

Richard



Bishop of Arundel & Brighton

PASTORAL LETTER
for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
50th Anniversary of the Canonisation of the 40 Martyrs of England & Wales
25th October 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This day in 1970 marked a most significant moment for the Church in England & Wales. Saints John Fisher and Thomas More had been canonised in 1935, but on this day, forty martyrs of the 16th and 17th centuries were canonised by Pope St. Paul VI. This group of saints (laywomen and men, priests and religious) includes our own Diocesan Patron, St. Philip Howard.

While not questioning their sanctity, some may look back at the 16th and 17th centuries and wonder if men and women of a bygone age have very much to teach us. Certainly, they were people of their own time - a period when lives tended to be shorter, perhaps a more barbarous time in some respects, a time when the vast majority of the population lived in great poverty, the threat of war or plague not far from the door.

Times do move on, although human nature changes little, and every time in history has faced its own perils and societal failures. In our own time, we are living in the midst of a pandemic and many across our world live in abject poverty and there is much injustice.

The challenges to Faith that are present in our society, although expressed differently, would be recognised by the martyrs we celebrate today. Pope St. Paul VI drew attention to this quality in our martyrs, in his homily at the Mass of Canonisation. He spoke of the “interior quality of unshakable loyalty to the vocation given them by God - the sacrifice of their lives as a loving response to that call.”

In a secularised society, one of the greatest expressions of faith we can offer to the world around us is simple, persevering fidelity to the Lord’s discipleship. This is a most pressing demand upon every one of us - to be, before all else, people who answer God’s call, living this out for the good of the whole world.

Pope St. Paul VI spoke also of his desire, in the act of Canonisation, to “assist in advancing ecumenism worthy of the name.” This witness in the society of our day is carried out alongside our Christian brothers and sisters.

In these present times of the Covid-19 pandemic, this fidelity, this loyalty, expressed in love and charity, is as vital as ever. It is, perhaps, the most powerful witness in times of crisis - and our martyrs show the way of fidelity without limit.

It may have been difficult for us to celebrate Mass together for some time - the “truth of the Holy Eucharist”, Pope St. Paul VI reminds us, was a particular point of testing for the martyrs. These present times are testing for us too. Our response must, surely, be that of the martyrs - placing the Eucharist at the centre of our lives and returning to the celebration with renewed hope and trust in the One who gave Himself for us on the Cross and continues to give Himself to us completely in the Sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist.

Faithful to his own promise, the Lord Himself is with us on our journey, just as He was with the martyrs whom we celebrate today. Through His closeness to us and our openness to His love, we are made a people of hope. This hope, rooted in the Eucharist, makes our witness strong; more effective than we might ever imagine.

As we give thanks for the witness of our martyrs, may their prayers strengthen us on the path of fidelity to the vocation, the mission, to which each of us is called.

With every Blessing,

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a cross at the beginning.

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