



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND AND WALES

Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Antonio Mennini addresses the Bishops of England and Wales

23 APRIL 2012, HINSLEY HALL, LEEDS

**My brother bishops,
dear friends in Christ,**

I wish to thank each one of you very sincerely for your welcome and for your kind invitation for me to be with you and to address you today. It gives me great pleasure to be here as the Representative of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, and to thank you on his behalf for all that you do. It is a particular pleasure for me to be with you on this, the Solemnity of Saint George, Protector of England and the heavenly patron of this Country. I am also pleased to say once again that I feel that gradually I am coming to know you better and to understand more deeply the challenges and the opportunities which you are facing, both in the public arena and in the life of the Church in Great Britain.

You have many matters to deal with during this meeting. I know that the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham has already been mentioned but, this year, as you probably know, Monsignor Newton kindly invited me to preside at their Chrism Mass, an occasion which I must say that I found moving and prayerful. Do please continue to be generous in your support of their endeavours. In a time of recession and of diminishing resources we are all finding ourselves having to make difficult decisions, and not just financial ones, and I am glad to see that the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life and the National Vocations Framework is under consideration, as indeed is the question of the 'Life Choices and Aspirations of Teenagers.' The future lies with the young who are looking to us for example and clear leadership in a complex society.

At our last meeting I think that I shared with you the importance of not losing hope in our dialogue with the secular world around us, trying always to courageously express the teaching of the Church. I think we all know how important this is for the good of the wider society and for the Church and how close this dialogue is to the heart of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI.

Addressing some of the Bishops of America during their recent 'ad limina' visit on 9th March this year, you will recall that the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, pointed out very clearly: "our concern about threats to freedom of conscience, religion and worship which need to be addressed urgently, so that all men and women of faith, and the institutions they inspire, can act in accordance with their deepest moral convictions." The Holy Father affirmed that: "particular mention must be made of the powerful political and cultural currents seeking to alter the legal definition of marriage." In America, but here too, "The Church's conscientious effort to resist this pressure calls for a reasoned defence of marriage as a natural institution consisting of a specific communion of persons, essentially rooted in the complementarity of the sexes and oriented to procreation. Sexual differences cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the definition of marriage. Defending the institution of marriage as a social reality is ultimately a question of justice, since it entails safeguarding the good of the entire human community and the rights of parents and children alike."

As you well know, the Pastoral Letter on marriage which you issued at the beginning of the Government consultation was a good start in highlighting the importance of marriage and in encouraging our people to reflect on, and express, the view of Christians, Catholic and others, in this regard. However, I think that most of us realise that this is the start of what may well prove to be a lengthy and probably difficult campaign. As I said when we met last November, I also wonder if we shouldn't ask for and look for more support among other Christian confessions and indeed, persons of other faiths. It seems to me that, concerning the institution of marriage, and indeed the sanctity of human life, we have much in common with the position of the Jewish community, the Chief Rabbi and many of the more significant representatives of Islam.

Within the Catholic community too, there are opportunities which need to be grasped. The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI also said to the American Bishops in this regard: "On the practical level, marriage preparation programmes must be carefully reviewed to ensure that there is greater concentration on their catechetical component and their presentation of the social and ecclesial responsibilities entailed by Christian marriage. In this context we cannot overlook the serious pastoral problem presented by the widespread practice of cohabitation, often by couples who seem unaware that it is gravely sinful, not to mention damaging to the stability of society. I encourage your efforts to develop clear pastoral and liturgical norms for the worthy celebration of matrimony which embody an unambiguous witness to the objective demands of Christian morality, while showing sensitivity and concern for young couples."

We all know how difficult it is to live in an increasingly secularised society but, that is why we need to express the teaching of the Church in a clear and outspoken way. This testimony in public life will affect the future of the young and will, God willing, also touch the hearts of all persons of goodwill who are seeking meaning in their lives and, often without realising it, are in fact, searching for God. In this regard, I cannot fail to express my admiration, as well as my congratulations, to Her Majesty the Queen, Elizabeth II, who has served as Monarch for sixty years and clearly manifests in all that she does, especially her Christmas Messages, the Christian Faith which inspires her.

Dear brothers, I draw your attention to the words of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, at the Chrism Mass this year when he spoke of genuine renewal. He said to his priests and to us too: "Dear Friends, it is clear that configuration to Christ is the precondition and the basis of all renewal. But perhaps at times the figure of Jesus Christ seems too lofty and too great for us to dare to measure ourselves by him. The Lord knows this. So he has provided "translations" on a scale that is more accessible and closer to us. For this same reason, Saint Paul did not hesitate to say to his communities: Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. For his disciples he was a "translation" of Christ's manner of life that they could see and identify with. Ever since Paul's time, history has furnished a constant flow of other such "translations" of Jesus' way into historical figures. We priests can call to mind a great throng of holy priests who have gone before us and shown us the way... The saints show us how renewal works and how we can place ourselves at its service. And they help us realise that God is not concerned so much with great numbers and with outward successes, but achieves his victory under the humble sign of the mustard seed." (Homily. Chrism Mass. 5 April 2012).

In this regard I hope that you will allow me to remind you of how important it is to continue to grow in an effective and affective communion among yourselves, given the fact that this communion reveals itself as the first way, the first form of Mission. We all know very well that to talk is absolutely indispensable – but just talking is not of itself sufficient... and then we can also reflect on the Lord's command: "*Love one another. Such as my love has been for you, so must your love be for each other. This is how all will know you for my disciples: by your love for one another.*" (Jn. 13:34-35). I believe that a stronger communion between you, between us, as brother bishops, would have very positive effects on your faithful and particularly upon your priests. One could quote the latin proverb: "exempla trahunt!"

To conclude, we live, of course, in a complex world and are challenged in many ways to continue to be living “translations” of the Gospel, in a successful way, and to carry out faithfully the holy mission entrusted to us by the Holy Father, and so, in this land, historically referred to as ‘The Dowry of Mary’, I also invoke the intercession of Mary, our Blessed Mother, and today particularly, Saint George, on all our endeavours.

Archbishop Antonio Mennini
Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain