



BISHOPS' CONFERENCE PLENARY

ENGLAND & WALES

H.E. Archbishop Antonio Mennini
Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain

HINSLEY HALL, LEEDS, 5 MAY 2014

I am glad to be with you today as you begin this Plenary Assembly of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Indeed my presence this afternoon among you is a clear sign of the strong links of communion, both affective and effective, which exist between the Apostolic See and the Catholic Church that make its journey here in England and Wales.

As always, I am very grateful for your fraternal invitation to attend this opening session and for the opportunity given to me to address you as a Bishops' Conference, to convey first of all, the closeness and prayers of our dear Holy Father Pope Francis, as well as to encourage you in the not always easy task that has been entrusted to you, namely guiding the People of God with your teaching and with your personal testimony as well as announcing the "Gospel of Joy" in our society.

Indeed, without entering the discussion generated by the recent words of the Prime Minister, Mr. David Cameron, when he called Britain a "Christian country", it is clear that the British society, as in many other European countries and elsewhere, have been profoundly formed by Christian values; in the values of the Gospel which have marked the history and the culture of this country.

However, at the same time, we cannot deny that the presence of the Church in the public sphere, the practice of people who define themselves as "Christian" as well as the influence of Christian values in society have declined considerably nowadays. Are we therefore a "post-Christian nation", as the former Archbishop of Canterbury has said?

It is not for me to answer that question, but we cannot deny the reality all of you know - better than me - very well, since it is in this society, multi-cultural and multi-faith, where you are called to announce the "Joy of the Gospel" and to encourage your priests and faithful to do so too.

In this regard, I cannot fail to express concern about the Assisted Dying Bill which will be discussed in the next few months in the House of Lords. This is a very sensitive issue, which required a serious commitment from us to protect and defend human life as a gift from God. As Pope Francis said in His Message to Catholics in Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales on the occasion of the Day for Life celebrated last year: "Even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God's creation, made in his own image, destined to live forever, and deserving of the utmost reverence and respect".

More recently, in the Pope's Message to the participants in the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, last February, the Holy Father used even stronger words denouncing the "tyrannical dominion of an economic logic that excludes and sometimes kills, and of which so many today are victims, beginning with our elderly", typical of the societies that Francis calls -in His Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* - "'thrown away' culture" in which the "excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'" (n. 53). In this context, - continues the Pope in His Message to the Pontifical Academy for Life- we "clearly" find in our societies the "exclusion of the elderly, especially when he or she is ill, disabled or vulnerable for any reason". Against this kind of exclusion,

the Holy Father affirms that “poor health and disability are never a good reason for excluding or, worse, for eliminating a person”.

Dear brothers, I am glad to see the work that the Department for Christian Responsibility and Citizenship is doing in this regard trying to clarify the “Sense and nonsense on ‘Assisted Dying’”. I thank Archbishop Peter Smith in a special way. May I encourage them but also each one of you to announce the Gospel of Life among our People, as well as in Society in general, presenting the reality which hides behind the “nice”, “politically correct” and “compassionate” expression “assisted dying”.

Unfortunately we know from experience how easily public opinion can be manipulated, especially using “emotional” arguments that try to move compassionate sentiments. But once we open this “Pandora’s box” we know as well the horrible consequences that follow. We have seen that even here, among us, regarding abortion, and the last news about “selective abortion”. But also elsewhere, in other European countries which recently have made change in their laws moving from a limited concept of “euthanasia” to a wider spectre, also including children, as in Belgium.

We, as the Catholic Church, have to make our voice heard in this regard as you have already done successfully in other fields. For instance, the success of the Conference on Human Trafficking held at the Vatican last April, and the remarks of the President of your Conference, Cardinal Nichols, in defence of those excluded in our rich societies, mainly the poor and immigrants that have suffered from cuts in social benefits who therefore feel themselves excluded from social welfare. Please be assured of our support, as well as that of the Holy Father, regarding this important issue.

Dear friends, before concluding I would like to congratulate once again Cardinal Vincent Nichols for been chosen by Pope Francis to form part of the College of Cardinals and thus to help Him in His service as Shepherd of the Universal Church. Congratulations to all of you as well for the recent appointment of two British to relevant posts within the Roman Curia, namely, Monsignor Brian Ferme, from Portsmouth Diocese, as Prelate Secretary of Council for Economy, and Lady Margaret Archer as President of the Pontifical Academy for the Social Sciences. And last, but certainly not least, we also rejoice for the successful visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth to Pope Francis at the beginning of last April, a clear sign of the strong links and reciprocal esteem that exist between this Country and the Holy See, the Queen and the Pope.

Finally, I want to congratulate the newly appointed bishops, Their Excellencies Robert Byrne, Nicholas Hudson and Alan Williams as well as His Grace Malcolm McMahon. To all of them as well as Bishop Thomas McMahon, who has become Bishop Emeritus of Brentwood, my gratitude for their willingness and generosity to serve the Church in the important mission as Successors of the Apostles. Congratulations too to the staff of the Apostolic Nunciature.

Dear brothers, I conclude by reassuring you of my prayers, my friendship and my support, as well as that of the Nunciature staff. We have a wonderful mission to fulfil. We know that it is not easy, but we also know much more that it is worth doing as well as we can, because it is a mission entrusted to us by the Lord and that it is ultimately done by Him, through our poor persons. Therefore let us place our trust in the Risen Lord, who rising from the death has given us His most precious gift, the Holy Spirit to enlighten us and strength us in this mission as He did on Pentecost Day, when the Apostles were together with the Blessed Virgin Mary in prayer. We are sure that just as he did then, at the beginning of the Church, he continues to do now. May God bless you and all the People of God who journey in England and Wales.

I thank you for your kind attention.