

Birmingham Catholic Partnership
Mass in Memory of Deceased Head Teachers
St Chad's Cathedral, Wednesday 24th November 2021

Homily given by Mgr Timothy Menezes

In presenting a case for the presence of a priest in the life of a school, a Secondary Head Teacher once said to me: our school is the largest Catholic gathering of the week outside of Sunday Mass.

I had never thought of it quite in those terms, but I found it a convincing and compelling point and our schools are indeed communities of faith and life that are significant in their population and in their purpose.

But if that is convincing for the role of a priest, how much more for the role of a Head Teacher? At the ceremony of an induction of a Parish Priest, the letter of appointment talks about his responsibility for the Care of Souls. That's more than finance or Mass attendance or any other such measurable success or failure.

The care of souls: a responsibility for the journey of others to heaven, for the short span of time that they are your responsibility before either you or they move on to another place or stage of life.

For a Head Teacher, isn't that an interest way of looking at the many calls upon your time, your initiative and vision, your patience, your negotiation skills – the leader of a school as a Catholic community: responsible for the care of souls.

Do you see that as a priceless privilege or a daunting challenge?

In today's Gospel, Jesus says: *I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.*

Friends of Jesus – a title that might often be used for the children or young people in our schools.

But this is a reference to Catholic Leaders: friends of Jesus, those who spend time with him as did the apostles. Those who were at times inspired by him but at other times frustrated by what he asked of them or by the cryptic messages that left them bewildered.

I chose you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last...

It is a calling, it is fruitful, it is missionary, outward-looking.

And perhaps a similarity between our own journey of faith, and the oversight as Catholic Leaders of the lives we accompany in both pupils and fellow staff, is that we don't have control over where the journey will lead, what the outcome will be. And we are simply called to trust in God's providence.

In this Mass, during this month of November, of remembrance, we pray in a special way for Bernadette Johnston, John Farrell and Elizabeth Brennan and Mary Danaher. There is something about the love and the sense of loss of fellow teachers for one with whom they have worked, that reflects all that is good in the camaraderie of the vocation of teachers. It is more than work colleagues, especially where there have been shared experiences of faith in the school setting, or the sharing of stories along the way, or on retreat experiences where people have taken their faith to a deeper level.

We pray today for Bernadette, for John, for Elizabeth, for Mary and for all those whose lives are the richer for having known and loved them and now in a sense poorer for their loss. But we live in the hope of a reunion with them.

St Paul writes to the Romans:

*Work for the Lord with untiring effort and with great earnestness of spirit.
Do not give up if trials come; and keep on praying.*

Dear Head Teachers: work for the *Lord* with untiring effort (that sounds like a more promising purpose than working for the government or the Diocese or the governors, the cluster or the MAC).

Work for the Lord.

During this month of November, we pray for the Faithful Departed, and at this Mass we think especially of those who have accepted the responsibility of leadership and have made sacrifices as a part of that leadership role. We pray for the families who support school leaders and the sacrifices they make.

For those who have been called home to be forever with God, they will now have the opportunity to look back on their life with a greater clarity, with a knowledge of the compassionate God who will help them to understand some of the aspects of our life here that are never so clear to us in this life.

And we can be sure that God will ask those who have been given the privilege of leading our school communities – as friends of Jesus – to give an account of their stewardship *because Christ has made known to them everything he has learnt from the Father.*

They will be asked to account for the fruit they have borne in the nurturing of young lives and the shepherding of the staff entrusted to their care.

And it is to be hoped that as our own assessment of our work might always tend towards the ‘have I done enough?’, as they give an account of their stewardship as Catholic Leaders, they might be told of the many lives they have touched without knowing it, the word of

encouragement they gave that changed the course of somebody's life, the belief they showed in somebody when others doubted.

And we accompany these brothers and sisters and all of the members of our school communities who have died during the past year with our prayers. In a special way, we think of the children and young people of our schools who have died in the past year and for their parents and families and for the school communities who have been affected. We remember any staff, parents or members of school communities who have died in the past year, and those who have not been able to grieve or express their grief in the way they hoped through restrictions on travel or gatherings.

And there is something about the role of a Head Teacher that means in a month of remembrance, they will never be forgotten. Because their true legacy is not the stories that people tell of their life as a Head Teacher, but the lives that flow from their role of leadership to shape the world using the gifts they have been given in our schools.

For those new to Catholic Leadership roles, for those who have served the Church in this way for many years, for those who have now retired and for those for whom we pray during this month of the Holy Souls, the calling is a privilege, the challenge is constant, but the invitation remains the same:

I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.