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**St Brigid's Day Lecture**

**St Brigid's Parish, Belfast**

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***Christian and Citizen?***

Good evening. It is indeed a great honour to be invited to deliver this annual St Brigid's day lecture. I have attended so many of them, given by Cardinals and Archbishops and really distinguished visitors and enjoyed all of them - having done so, having seen what has gone before, it is somewhat difficult to stand before you today. However... I would like to thank those who invited me to speak tonight, and thank you all for coming out to hear me on this cold winter night.

It is fitting that these lectures occur on the feast of St Brigid - I have read that she chose the beatitude of mercy for her motto throughout life - she lived a life of self sacrificing mercy to the poor and hungry . She gave away all she could and she became known as Muire na nGael. She believed that the poor belonged to the great family whose father was God. They were the brothers and sisters of Christ who needed to be cared for physically so that the light and life of Christ could nourish their souls. She was true follower of Christ - a Christian.

The topic about which I speak "*Christian and Citizen?*" invites reflection on the nature of what it is to be a Christian, and on what the call to follow Christ, the call to holiness in all its manifestations means for one's life as a citizen. It almost suggests that there may be an incompatibility between citizenship and Christianity.

There are certainly those, and they are quite vociferous who invite, indeed command us to keep our Christianity separate from our public lives. But I have learned that life cannot be like that. It should not be like that, for what I believe informs everything I do, and I believe that God has called each of us as Newman said "*to do him some special service.*" That service, for most of us, will be lived out in the world in what we live, work, socialise. It will not be something separate from the place to which we are called. It will be integral to all our relationships with those whom we encounter our pilgrim journey.

The Church is very clear on this. As the American bishops said in their document launched in December last and prepared for the purposes of the forthcoming American presidential election:

*"In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation."*

They quoted Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he said *People in every nation enhance the social dimension of their lives by acting as committed and responsible citizens.*<sup>1</sup> So, the American bishops say, *"The obligation to participate in political life is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life"*.<sup>2</sup>

This position is quite contrary to the public position, often quoted by secular politicians, that religion should be a private affair, and that no one should attempt to formulate their understanding of how things should be by reference to their religious beliefs. Moreover, there is almost an assertion that by bringing our beliefs as Christians into public life, we are behaving in an inappropriate and undesirable way.

I suppose my first question must be, why must the assertions of secularists be more acceptable than the proclaimed belief of a Christian? After the Second World War, following the devastation of the world and mass genocide, there were attempts to work out how many people died in those six short years across the world. To this day nobody really knows - they estimate that between 70m and 85m people died as a result of the war between 1939 and 1945. That we do not even know today how many died is a terrible indictment. We were reminded of this most recently on International Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January when we remembered the millions of Jews who perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and similar places and also the Romanies, the Catholic priests, the homosexuals, and so many others whose lives were extinguished in those terrible places. We pledged ourselves never to forget what happened and to fight anti-semitism and discrimination wherever we meet it.

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<sup>1</sup>Evangelii Gaudium, no. 220

<sup>2</sup> os. 1913-1915

In an attempt to ensure that never again was such inhumanity allowed to prevail, the states of the United Nations agreed the The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948, as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations, listing the fundamental human rights to be universally protected. It has been translated into over 500 languages.

It was followed by The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the European Convention on Human Rights, which gave effect to certain of the rights stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and made them binding on signatory states. Agreed in 1950, it came into force in 1953.

The Member States, reaffirmed *“their profound belief in those fundamental freedoms which are the foundation of justice and peace in the world and are best maintained on the one hand by an effective political democracy and on the other by a common understanding and observance of the Human Rights upon which they depend;”*

ARTICLE 9 of that Convention provides for freedom of thought, conscience and religion

It says that *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, **either alone or in community with others and in public or private**, [emphasis mine] to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”* and that that freedom shall *“be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”*

It seems to me that these rights have been much diminished in recent years. It is time we remembered again the fundamental principles and rights upon which our society is based.

Those us who have faith have the right, then, to articulate that faith in the public domain. We should not be silenced. Nor should we be embarrassed or afraid to be Christian in an increasingly secular world. It is our duty to manifest our faith, to proclaim the Gospel.’

