

# DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



*✠ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham  
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle*



## **Advent 2014**

Thank you very much for gathering here at St Mary's Cathedral from all over the Diocese for our time of Prayer and Reflection together. I want today to reflect on the presence of the Risen Lord in the Eucharist, so that the Lord will can open our minds and hearts and imaginations to him. The Lord will help us prepare in the coming weeks and months for our journey together as we move Forward Together in Hope.

Over the last few months I have been reflecting deeply on the story of the Vietnamese Archbishop. Archbishop van Thuan. He was imprisoned in 1975 for his faith. When he was imprisoned the question that haunted him was: "Will I be able to celebrate the Eucharist". When he was released, the first question the people asked: "Were you allowed to celebrate Mass?"

When everything was lacking, the Eucharist, the bread of life was upper most in his thoughts. Everything has been taken from him but he was hoping that the Eucharist would never be taken from him. "If anyone eats this bread he will live forever and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" John 6:51. Time and time again he recalled the words of 4<sup>th</sup> century martyrs, "we cannot live without the Lord's supper".

We know from our own history and experience that in times of persecution and struggle the Eucharist was celebrated – whether it was in a field, a desert, a ship, a prison or a Mass rock. People travelled long distances over rough ground and very often knelt in the damp mud in order to celebrate the Eucharist. Wherever there was suffering and persecution a way was found in which to celebrate the Eucharist.

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**Bishop's House, East Denton Hall, 800 West Road, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE5 2BJ**  
Tel: +44 (0) 191 228 0003 Fax: +44 (0) 191 274 0432 Email: [office@rcdhn.org.uk](mailto:office@rcdhn.org.uk)

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In many cases priests and people died as they made such great sacrifices to celebrate. Our diocese is blessed with the witness of priests from Douai College, the forerunner of Ushaw College, and the Venerable English College in Rome, who studied abroad and returned to this country. Some of them were arrested as soon as they set foot on English soil. Many of them are martyrs as a result of their commitment to serve the Lord and the Church in this area. They had deep faith, great hope and great strength, they got through it all through the power of the Eucharist.

The Archbishop tells of his own experience he said: 'When I was arrested I had to leave immediately with empty hands'. He was isolated, lonely and without the support of his people. 'The next day I was permitted to write to my people in order to ask for the most necessary things – like clothes, toothpaste etc. I wrote, "Please send me a little wine as medicine for my stomach ache". The people understood right away.

They sent me a small bottle of wine for Mass with a label that read "medicine for stomach aches". They also send me some hosts which they hid in a flashlight for protection against the humidity.

The police asked me, "You have stomach aches?" "Yes", "Here's some medicine for you".

He speaks of his great joy – every day with three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of his hand he would celebrate Mass. The palm of his hand was his altar and this was his cathedral. It was true medicine for soul and body.

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He said, "Each time I celebrated Mass I had the opportunity to extend my hands and nail myself to the cross with Jesus; to drink with Him the bitter chalice. Each day in reciting the words of consecration I confirmed with all my heart and soul a new pact; an eternal pact between Jesus and me through His blood mixed with mine. Those were the most beautiful Masses of my life". The Archbishop had to be stripped down of everything before God broke into his life and the power of the Eucharist became effective.

It is extremely unlikely that any one of us will ever have to live in such extreme circumstances, being imprisoned for our faith. Though the way things are going in our world and society at the present time there may be a time when we will have to suffer in the same way. But just as Archbishop van Thuan could take 3 drops of wine and a drop of water and a small piece of bread and recognise Jesus in them, so can we appreciate the presence of Jesus in very small things. The smile of a child, the grasp of a hand from a close friend or an encouraging word from a neighbour can make real for us the presence of the Lord.

