

Knock Pilgrimage 2014

Pilgrimage – A Journey in Hope.

[Homily by Most Rev. Philip Boyce, O.C.D., Bishop of Raphoe.](#)

[Knock Shrine, 16th August 2014.](#)

“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water..welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4: 10.14).

God has many ways of coming to meet his people. The Samaritan woman met him when she went to draw water from the well. To us believers he gives the grace of a Sacrament for the seven most important moments in our lives. The first one is on the day of our baptism when we receive a new birth into his divine life and become living temples of the Lord. Then there are the moments when that new life is refreshed or restored when sin had weakened or destroyed it. Another Sacrament confirms our faith to face the trials and temptations of life. There are also frequent moments of spiritual nourishment provided in the Mass, the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Finally there are the life-changing moments of Marriage or Ordination and those of serious illness and death.

However, we have not only these sacramental times when God’s grace is given to us. The Holy Spirit has been sent to us and lives in our hearts, inspiring and guiding us with his wisdom, and leading us into the fullness of truth. We each have a Guardian Angel who is at our side as a constant companion and goes before us to protect us on life’s journey. And our Patron Saints pray for us.

Then there are other times and places where God gives his help and grace in surprising abundance, namely, on Pilgrimage and at Shrines where normally an intense devotional and sacramental life is experienced. We all take part in the great pilgrimage of life that the Church and all mankind, with Christ as leader, make throughout the course of history. We set out with heaven as our goal. Our final destination is not simply a natural one fulfilling the cravings of nature, but it is one that goes beyond human nature, a supernatural one. Our deepest hopes will be fulfilled only with Christ in the glory of his Father. As the priest prays every day at Mass: “Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil... as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

Shrines and Places of Pilgrimages.

Shrines or approved places of apparitions are like stations or stopping places on the pilgrimage of life. What makes them holy is above all the prayer and penance, the reconciliation and conversion of a countless number of pilgrims. Knock is such a place of grace and holiness in Ireland.

What makes any Shrine what it is, is the fact that people travel to it on pilgrimage. It becomes holy ground as a result of the intense Christian life that is lived there, and that attracts so many pilgrims. It offers a good liturgical and sacramental experience, and it cultivates sound devotional practices. Pope Paul VI once called such places of pilgrimage “spiritual clinics.” Just as a person who is ill goes to a hospital or clinic hoping for a cure, so do pilgrims journey to a Shrine in the hope of being relieved of the consequences of sin and of deepening or regaining divine friendship and spiritual health. A pilgrimage brings a person nearer not only to the Lord and his Blessed Mother, but also advances the pilgrim on the way to the heavenly Jerusalem, the Paradise of the Saints, where all our hopes will be fulfilled. As Pope Benedict XVI said: “Man’s great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God”.^[1] Only this hope sustains the human heart on our pilgrim way through life.

A Shrine like Knock is not simply a holy spot where some spiritual practices are done, whether it be the Stations of the Cross, or saying the Rosary as one walks around the Apparition Chapel, or going to Confession and attending Mass – although all of such things are important and form part of the pilgrimage, but it is above all a place where Christ is encountered, where God is met and where Our Lady shows us the power of her intercession. This becomes either a life-changing experience or at least a meeting that gives renewed strength and energy for the onward journey. The Shrine may well have originated in an Apparition of Our Lady, but it is her dearest wish to lead us to her beloved Son. In Knock she, and the Saints and angels who also appeared, direct our gaze to the Lamb on the altar who takes away the sins of the world. To each pilgrim she seems to say, as she did to the servants at the marriage feast in Cana: “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2: 5).

As a place of encounter with the Lord of life, any Shrine, and Knock for us in particular, “is a clear sign of the presence of God at work in the midst of his people, for there, through his word and the sacraments, he gives himself to us. Pilgrims thus approach a Shrine as the Temple of the living God, the place of the living covenant with him, so that the grace of the sacraments may liberate them from sin and grant them the strength to begin again with a new freshness and new joy in the hearts, and thus to become, in the midst of the world, transparent witnesses of the Eternal”^[2]

Pilgrimage, a Journey in Hope.

A pilgrimage is a journey in hope. Our vision and thoughts are directed to the goal of our journey. Our hope looks forward first of all to the shrine or place of apparition where we expect to come nearer to God. The pilgrims of old who journeyed to the Temple in Jerusalem anticipated, in the Psalms they sung, the hopes and expectations that filled their hearts as they advanced on their pilgrim way: “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth... I rejoiced when they said to me: ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’ (Ps. 121: 1-2; 122: 1).

