

I want to begin by thanking Father Alan for inviting me to preach on the 40th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood well, near it anyway! It is a great honour and privilege to be invited and also an awesome responsibility, because not only is this a celebration in thanksgiving for 40 faithful years of following a priestly vocation by Father Alan, but that the living out of that vocation has touched many different Christian communities throughout the world.

It is a fact of life that sometimes, sadly, the predecessor/successor relationship can be difficult. It says a great deal about Father Alan that he not only gets on with me but we are good friends. I succeeded him as Chaplain of Ardingly College in Sussex. Mind you he does pull my leg by telling me I wrecked all his good work! He asked me that in this sermon I should concentrate on the priesthood and not on him. I don't want to deliberately ignore his request but I have to say it seems to me, if I can put it this way, that it is an incarnational principle that one's personality, one's being plays a vital part in the living of the priestly vocation. So what I would like to do today is make a few comments about priesthood, and then see how Father Alan has exemplified superbly all that is best in the priestly life.

Listen to these words of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin :-“The priesthood is a passionate commitment, a fiery eyed vision, and an insatiable thirst for holiness and practical justice. The priest is called to be challenger, enabler, life – giver, poet of life, music – maker, dreamer of dreams. He must be a man of personal faith, conformed to Christ, a man who loves the scriptures, draws sustenance from the sacramental life of the Church, and truly knows the community with and for whom he offers sacrifice. A priest is a man with a clear sense of his own self, and one who strives to develop all his natural talents to the limit for the good of the Church. He is a man of unreasonable hopes and expectations, who takes seriously, for himself and others, the injunction to be perfect as The heavenly Father is. I would want to add – and I think although the Cardinal doesn't use the word he implies it – that the priest must be a realist. He must be able to laugh at himself and the often absurd nature of life, and realise that he is often in a no- win situation which can be exceedingly frustrating. This anonymous writer says it so well :-

“If the priest preaches more than ten minutes he is too long – winded,
If his sermon is short, he is too easy – going,
If the parish funds are low, he's a bad businessman,
If he mentions money, he's too grasping,
If he visits his parishioners, he is never home,
If he doesn't he's snobbish.
If he runs bazaars and ballots, he's bleeding the people,
If he doesn't, the parish is lacking social life.
If he takes time in the confessional, he's too slow,
If he doesn't he has no time for people.
If he starts Mass on the minute, his watch is fast,
If he's a bit late, he's holding up the congregation,
If he doesn't, he's letting it run down.
If he's young, he's inexperienced,
If he's old, he should retire.
If he dies, there will never be his equal again!

Central to Father Alan's life as a priest has always been the offering of The Mass. He would agree with these words of the late , and in my view, Father Diamond of Deptford who said :- "The Eucharist is the supreme way in which the people of Christ are, through our great high priest, with God with the world around on their hearts. So great is the Eucharistic mystery that it is easy for the people to miss some aspects of it. The priest will help the people to realine both the Godward and the manward aspects of the liturgy. He will show them that it is more than table fellowship with one another, for it is their sharing in the worship of heaven with Blessed Mary and all the Saints. He will show them that they are brought near to the awful reality of the death of the Lord on Calvary as well as to his heavenly glory.

Let me move on to the "This is your life" bit now.

Although I felt I knew Father Alan pretty well there were a number of aspects of his life which I was a little hazy about, so I rang him up and 'interviewed' him. He was raised in an atheist foster-family, and he says they were very strident in their atheism and that affected him greatly, so much so that he has never doubted the truth of the Christian faith, that I think shows great strength and courage. So it is significant, in the opposite way, that he was priested on St. Thomas's day, and that this is a Votive Mass of St. Thomas, and if you remember nothing else about St. Thomas you'll know why he was called 'Doubting Thomas' – not a 'doubting Alan' here though!

When I asked him what words epitomised the priesthood for him he talked about prayer and holiness of life, being an example to those he was called to serve. A life of unstinting sacrifice modelled on Our Lord the great high priest – not the sort of concept our managerially – orientated church likes these days. From his early years he saw the priesthood as a vocation and after accepting it he didn't have a choice – he was a man under authority. As I said earlier the Mass is central to his life; someone once called him a Mass priest – a title to which he has no objection – provided the description goes on to encompass all the sacraments. He is a confessor and a penitent.

He is a people's person – standing (his words) with Our Lord doing what He commanded and with his people listening to Our Lord's command – in other words just what Michael Ramsey said ; He is a scholarly person with a first class mind and a fund of knowledge – we even have to endure his crosswords as proof of that – these, by the way are my words not his.

He is committed to the church's mission as a pastoral effort – he'd explain more fully what he means by these words! He is an excellent teacher and evangelist (again my words, in case you think he's suddenly become big-headed!) He is a member of the Mission Task Force, members of which lead Fan the Flame teaching weeks throughout the country – and I know you've had Father Beau Brandie and Father Oriel Alby (my neighbour) to lead one here – Now that's a pair! I have been extremely privileged on three occasions to partner Father Alan on these teaching weeks and he has always been great fun. His humour and ability to get his audience to almost crack up with laughter on these occasions has been terrific. Mind you it would help if he didn't fall off to sleep in our host's house after lunch each day, and he's usually sitting far enough away for me not to be able to kick him! He is a member of the Society of the Holy Cross – a brotherhood which truly reflects the nature of the priesthood. I think it would be true to say that he is a priest through to his fingertips.

He even has a Black BMW! If it was a slightly bigger model the good folk of Ilkeston could be forgiven for thinking he was an ecclesiastical drug baron!

Father Alan is a man with a great love of Art who likes collecting good pieces of art, especially religious art, He directed the School of Iconography in Melbourne for 4 years. He wrote a handbook on Iconology entitled 'The History and Influence of Christian Icons'. A long – term influence on his life has been The Old Catholics and he wrote a book on them.

I referred earlier to what I call 'The Cult of managerialism' in The Church of England these days. In his recent parish magazine Father Andrew Norman, Vicar of St. Nicolas, Guildford, wrote :-“these days the dominant culture in the Church of England attempts to squeeze the priest into a management role with plans and strategies which it is anxiously hoped will result in measurable outcomes” Thank God 'managerialism' is not something which affects Father Alan, for he knows there are far more important aspects to a priest's ministry. Even though I am a Welshman I have to confess I understand very little of R.S.Thomas' poetry, and even though Father Alan is no country clergyman, I felt that within Thomas' poem entitled 'The Country Clergyman' were words which fitted the influence that Father Alan has had in his ministry :-

I see them working in old rectories
By the sun's light, by candlelight,
Venerable men, their black cloth
A little dusty, al little green
With holy mildew.....
.....they left us books,
Memorial to their lovely thought
In grey parishes; rather they wrote
On mens hearts and in the minds
Of young children sublime words
Too soon forgotten.....

Bishop Westcott once said:- “The mark of the saint is not sanctification but dedication, faithfulness” That mark of dedication, faithfulness has certainly been found in Father Alan's life. Father, we thank you for your faithfulness, your dedication over these past forty years, we congratulate you, we wish you good luck in the name of the Lord and we look forward to the next party when you reach your 50th