Cardinal Hume, writing in 1996 was very clear about this. He said *“Religion is always personal, but never just a private affair. Discipleship involves seeking God in this world, as well as preparing to meet Him in the next. The Gospel imperative to love our neighbour entails not only that we should help those in need, but also address the causes of destitution and poverty. The deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour, and thus with social action.”*

The Church's social teaching places the political within the larger context of humanity's relationship with God. However, it also emphasises *“the importance of our spiritual journey. Social and political action is important, but realising our full human dignity as children of God, made in his image and likeness, also requires each of us to undertake an inner spiritual journey. The future of humanity”* he said, *“does not depend on political reform, social revolution or scientific advance. Something else is needed. It starts with a true conversion of mind and heart and it is very simple .”*

For a true Christian, citizenship is fundamental to discipleship. That desire to participate in the life of a community, to make a difference, is part of us.

As Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*, *“An authentic faith . . . always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. If indeed “the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics,”* the Church, *“cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice.”*<sup>3</sup>

Francis talks too, of our call to holiness as a call to protect our inheritance: *“It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God’s creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving*

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<sup>3</sup>(*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 183)

*concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about. It means caring for one another in our families: husbands and wives first protect one another, and then, as parents, they care for their children, and children themselves, in time, protect their parents. It means building sincere friendships in which we protect one another in trust, respect, and goodness. In the end, everything has been entrusted to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it. Be protectors of God's gifts!"<sup>4</sup>*

There is plenty of guidance, then for all of us if we can find the courage to hear and to act, not just out of our common humanity, but in faith. Christians believe in the Gospel, and in answering that most basic and fundamental element of our call to holiness, that we love God as he has loved us, that we try to know that Christ is there always not only in the quiet calm but also in moments of danger, challenge and uncertainty, and that we must love him not just when we encounter him in the hearts of all who love us, but also in friend and stranger.

Each of us is on a pilgrim journey. For some it will be a lower profile journey: not everyone seeks election as a politician, for example, but in every aspect of our lives we have opportunities to be what St Theresa of Avila reminds us of when she said, "*Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*"

The opportunities are ours and as citizens we have so many avenues to live that calling to be the body of Christ on earth: it may be that we are called to care for the sick, those who live with disabilities, those for whom life has become limited; it may be that we are called as parents or uncles and aunts to nurture the children of today, so that they become worthy citizens of this world; it may be that are called to act in a work context, in a social context, as a volunteer: so many opportunities to live out the calling to love one another as he has loved us.

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<sup>4</sup> MASS, IMPOSITION OF THE PALLIUM  
AND BESTOWAL OF THE FISHERMAN'S RING  
FOR THE BEGINNING OF THE PETRINE MINISTRY  
OF THE BISHOP OF ROME HOMILY OF POPE FRANCIS  
Saint Peter's Square Tuesday, 19 March 2013

Pope Francis, in his forthright way has identified many of the causes we need to espouse:

*'We cannot ignore the fact that in cities human trafficking, the narcotics trade, the abuse and exploitation of minors, the abandonment of the elderly and infirm, and various forms of corruption and criminal activity take place. At the same time, what could be significant places of encounter and solidarity often become places of isolation and mutual distrust. Houses and neighbourhoods are more often built to isolate and protect than to connect and integrate.'*

The answer he tells us is *'To live our human life to the fullest and to meet every challenge as a leaven of Gospel witness in every culture and in every city. This will make us better Christians and bear fruit in our cities.'*

Cardinal Daneels spelt it out very simply. He said this, *"the Kingdom of God grows primarily outside the Church, in the field, among the people, in the world. You can help us most by making Christ's Spirit present in your home, in your work, in your profession, in the world of economics and politics, in culture, in schools, in health care institutions.... To be present in the world and in life, to discern therein what is in conformity with the gospel, and to bear witness to it all: this is not merely a prelude to the coming of the Kingdom of God. It is a kingdom itself already established and founded.'*

So what about this world of ours?

Christian fundamental values of respect for life from beginning to natural end, of compassion, of offering one's life for another, of caring for the weak and the vulnerable, of respecting, not isolating and forgetting, the old and the sick, of providing education and health care, and of doing all in the name of the Lord can seem to those of us of religious faith to be unchallengeable. Yet in the modern secular world they are much challenged.