A pilgrimage leads to the joy of forgiveness and conversion, and to the partial fulfilment of our hopes. But in turn, the reaching of our destination here below, whether it be Knock or Compostella, Lourdes or Fatima, Guadalupe or Lough Derg,

is only a foretaste and a sign of that better world, the homeland where all our longings will be satisfied at the end of life's pilgrim journey. The anticipation in faith and hope of that final destination sustains all pilgrims on their journey. In so far as it is a sign of something greater yet to come, a Shrine like Knock gives pilgrims "a more powerful yearning for the heavenly Jerusalem, the desire for heaven. Thus Shrines make us acknowledge both the holiness of those to whom they are dedicated and our condition as sinners who need to begin anew each day the pilgrimage towards God's grace. They make us realize that the Church 'is at once holy and ever in need of being purified', since its members are sinners."¹³¹

Pilgrimages respond to a need in the human heart. We go on pilgrimage hoping to gain something beyond what is ordinary and commonplace. Over the past fifty years the number of people who frequent local church services has gone down noticeably, at least in the Western world. Yet the number of people who go on pilgrimage to Shrines in these same secularised countries has steadily increased. Millions go to Lourdes, to Fatima, to Jasna Góra in Czestochowa, to Compostella, to Guadalupe and to Knock every year. The manner of travel may have changed over the centuries: no longer the long trek on foot with a pilgrim's pack on one's back. The motor car, the train or the plane make the journey more pleasant; hotels provide modern shelter and comfort; good meals are provided. But what has not changed is the basic attitude of journeying to a holy place where the pilgrim hopes to have a deeper encounter with the living God and gain new hope and energy for the onward journey.

Wealth and technological advances do not still the hunger of the soul and its thirst for truth and love. The human heart was made for something greater, more lasting and beyond the material. It will be ever restless and searching, ever 'on pilgrimage' we could say, until it finds the God who makes sense of all things and who answers all the cravings of the human spirit.

People go on pilgrimage in the hope of finding something that this world with all its pleasures and skills cannot provide. Before he left his disciples, the Lord gave his followers a parting gift, a gift this world could not give: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you...In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (Jn 14:27; 16:33). If we are not fully at peace, we are restless and searching. We go on pilgrimage in the hope of finding or preserving this gift of peace within us.

Therefore, all kinds of people go on pilgrimage, because all bear the hope within them of reaching a goal not yet attained. You get the young and the old, the sick and the healthy, the convinced and the curious, the devout and the sceptical. Nobody feels excluded, for they are all hoping for something, at times undefined, but something that is greater and beyond the normal. And this hope does not disappoint "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

The Gospel passage read in this Mass recalled the incident of the Samaritan lady meeting Christ at Jacob's well. We might have thought that a holy life was beyond what this woman, who made the journey to the well every day, could ever hope to attain. She had lived an immoral life with five men. And yet her journey – we could

call it her 'pilgrimage' – to the well that day answered her search. It gave her an answer to what she had unknowingly looked and hoped for. The lack of water was not her problem. The well was never dry. She now began to see that she had an inner thirst that no earthly water could quench. "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw" (Jn 4:15). She began to thirst for God whom she began to realise was absent from her life. But God, too, was thirsting for her love. At the well she met Christ himself who led her to confess and admit her sinful actions of the past. He offered her the possibility of a new life in God's friendship and she went back to her own people to share the Good News.

How many souls have come to Knock over the past 135 years and have met the God of infinite mercy who freed them from guilt and restored them to God's friendship for which they had hoped. Stored up in the silence of the Confessional and in the heart of many confessors is the extraordinary litany of repentance, conversion and new divine life: "living springs of grace welling up to eternal life." How many have been able to say in the depth of their heart: "my life has been changed for the better; I have received the grace for which I prayed; my hope has been realised; I have had personal experience of the living God and of the power of Our Lady's intercession."

Conclusion.

During the Great Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II, seeing the stream of people who went on pilgrimage to Rome and filled Saint Peter's Square, meditated on the graces these pilgrims received, their encounter with Christ and the hope that energized them to continue their onward pilgrimage. He wrote: "I have often stopped to look at the long queues of pilgrims waiting patiently to go through the Holy Door. In each of them I tried to imagine the story of a life, made up of joys, worries, sufferings; the story of someone whom Christ had met and who, in dialogue with him, was setting out again on a journey of hope"^[4]

Christ is forever meeting women and men at the well, at the spring of living water welling up to eternal life. Pilgrims at Knock make this experience and return home on their journey of hope with renewed energy for their pilgrimage through life.

Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* On Christian Hope (30 November 2007). No. 27.

Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *The Shrine. Memory, Presence and Prophecy of the Living God*, No. 11: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English Edition, 26 May 1999, p. V.

Ibid., p. V – VI.

Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* at the Close of the Great Jubile of the Year 2000, No. 8.