

200th Anniversary of St Mary's Hampstead

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Given at St Mary's Church, Hampstead, at the Mass celebrating the 200th anniversary of the church on 11 September 2016.

During August, I visited two places which left a lasting impression on me. The first was Krakow, where World Youth Day took place. It was marvellous to see nearly two million young people there, witnessing to their faith, showing the vitality of the Church and offering hope for the future.

The second place was in the course of a visit to France. To get there, many a British visitor has to pass near to the so-called 'jungle' in Calais, so often in the news and a focus of such poverty, desperation and political complexity. On this trip I went to the small town of Saint Etienne-du-Rouvray, where the elderly Fr Hamel was brutally murdered at the foot of the altar steps. There, a simple collection of flowers, cards, and tributes, looking rather tired, bore moving witness to the horror of what had taken place and to the love in which Fr Jacques was held.

The exuberance of World Youth Day contrasts with these sadder circumstances, yet both bear witness to the truths of our faith. Such juxtaposition is not special to our 21st century alone. Indeed, looking to our history we can see moments of heroic and joyful faith combined with the realities of hardship and martyrdom. A realisation and understanding of the past is so important in beginning to make sense of the challenges that face us today. As Pope Francis said in Krakow: 'Do you want to be the hope for the future? The first condition: to remember... everything you have received from those who have gone before you.'

Today we look to the history of this church and parish, and remember with gratitude what we have received from our parents and grandparents in faith here. As we do so, we can see some parallels with the present. There were no camps in Calais when the Abbé Jean-Jacques Morel made his way to England, but he too was a refugee. This was because he refused to swear an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, promulgated in the aftermath of the French Revolution. His arrival in Hampstead in 1796 was the beginning of a long ministry in this part of London, to fellow refugees from France, certainly, and to many others besides. His concern that good education should be provided and his steadfast pastoral work, extended beyond the ranks of Catholics, were indeed signs of hope. They are, I am sure, the sorts of memories Pope Francis is encouraging us to retain and cherish. They give us courage for our tasks today.

Abbé Morel was motivated by more than a simple desire to do good. His impetus, as a faithful priest, was to spread the Good News of Our Lord Jesus Christ. 'You are God's building,' says St Paul to the Corinthians in today's First Reading. He goes on, 'everyone doing the building must work carefully.' In this careful work of the disciple of Christ, there are two key facets: our relationship to God in prayer and its manifestation in practical charity. These are two sides of the same coin: they are inseparable. The recently canonised Mother Teresa knew that well; Pope Benedict has written of it eloquently especially in his Encyclical 'Deus Caritas Est'. The lives of countless holy men and women witness to its truth, not least here in Hampstead.

It is not surprising that, once the foundations of the Catholic community in Hampstead had begun to be laid, thought turned to the building of a church, a focus of prayer for the living stones of God's temple, and itself a 'holy place where the most high dwells.' St Mary's was opened and blessed on 17 August 1816 by Dr William Poynter, Vicar Apostolic of the London District. 'How amiable are thy dwellings'; the choir will sing these words from Psalm 84 during Holy Communion today. Looking around this beautiful church, we should find it hard to disagree.

The past two hundred years have seen a succession of twelve parish priests and many more parishioners, General de Gaulle and Graham Greene among them at times. How good it is to see two of those twelve priests here today. The building has been adapted as liturgical changes and architectural development have required, and it was consecrated in 1997. But some passing fashions have been resisted, thankfully. This lovely church

building itself was once threatened with being knocked down and replaced by a circular church with a car park underneath! Financial crises have come and gone over the years, and have been dealt with.

But some things do not change, and cannot. St Mary's is a Catholic church. We sometimes use the word casually, but it has a particular meaning here, where the community has always been international in nature, reflecting the universal nature of the Church. This means, of course, that whatever our history, here we can find a home, with Christ and close to him.

Today's Gospel speaks of a certain authority entrusted to Peter; it speaks too of his faith, a faith in which we are all privileged to share through our baptism. And if we look to our fathers in faith, to Peter and those who have gone before us in this parish, we see something else that has not changed down the ages: the vital importance of mission. 'Go out to the whole world, proclaim the good news.' This is the command of the Lord. It has borne fruit in this building, two hundred years ago. For us, it can bear fruit in any number of ways: in unobtrusive works of mercy, in practical support of worthy initiatives, in care for the house of God, in sharing with others an understanding of the faith, in witness to its universal values and precepts in the world of business. Whatever our particular mission may be, we pray today to be given a deeper awareness of it, and the grace to carry it out, so that we and our successors may sustain the life of the Church in this place and witness to the Gospel both in prayer and in action.

I spoke of the places that had made an impression on me over the summer. This place, the Church of St Mary in Hampstead, has made an impression for much longer than that. We pray that it may retain this impressive character for many years to come. As we make this prayer, we ask the intercession of Our Lady, to whom this church is dedicated, and to whom, I understand, Abbé Morel had a deep devotion. May she watch over us with her motherly care and assist us with her prayers, that we may one day enjoy the presence of her Son for all eternity, in company with those who have gone before us, and for whose work and ministry over the past two hundred years we give thanks today. Amen.