What about things like the new abortion law which was imposed on the people of NI without consultation, or consideration of its impact on our stretched and broken health service. At the moment we have no law regulating abortion here - it is a strange and terrible time - there is no longer the protection which existed before Oct 22 last year . We are awaiting regulations which will give effect to our new law. We do not know what they will say but the

trend is pretty clear. Once they are placed before Parliament they will become law. We will not be able to amend them and we don't have the numbers to defeat them. The stated aim of the pro abortionists is for abortion on demand to birth. At present abortion can be carried out to birth when a baby has a cleft palate, club foot, or Down's Syndrome or what they call a fatal foetal anomaly. Abortion is a multi million pound industry. To give one example, Simon Cooke, chief executive of the Marie Stopes family planning charity, earned £434,000 in 2018, including bonuses – up from £300,532 in 2017. It speaks for itself.

We face, too, an inevitable move to create a legal right to assisted suicide or euthanasia. Canada changed its law to provide for medical assistance in dying in 2015. 6,794 people had been killed by March 2018. It is reported that, in 2017, fifteen years after the Netherlands decriminalised euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, more than 25 percent of all deaths in the nation were induced, 6,600 cases of euthanasia; 1,900 suicides and some 32,000 people killed through a practice called palliative sedation. Holland has a population of 17.8m. In The greatest growth in assisted deaths in Holland has been in those who have been diagnosed with dementia or are suffering from depression or other mental illness.

This is what they want to bring to us, north and south in Ireland.

We must, as Christians and as citizens, continue to try to assert that most precious, and for us sacred, right - the right to life. Using the language of compassion, care and rights, the pro-choice lobby offer what purports to be simple easy solutions. But birth and death are not easy. The proclamation of the right to kill the unborn child and to terminate life is not a matter to be accepted without challenge. They are the two most fundamental moments of our lives. We must continue to speak up.

We need to speak up on behalf of not just the unborn, but also the vulnerable, the disabled, the trafficked, the enslaved, the persecuted religious minorities of the world, the marginalised, the deprived.

In this community in particular we need to speak up for and do all we can to help the often silent victims of the Troubles. I have spent the last three days working on the Stakeknife Investigation and looking towards the beginning of the review of the Glenanne series of cases. We know that trauma is trans -generational - the trauma of the last 50 years is still

visible in this country. We have to do all we can to ensure that the legacy of the past is dealt with, that healing comes and that justice is seen to be present. Great work is being done to attempt to unite our divided society. It is for the most part forward looking, but there are those for whom the past is the present, and it surely is our duty to try and ensure that justice, mercy, compassion and love form part of our response to the past, so that we enable the future and bring hope to our people. It is happening, but it is too slow, and the truth we now know, is that those who hoped that, as people died the injustices and wrongs of the past would be forgotten, were wrong. Think about the recent pictures of the Bloody Sunday commemoration, I think about the children and grandchildren of the Disappeared, who continue to support those who still seek the recovery of the bodies of the three remaining disappeared so that they can lay them to rest. The trauma simply passes from one generation to another.

Our politicians cannot continue to quibble endlessly about the detail of a historic investigations unit - they need to ensure that robust and effective mechanisms properly funded are made available to heal the many sore wounds of our troubled past. Then we will really be able to build our solid future.

Christians have another duty too - to be brave and to proclaim that God is, not only to offer religious values to inform society's decision making, but also to offer spiritual realities, to encourage belief, to model belief, to make it possible for people again to say publicly "I believe in God and that is the reason I live my life as I do. "

We live in a country with soaring suicide rates. In 1970, 73 people died of suicide. In 2018 the figure was 307. Over 5,000 people in NI have died by suicide since the Good Friday Agreement. 3,700 people are recorded as having died during the Troubles. Our suicide rate now far exceeds the murders of the Troubles. How has this come to pass? Why do so many people decide that there is no hope - that death is the only way to stop the pain which torments them ? We know some of the reasons - we know that many people die after drugs, alcohol, of Troubles related traumas, but we know too that Christianity brings hope.

We have to have the courage to speak that truth as citizens, to reiterate the truth that God made each one of us, that we are loved even when we do not know that love, and that God really does have a purpose for each of us, part of his divine plan. The pain of the death by suicide of a loved one is immense. it echoes throughout the years. We have to reach out as

best we can to all those for whom life is so very difficult, and when life gets very difficult for us, as will happen from time to time, our fellow Christians must be there for us to hold us in prayer and in love until the darkness passes, as it will.

When this happens, when Christians speak out in love, it can be powerful beyond our imaginations.

