

Mass in Thanksgiving for the Ministry of the Apostolic Nuncio HE Archbishop Faustino Sainz Muñoz

Archbishop Vincent Nichols' Homily

Westminster Cathedral, Thursday 2 December

With this Mass of thanksgiving we, sadly, mark the end of the mission here in the United Kingdom of His Excellency Archbishop Sainz Muñoz, our Papal Nuncio. We do so with great gratitude to our Lord for the fruitful ministry of the Archbishop and with heartfelt prayers for his full recovery from illness and for many years of continued service of the Lord, although in different circumstances.

I know I speak for all the bishops of England and Wales, for the whole Catholic community, when I thank Archbishop Sainz Muñoz for all that he has done among us. I know, too, that the entire Diplomatic Community in this country also pays great tribute to him and its members have said quite clearly that they will miss his presence.

At the heart of the ministry he has fulfilled is his task of representing here among us the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. The Nuncio has done so with great humanity, much joy and with a truly fraternal spirit. We bishops have grown to see him as a brother and we will certainly miss him very much indeed.

The role of the Holy Father as the human centre and expression of the visible unity of the Church is well explored in these Advent readings which we have heard.

In the first reading, from Isaiah, we learn again that the Lord is an everlasting rock. On this rock is built the city, a city of stability, of justice and of strength, qualities which enable the city not to be a closed fortress but a place of confident welcome for all.

These are qualities which we see in Pope Benedict: the quiet yet clear stability and clarity of his faith and leadership which seeks always to include those who wish to enter and are ready to accept the ways of the Catholic faith. I think, at this moment, of the way in which the Holy Father is leading us to welcome a number of clergy and parishioners from the Church of England into full communion within the new provision of the Ordinariate. This development will take place in the New Year, and we are ready to respond generously to this leadership of the Holy Father.

The Gospel passage from St Matthew develops this same theme of the 'everlasting rock'. The city built on rock becomes the Church built on the foundation of Christ's own Word, which has the same rock-like qualities: reliability, firmness, strength. Whatever may come our way, as long as we 'listen to these words and act on them' then the Church will not fail, despite all our own failings.

As we listen to these words about building on rock, the rock of the Word of God, who fails to recall the other words of the Lord, spoken to Peter: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church' (Mat 16.18). Indeed with the ministry of Peter the Church is given the gift of such leadership that it will not fail. The rock of the Word is placed in the hands of the rock of Peter. For this we thank God with all our hearts.

We have been much blessed by the recent Visit of Pope Benedict, the holder of the office of the rock of the Church. We have seen and heard his eloquent testimony to the Gospel and his convincing encouragement to us all about the part we are to play in our society and the manner in which we, in our turn, are to proclaim the Gospel in daily life.

That Visit lasted four days. And we have also been blessed by almost six years of ministry of our Nuncio, the representative of the successor of the Apostle Peter. He too has shared in that Apostolic Ministry and in the same spirit.

The Nuncio has said to us that when he set out in his work within the diplomatic service of the Holy See he was told that his task was to make present the pastoral heart of the Holy Father. We have seen for ourselves the pastoral heart of Pope Benedict. And we have seen how well it is reflected and expressed in the ministry of Archbishop Faustino, our Nuncio. It is a heart of kindness, of sensibility, of humanity, of well-chosen words and of joy.

Pope Benedict won our hearts. Your Excellency, you have won our hearts too. We thank you. We shall miss you. And we promise to pray for you, always. Amen.

+Vincent Nichols

President of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales