

# **HOMILY FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2019**

**Beda College, Rome.**

**Saturday 19 January 2019.**

## **Thanks**

First, my thanks to the Rector, Canon Philip, for his very warm welcome and hospitality and for his very kind invitation to be here with you at the Beda this evening. It is a joy for me also to meet up once again with the Vice Rector, Fr John Breen, and to thank him for his friendship which began just over 20 years ago when I joined the Team of diocesan priests at the Catholic Missionary Society leading parish and school Missions. My first parish Mission was with John in September 1996 in the parish of the Assumption of Our Lady at Maldon in Essex in the Diocese of Brentwood and I couldn't have had a better teacher and mentor. I am wearing the CMS stole as a reminder that the five founding members of the Catholic Missionary Society were recruited as newly ordained priests from the Beda by Cardinal Vaughan in 1902. One of them was the famous Fr Thomas Byles who, in 1912, was to perish tragically and heroically on the Titanic while on his way to America to officiate at his brother's wedding.

## **Theme**

The scripture readings for this Ecumenical Service have focussed on the theme of Commitment to Unity through Justice and Mercy. This year's theme was chosen by a group of Christians from Indonesia which is well known as having the largest Muslim population of any country but where 10% of Indonesians are Christians from various

traditions. Their prayer and desire is that Christians throughout the world should give united witness for justice and mercy and so be a sign and a means of Christ's healing grace for the brokenness of our world. Our scripture readings encourage and challenge us both to receive God's justice and mercy with gratitude and to show God's justice and mercy with generosity.

## **Journey**

Pope Francis reminds us that when we pray and work together in proclaiming the Gospel and in the service of others, we are already united. Pope Francis also often speaks of the ecumenical journey in terms of walking together on the way. Significantly, the new Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission document of ARCIC III is itself entitled *'Walking Together on the Way – Learning to be the Church – Local, Regional and Universal.'*

There are perhaps three words which best sum up the ecumenical journey and they are – relationships, relationships, relationships. Relationships are not just important: they are essential. Where relationships are good, things tend to happen. Where relationships are not good, things so easily falter and grind to a halt. Relationships and trust are the necessary bridge to reconciliation and unity.

The image of a journey invites us to reflect on where we have come from and where we are going. The journey began long before our time and tonight it is good, in this chapel, to remember with gratitude those who have walked the ecumenical way before us and who have now passed on the baton to us to hand on in our turn.

## **Trust**

Being here in the Beda College is a great privilege for me and, though it may seem unusual, I think it is also very fitting on this occasion and in this setting, to speak of somebody who lived in what, for Roman Catholics at the time, was very much a pre-ecumenical age but who nonetheless has much to teach those of us who are blessed to be living in this current ecumenical age. It is easy to forget how far we have travelled on the road and it is only right and just to give thanks for the great ecumenical progress that has been made as a result of those who have been involved in faithful and patient dialogue over the last fifty years. As the Roman Catholic National Ecumenical Officer in England and Wales I work very closely with my colleagues who are National Ecumenical Officers in the other main Christian traditions and I can honestly say that any one of us could represent all of us – simply because of the relationships and trust, - the genuine friendships - built up by our predecessors which we have inherited and on which we continue to build in our turn.

## **Story**

So the person I want to mention this evening is a former distinguished Rector of this Beda College. He is a man I never met but one I wish I had. Like myself, he was a priest of the Southwark Archdiocese – which today covers the whole of south London and the county of Kent, although in his day it also covered the whole of Sussex and Surrey which now forms the diocese of Arundel and Brighton. I was once privileged to live in the presbytery of St Thomas a Becket Parish, Wandsworth when I was Director of our Diocesan Centre for Adult Formation and I know that Fr Peter Verity, the Spiritual Director here at the Beda, also lived there at one stage when he was working for the Bishops' Conference. It was while I was living at St Thomas a Becket that I first became interested and intrigued by the

life and story of Mgr Charles Duchemin who was Rector here at the Beda for 33 years, from 1928 to 1961.