Maybe we can ask the question, what about us when we come to celebrate the Eucharist? Like the Archbishop we too have the opportunity to nail our sufferings, our lives to the cross with him. We too can unite whatever is going on in our lives with the sufferings of Christ. Our blood can be mingled with the blood of Christ, our hearts can beat with His heart, we can be one as the bread and wine are placed on the altar we can place everything that is going on in our lives there so that as the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ so too are we transformed. Such is the power of the Eucharist that we bring our fears and

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anxieties there; it is there that we surrender and abandon ourselves into the hands of God. We let go of anything that is holding us back; anything that is hindering growth; anything that is hindering love, we let go of our narrow world.

When the priest offers the simple gifts of bread and wine to God at the Offertory of the mass, he is also offering the hopes, fears, yearnings and longings of the whole congregation. Our faith is that all of this is changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. We become the Body and Blood of Christ in our world today.

What that stirs in me is how often we take the Mass for granted. Many are inclined to look for the 'mass of convenience'. Are we prepared to put ourselves out, to go further than we feel is convenient? How often we fail to enter into what the Mass actually means. How often we fail to nail ourselves to the cross with Christ. How often we fail to unite our sufferings with His. How often we grumble because we have to put ourselves out in order to celebrate the Eucharist, "All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of His resurrection to share in His sufferings and to become like Him in His death in the hope that I myself will be raised from death to life". There is no resurrection without the cross, we get to know Christ only if we enter fully into the whole of His life.

The true effect of the Eucharist is that we are transformed in Christ, "I live now, not I but it is Christ who lives in me". I am not journeying alone, I am empowered by the power of Christ within me. In the Eucharist we are changed to what we receive into the person we meet.

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We become what we eat and drink. We become the Body of Christ today. We are commissioned to become his disciples to go out from Mass together to make a difference in our world, to serve one another and to transform the world around us. Evangelization begins on our knees. Through the Eucharist we become, "One flesh and one blood with Christ". Jesus lives in us and we in Him; He lives in me, remains in me, He acts through me. "We are possessed by that same mighty power which God the Father used when He raised Jesus from death to life". We are empowered by the Trinity, the perfect Community of love which transforms our lives.

Archbishop van Thuan said that in the prison he felt beating within his heart, the same heart of Christ, "I felt that my life was His life and His was mine".

The Eucharist became for me and for the other Christians a hidden and encouraging presence in the midst of all of our difficulties.

In the re-education camp the prisoners were divided into groups of 50 people. They slept on a common bed and everyone had a right to 50 cms of space. They managed to make sure there were five Catholics with him. At 9.30 pm they had to turn off the lights, be silent, and everyone had to go to sleep. It was then that he would bow over the bed to celebrate the Mass by heart. He distributed Holy Communion by passing his hand under the mosquito net. They even made little sacks from the paper of cigarette packs to preserve the Blessed Sacrament and bring it to others; he always carried the Blessed Sacrament in his shirt pocket.

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They took advantage of recreation to pass the small sacks to everyone in the four other groups of prisoners; everyone knew that Jesus was in their midst. At night the prisoners would take turns for adoration.

Is it not time that we took the risk and opened our churches for prayer and adoration? Can lay people not take responsibility to be in church and allow others to come and pray before the Blessed Sacrament?

With his silent presence in the Eucharistic, Jesus helped in unimaginable ways. Many Christians came back to the faith and their witness of service and love had an ever greater impact on the other prisoners. Many brothers and others were converted; the strength of Jesus' love was irresistible.

In this way the darkness of the prison became a paschal light and the seed germinated in the ground during the storm. The prison was transformed into a school of catechesis. Their joy and happiness was so great that they wanted to share it with those around them and others were converted. Catholics baptised fellow prisoners and became the godparents of their companions.

In Vietnam during this period approximately 300 priests were imprisoned. Their presence within the different camps was providential. There you had real inter-religious dialogue which created an understanding and friendship with everyone.

Through the Eucharist we are made one with Christ and with one another.

As I mentioned earlier, it is unlikely we will ever be in such a situation. But we all know moments of darkness, of loneliness and of fear. Perhaps we can pause at this

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point for a few moments, and recall any times when we've recognised the presence of Christ in difficult or desperate situations? Who stood alongside us? How was the power of the Holy Spirit made clear to us?