I was reading recently a homily which St Oscar Romero gave on March 24 1980. It is very powerful. Among other things, speaking of the battle for peace in an escalating civil war, he said this,

*Many do not understand, and they think Christianity should not get involved in such things. But, to the contrary, you have just heard Christ's Gospel, that one must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life which history demands of us, that those who would avoid the danger will lose their life, while those who out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others will live, like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone. The harvest comes about because it dies, allows itself to be sacrificed in the earth and destroyed. Only by destroying itself does it produce the harvest."*

Minutes later Oscar Romero was shot dead in his cathedral as he continued to celebrate Mass.

So this is no glib calling. This Gospel of ours is fundamentally and totally demanding. It requires of each of us that we see the face of Christ in all whom we meet, that we respond totally to those who need our help, that we are never too tired or too busy. It is actually profoundly difficult to be a true Christian!

I have been much privileged in the opportunities which have been given to me over the years. I heard early the words of Micah, *this is what the Lord asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.*<sup>5</sup> They really impacted on me - so simple yet so profound: like a motto for life: act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly. The work which I do relates to social justice matters - human rights, the abolition of the death

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<sup>5</sup>- Micah 6:8.

penalty, justice and security, accountability of policing and power, the protection of the right to life both in the womb and at the end of life.

Such discipleship is never simple, it can be intellectually challenging - for example if one accepts that medical technology has rightly brought us lung transplants and amazing advances in saving premature babies and so many other developments, is it right or wrong to replace a defective battery cell with one which is not defective which is harvested from another mother. They say such children have three parents. Can this be what God intended? One question, of course, is how is that battery cell or mitochondria secured? What may be the ongoing consequences? And if women are being paid £500 a time to allow their eggs to be harvested so that the healthy mitochondria can be extracted, is that wrong? And who are those women? There are undoubtedly altruistic donors, but most of them are women who need money to feed their children or provide a home. Serious risks attach to the procedure, even of life threatening renal failure. All the women therefore are not necessarily true volunteers. Is that permissible? How do we fight the commercial exploitation of women's vulnerability? Should we? What can you or I as Christians do?

I think, too, of all those people coming from Africa, from Syria, from so many other countries in the hope of a better life? They come from places of huge natural wealth. The reality is that it is not that such people could never have a proper standard of living, rather it is that those countries' assets are very often stripped out by corrupt rulers and even by multi-nationals, leaving their people in penury. So what do we do about the current problems of the mass movement of peoples? As Christians we make donations to appeals. Do we pray that someone else will solve the problem? Is that enough? It is not enough to be shocked.

It can seem a bit overwhelming. The corrupt exercise of power is hard to challenge, especially when it reposes in the hands of oligarchs, presidents, and multi-nationals. It can seem an insuperable task. It will only be achieved in small steps. That does not matter. That the steps may have to be small, must not be a deterrent for us in trying! As a Christian I have learned that faith must be lived in the world in which we live, with the people whom we meet. It is not an intellectual exercise.

Dag Hammerskjold, the second Secretary General of the UN and Nobel Peace Prize winner wrote of how ,

*"In our age, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."*

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis said that, *'humanity is experiencing a turning-point in its history: steps are being taken to improve people's welfare in a health care, education and communications. Yet the majority of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day, with dire consequences. Diseases are spreading. The hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation, even in the so-called rich countries. The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident. It is a struggle to live and, often, to live with precious little dignity.*

I think we can all recognise the world which he describes, and he tells us we must say no to *"an economy of exclusion and inequality, in which it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, or when food is thrown away while people are starving, but it is when the stock market loses two points, Today, he says, everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. Masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape*

The reality too, is that as we live our faith in today's secular world, we will find that God reveals himself to us in so many ways. We meet him in others who walk the journey with us, relations, friends, teachers, medical professionals, those who make our world work, and who make it safe for us to live in. There are other ways and other times when we meet the Lord. As Martin Luther wrote, *"Our Lord has written the promise of the resurrection, not in scripture alone, but in every leaf in springtime."*

Each of us is called to live our faith as Christians.. We live where we find ourselves, our challenge is to really live in faith, so it is perhaps appropriate to end with some words which are attributed to St Augustine of Hippo.<sup>6</sup> *God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies grey and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may*

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<sup>6</sup> 354-430

*be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to Your honour and glory.*

Our lives as Christians and as citizens are not ours alone. We are part of the great work of God in the world He made.

Thank you

Nuala O'Loan