He was born at Edgbaston in Birmingham in 1886. He qualified as a solicitor at the age of 22 and came to live and work in No 3 Norfolk Mansions in Santos Rd, Wandsworth, right next door to the presbytery. He greatly admired the Irish parish priest at the time, Fr Thomas Cooney - so much so, in fact, that, having obtained his degree from Trinity College, Cambridge, he himself decided to become a priest and arrived at the Beda College as a seminarian and a late vocation in 1914. This was at a time when the Beda was housed within the Venerable English College and where the Beda students and staff had the use of the Martyrs Chapel. He was ordained a priest in 1918 in Cambridge when he was 31, originally for the Northampton Diocese, and took up his first appointment as a priest at the Church of St Peter and All Souls in Peterborough. In 1921 his Parish Priest became the Bishop of Northampton and Fr Duchemin asked to be transferred to the Southwark diocese. It would be fascinating to know more about what lay behind his request but it likely that it was so he could assist his great friend and mentor Fr Cooney, the PP of St Thomas a Becket at Wandsworth.

After 6 very happy years with Fr Cooney at Wandsworth he was made a monsignor in 1928 and appointed as Rector of the Beda College, which in 1921 had moved to premises near the Piazza Barberini. Mgr Duchemin was ultimately to see the move of the Beda to its present site in 1960 before he retired after 33 years at the age of 75 in 1961 and then died in 1965. He is buried in Mortlake Cemetery in the same grave as Fr Cooney, the priest who had inspired his vocation and whom he admired so greatly.

## Message

So what can we learn today from the pre-ecumenical age in which Mgr Duchemin lived? For me it is summed up in the fact that when he left Wandsworth in October 1928 the only place big enough for the local people to say thank you to him was Wandsworth Town Hall which was hired for his farewell and was packed out not only by the Catholic parishioners but by many non-Catholics and other local people who had cause to be grateful for his ministry in the area. He had a genius for friendship that cut across the labels that normally distinguish and often divide people. Like his Lord and Master in tonight's Gospel reading, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and with power and he humbly went about doing good. As befits our specific theme of Commitment to Justice and Mercy, Charles Duchemin used his legal training to help Fr Cooney in his work as Chaplain to Wandsworth Prison and specifically to improve the living conditions of the prisoners and to help give discharged prisoners the chance of a new start in life. He also used his knowledge of the law to help poor families in the area who had trouble with their neighbours or with their rogue landlords. It was reported that he was greatly appreciated by all the people of Wandsworth for *'his inexhaustible kindness, his ready sympathy and his helpful counsels.'*

In short, we can say that he was *'walking the talk'* before that phrase had been invented. Perhaps we have a tendency to think that we have to do the talking before we do the walking – but experience suggests that it is by first walking and working together for the common good and in the service of others that we can lay a firm foundation for our talking together, with honesty and humility, about the things that both unite and divide us as Christians.

## Future

So what might the future be for ecumenism? Pope Francis gives us an important reminder that unity is not the fruit of our human efforts but

is instead a gift that comes from on high. He says that we are not able to achieve unity by ourselves, nor can we decide its forms and timing. Rather, our task is to that of receiving this gift and making it visible to all. It is more about receiving than achieving. From this point of view, he says, unity, rather than being a destination is a journey, with its roadmaps and rhythms, its slowdowns and its accelerations, and also its pauses. Unity as a journey, he reminds us, requires patient waiting, tenaciousness, effort and commitment.

Tonight's service focusses on commitment. We are invited to reflect how we might take a small but sure step forward on that journey as we commit to tipping the scales of justice a little by a particular act of justice, mercy or unity – depending on our particular gifts and individual circumstances. We are also invited to pray for each other and for each other's commitment. In that way we recall the example and witness of Mgr Duchemin– and both the fine portrait and fine bust of him here in the Beda help to keep both his memory and his spirit alive.

He himself once presented the Birmingham Oratory with a fine bust of Blessed (and hopefully soon to be) St John Henry Newman – in memory of his own father Charles who had been organist at the Birmingham Oratory and a good friend and admirer of Newman. Charles Duchemin Senior had himself been the principal solo soprano at the opening of St Chad's Church (and later Cathedral) in Birmingham in 1841.

Newman's hymn *Lead kindly light* (which I would like at my funeral!) wisely teaches us to walk the journey of faith step by step and to leave the destination in God's hands and to God's good time:

*“Keep thou my feet, I do not ask to see  
the distant scene, one step enough for me.”*