At this point Bishop Seamus paused for some time of silent reflection...

If we take the Eucharist seriously we will follow the example of Jesus and wash one another's feet. We will be attentive to the needs of others. We will treat each other with respect "that the Christ in me may recognise the Christ in them and that the Christ in them may recognise the Christ in me". The Catholic Catechism says, "The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the body and blood and Christ given up for us, we must recognise Christ in the poorest; we must also strive to change unjust structures".

As far as I'm concerned, Cardinal Thuan is a model of Christian hope. Isolation, darkness, and brutality saturated his prison life. In one afternoon, he went from being an archbishop to a mere prisoner. Instead of viewing his life as useless, empowered with the strength of the Eucharist, he chose to see his imprisonment as Christ's gift to him. He wrote the following during his imprisonment:

I accept my cross and I plant it, with my own two hands, in my heart. If you were to permit me to choose, I would change nothing, because you are with me! I am no longer afraid, I have understood. I am following you in your passion and in your resurrection. (Five Loaves and Two Fish, 48).

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Cardinal Thuan, while in prison, literally had nothing to give to his faithful. He could not give his time, energy, or advice. He became like the widow from the gospels who only gave two copper coins (Luke 21: 1-4). However, like the widow, he also gave all he had; he offered his emptiness and suffering as a prayer to God the Father. During his imprisonment, Cardinal Thuan learned to no longer place his hope in his works but to place his hope in accepting God's plan for him.

I think we can learn a lot from what went on in that prison. It is very obvious God was at work in a very powerful way in spite of the darkness, the isolation, the loneliness He was at work there in the darkness. There was a great outpouring of love in that prison. When the prison guards asked if he felt resentment towards them for his imprisonment, he only assured them of his concern and love for them (*Five Loaves and Two Fish*, 56). His love was both bewildering and contagious. We too will feel loved if we allow that deep friendship between God and each one of us to develop. But like plants, if that friendship is to grow and flourish, the conditions must be right. God shows us the conditions that are necessary namely privacy and solitude, stillness and quiet and listening. Just as a plant needs the balance between sunshine and rain so too we need the balance of space and togetherness. So each of us allows ourselves a period of solitude that we need for any friendship to grow. We need the stillness, the quiet and the silence that is experienced in prayer. Like any lover the Father speaks to us in the stillness of prayer in the intimacy of quietness. We have to wait patiently in readiness for this experience and in complete trust of His love for us. In the first stage of growth, seeds thrive best in the dark; it is the darkness of the soil that there is a lot of energy, a lot of activity, a lot of life even though we don't see it. Very often it is the same when we settle

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down to prayer much of the time nothing seems to be happening but God is at work in a very special way in our lives and eventually His light will shine and dispel the darkness.

## **Jesus living in the Church**

In very many cases today, we hear it said, "Christ yes, the church no". They don't see the connection between Jesus and the Church. God's Church. They do not recognise His presence in it and yet what is the church? What does the church desire to be if not the one who manifests the face of the Lord in the midst of the world. A farmer once said of the Curia of Ars, "I saw God in a man".

As Hindus, Muslims and Christians followed Mother Theresa's funeral they saw in her someone special, the face of Jesus. Here you had people who lived in close union with Christ and His face was revealed in them, "look towards the Lord and be radiant, let your faces not be abashed". Let the power of God's love break through us into the lives of people we meet, "Let your face shine on us, Oh Lord and we shall be saved". In our day and age more than ever before it is urgent that within the entire church Christ is seen and that everyone in the church radiates His presence. Hope is Jesus present in the church.

A Hungarian religious said, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall – that the only bible read by the un-churched "from a distance" so to speak, is the life of Christians. We

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can also add that we ourselves, our lives are the only Eucharist on which the world of non-Christians can feed. It is when we live in communion with Christ and with one another that the presence of Jesus manifests itself and becomes operative in very day existence.

