Homily

Monsignor Seán Killeen

Diamond Jubilee of Ordination

First of all, let me congratulate Monsignor Sean on the Diamond Jubilee of his Ordination and thank him for the sixty years of dedicated service which he has given to the diocese of Killala. Personally, in particular, I want to thank him for his fifteen years as Vicar General of the diocese, during which time he has given me support, guidance and encouragement, without which my work would have been much more difficult. So thank you, Sean.

It is fitting that we are holding this celebration of the Eucharist in this College Chapel, where so many of the vocations of the priests of this diocese were discerned and nourished. It was here that the Lord touched their hearts and from here they have carried out their ministry, in this diocese and to the ends of the earth. I cannot but acknowledge an element of sadness that this is no longer the reality.

Despite this, for Sean and for all of us, sixty seven years after he left this College to go to Maynooth and after sixty years of ministry in this diocese, he is celebrating an eternal truth this evening, one that never changes, one we need to acknowledge ourselves and from which we need to take encouragement. That is the enduring presence of the Church, despite the ups and downs of history and in particular of Irish history. with the trauma of recent years. We are also celebrating faith in God, which is still deep in this country, if changed in it’s expression and practice. We are acknowledging commitment to Christ, which is still strong and still possible in priesthood. And we are celebrating priesthood itself – perhaps bloodied but still unbowed. And on the other side of the coin, as priests, he and we are acknowledging our human frailty, our sinful nature and the ultimate triumph of the grace of God in our lives.

Sixty seven years ago, as he left this College Sean could not foresee what was coming, neither the scandals which have taken place nor the knowledge of himself which only life’s experience could and would reveal to him. The theologian Karl Rahner, speaking at a jubilee of ordination, summed this up; ‘We did not see then what was coming and we did not know what was in ourselves. Perhaps we could have guessed. But at the bottom we could not know what was coming.’ And then he goes on to say; ‘Eternal thanks be to God’s merciful grace; in all these years God has never forsaken us. And so we are able to say; we have no regrets.’ And I know that despite all that has happened in the Church over the past six decades, where his priesthood is concerned, Sean is able to say with Rahner, ‘I have no regrets for having become a priest.’ This evening, therefore, we celebrate the triumph of grace in Fr Sean.

One of Fr Sean’s great gifts is his openness to the future and his practical handling of the present, with an occasional glance backwards, often more in jest rather than in admiration. Like many of us, I think he would resonate with a sentiment which Pope Francis expressed recently, when thinking about the place of the Holy Spirit in our lives and especially in priesthood. The Pope said: “To put it simply: the Holy Spirit bothers us. Because he moves us, he makes us walk, he pushes the Church to go forward. And we are like Peter at the Transfiguration, saying, 'Ah, how wonderful it is to be here like this, all together!' ... But don't bother us. We want the Holy Spirit to doze off ... we want to domesticate the Holy Spirit. And that's no good. Because he is God, he is that wind which comes and goes and you don't know where. He is the power of God, he is the one who gives us consolation and strength to move forward. But: to move forward! And this bothers us. It's so much nicer to be comfortable.”

Even in retirement, while Sean enjoys his comfort, he is not comfortable, he is constantly open to the Holy Spirit who refuses, as the Pope said, to ‘doze off’. Sean has never said to the Spirit ‘don’t bother me’ when he went as Chaplain to Belmullet, or as President of this College or as Parish Priest of Ballycastle. And even now, in retirement, he helps out in Rathduff, acts as Chaplain to the students here and attends endless meetings as Vicar General. And, perhaps, the finest tribute paid to him is that paid by the teenagers in this College at present, some seventy years his junior, who haven’t got up in this pulpit but who in a recent survey taken here have clearly shown their admiration for him for being inclusive, non-judgmental and welcoming in all his dealings with them. And their spirit of appreciation is shared by so many in our diocese, priests and people alike.

Sean, we and you have much to remember, much to celebrate and much to be grateful for this evening. Thank you from all of us. Ad Multos Annos.