Church, in our parishes and in our schools. Young people have a tremendous capacity for generosity, for service of others and for outreach to the vulnerable and those in need. They also have a greater sense than previous generations of the potential for global unity and solidarity. They all listen to the same music, wear the same sweat shirts, they use the same mobile phones and global social networks. Perhaps for the first time in human history this makes the nature of the Church as the sacrament of unity of the whole human family a prospect that finds expression in the practical culture and experience of the younger generation. When our Holy Father, Pope Benedict speaks of our fundamental vocation as artisans, active citizens of the civilisation of love, I believe we propose something that is real and attractive to young people in particular. I encourage you to reflect, as we should throughout the Church, on the potential of the proposition of the civilisation of love to encourage greater participation by young people in the life of the Church, as well as vocations to the priesthood and religious life.
- Finally, the document speaks of the importance of supporting the work of encouraging vocations to the priesthood with prayer. It is striking and can never be forgotten that in response to the recognition that the harvest is rich, our Lord said simply and starkly that we should pray to the Lord of the harvest to send more labourers.

Do we do enough to encourage prayer for vocations in our homes, in our parishes, in the wider Church? This must always be a question that exercises a meeting of a service dedication to the promotion of vocations.

Your work is vital to the future of the Church generally, and to the Church in Europe in particular. Saint Irenaeus, whose Memorial we celebrate today, reminded us of the link between the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the very promise of our resurrection from the Lord. In

celebrating the Eucharist, he said, ‘we proclaim communion and unity and profess our belief in the resurrection of flesh and spirit’. In receiving the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, he said, we are no longer corruptible, for we have the hope of resurrection.

Our world needs confident, cheerful and generous heralds of hope – of hope in this life and hope in the peace and joy of the life to come. It would be wrong of us to believe that the current generation of young people is less open, less generous or less willing to give their lives wholeheartedly and generously to the service of the Gospel than generations in the past. What we need is to pray and to have confidence in our own vocation. We need a renewed joy and recognition of the unique identity and role of the ordained priesthood and the consecrated life. We need the courage to ask young people and others to respond to the call of the Lord, to take the step of discerning his will, and in the spirit of our Gospel, of building their future on the rock of faith. We need to hear the voice of those incredible young priests and religious who continue to come forward and give their lives in joyful service to the Gospel in spite of the many cultural and other pressures that press against their generosity and faith.

By way of conclusion, I put before you the memory of a young man I knew who spent part of his priestly formation in the Irish College in Rome. Although he was not from Ireland, he also spent some of his summers here helping out on the penitential island of Lough Derg and some local parishes. His name was Fr Ragheed Ghanni. He was ordained for the Diocese of Mosul in Iraq. Those who knew him were struck by his incredible faith, even though he had grown up in a Muslim culture. They were also very struck by his joy at being a priest and his deep commitment to returning to serve his people in Mosul in Iraq once he was ordained and had finished his studies. On the third of June 2007, only six years after he was ordained and four years after he returned to his home Diocese of Mosul, Fr Ghanni was brutally murdered along with three sub-deacons of his parish as they left the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist with their parishioners at Holy Spirit Chaldean Church in Mosul. When he returned to Iraq, Fr Ghanni knew the dangers that awaited him as a priest. He did not hesitate to face those dangers with courage and utter generosity towards the Christian people and the wider society he had been called to serve. I am pleased that his image is celebrated on the new apse of the Chapel of the Irish College in Rome. I am pleased that a copy of that image and the apse formed a backdrop to the celebration of the Eucharist during the week of the recent Eucharistic Congress in Dublin.

We should never lose faith in God’s power to raise up women and men in every age who are living and courageous witnesses to his love. Our challenge is to have the courage and the faith to invite those we believe and who may have received that call to come forward and to discern with the Church what the Lord asks of them. The harvest is rich but the labourers are few. Let us pray to the Lord to send more labourers the great harvest that every day opens up before us as a great challenge, and as a great opportunity.