In silence two or three believers can witness in mutual love to what constitutes their profound identity. To be church in the call of the weakness, in fraternal correction, in common prayer, in forgiveness without limits. St Paul says, "Walk in love just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us to God as an offering and sacrifice with a pleasing fragrance."

At one stage there were only two priests left in two Dioceses in North Vietnam and they could not freely leave their residences. What happened. Small groups of two or more lived the gospel daily and helped one another in every way and in this way they experienced the presence of the risen Christ who said, "but take courage I have conquered the world". John 16:33. Above all it is thanks to these small groups experiencing and witnessing daily to the presence of Christ that the church survived. Everywhere in fact one could verify the presence of Christ even among two Christians who met in the market or among two men who work side by side in a re-education camp. It was not necessary to speak to each other, it was enough for them to be united in His name, which means in His love. One experienced the presence of the risen Christ who enlightens and comforts.

With the presence of Christ in their midst they found hope – that hope which does not disappoint - Romans 5:5. They radiated the gospel around them when all was lost Jesus began to walk the streets of the country again. He left the tabernacle and

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made Himself present in the schools and in the factories, in the offices and in the prison.

This is my body broken for you. Not just the body of the risen glorified Christ. We too are the body of Christ and we are called to be broken for each other. We are called to go out there – to be Eucharist to one another. To give without counting the cost, to show love in action, to reach out to the people on the fringes.

## **Prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament**

Some years ago now, I remember reading a book by Raniero Cantalamessa, - the Franciscan priest who has been preacher to the Papal Household since the time of Pope John Paul II in 1980. In it he quotes Mother Theresa where she speaks about prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament. She says you come into the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and you sit there or kneel there simply gazing at Him. She said, that gaze is a two way thing. As you gaze at Him, He is gazing back at you and not only is He gazing back at you, but He is gazing deep within and He sees what is going on in the depths of our being and he moves through the chaos and the confusion, the fears and the anxieties, the hurts and the wounds and His gaze is a healing gaze. He touches us with His healing power and He makes us whole. Then the time comes for us to get up and go away but as we go away that gaze still continues; He is still gazing after us and we can continue to gaze back at Him. I remember when I read that I was in the church at home in Ireland and I decided I would put it into practice. So I just sat there gazing at Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for quite a while. As I lay in bed that night continuing the gaze back to the church I felt that the two mile distance between church and home

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disappeared and I felt that closeness as I continued to gaze at Him and He continued to gaze at me; I felt we were in close union.

In his letter to us – ‘The Joy of the Gospel’, Pope Francis says this about gazing...

Let ourselves be gazed upon by the Lord.

He looks at us and this is itself a way of praying.

Do you let yourselves be gazed upon by the Lord?

But how do you do this?

You look at the tabernacle and you let yourselves be looked at...

It is simple!

‘It is a bit boring, I fall asleep’

Fall asleep then, sleep!

He is still looking at you.

But know for sure that he is looking at you!

This warms the heart, igniting the fire of friendship with the Lord, making you feel that he truly sees you, that he is close to you and loves you.

Writing about the power of the Eucharist in his life, one priest wrote, the Eucharist is the centre of my life. Another priest called his daily hour before the blessed Eucharist his daily “radiation therapy”. He quoted Archbishop Fulton Sheen who said, “We become like that which we gaze upon. Looking into a sunset the face takes on a golden glow. Looking at the Eucharistic Lord for an hour transforms the heart in a mysterious way”. Enjoying the daily hour of “radiation” is my best “investment” of time. Pope Benedict wrote, “Every great reform has in some way been linked to the re-discovery of the belief in the Lord’s Eucharistic presence

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among His people". Look towards the Lord and be radiant, let your faces not be abashed. It is in that time of stillness and silence and patient waiting in the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament that a transformation takes place in our lives.

During our time of silent prayer, gazing at the Lord in the Eucharist, may we all be open to his presence, urging us to deepen our love for him and guiding us in such a way that we can indeed journey ***Forward Together in Hope.***