

March for Life Mass at Westminster Cathedral

Saturday, 5th September

Homily by Bishop Frank Dougan

Bishop of Galloway

During that lively beginning to the Mass, I found myself thinking, “I wouldn’t want to be the preacher.” And then I remembered.

Having driven down on the overnight bus from Glasgow to here last night into this morning, I feel at the moment I can well represent one of the many aspects to the Scottish persona, which is to be a little bit disgruntled.

Scots, you might know, are very good at being disgruntled. Things annoy us, and once we lose our “gruntle”, it’s very hard to get it back.

And there was an incident, or a story, last week or a couple of weeks ago, which might have been a footnote down here, that became big news, up north. And it was about a weather presenter, a Scottish weather presenter, called Judith Ralston, who is very well known in Scotland. She’s a Catholic, and she came down to London to present the national weather.

Something went wrong with the sound, so that led to some commentators and others saying, “Maybe we need subtitles.”

If there’s anything that’s going to get a Scot disgruntled, it’s when people down here suggest that we need subtitles. As I said, it might have been a small story down south, but it was a big one up north. And so, I trust we won’t need subtitles this morning. And just to make sure, I’d like to begin not by quoting my own words but by quoting someone else.

By providence—I was originally going to say by coincidence, but not by coincidence—by providence, I have been reading Pope Francis’ document, *Amoris Laetitia*, again and taking some time to reflect on it.

And so, by providence, on Thursday, as I was still reflecting on what I might say today, I came to the point where Pope Francis says this: “Each child has a place in God’s heart from all eternity. Once he or she is conceived, the Creator’s eternal dream comes true.”

They are beautiful words which perfectly express what it is we are reflecting on and speaking about, marching about today. “Each child has a place in God’s heart from all eternity, and once he or she is conceived, the Creator’s eternal dream comes true.”

This is why we do what we do. This is why so many of you, so many of us, are here today. Not because of rational arguments, not because of science in the first instance, but, in the first instance, because we celebrate the love of God—and the love of God, who loves every single one of his children into existence and sustains every single one of his children in existence. And so, for that reason, we do what we do.

And it’s for that reason also that the Church, from the very beginning, has so valued and prized parenthood. So often spoken in defence of it, so often spoken of the beauty of it, and also given us examples of what parenthood should be, of mothers and fathers, including amongst our saints. Obviously, our Blessed Mother herself is a great example of motherhood, and Saint Joseph the great example of what it is to be a father.

The Church gives us these examples and holds them up because the parent is such an important person, is given such a great gift and also such a great responsibility.

More recently, Saint Gianna Beretta Molla as well. And a father like Saint Thomas More. (I had to get an English saint in there somewhere, and I found one—but, just for balance, I’ll put in Saint Margaret of Scotland.)

We value, celebrate and rejoice in parenthood because that parenthood is called to be a reflection of the parenthood of God Himself: God the Father. All we are called to do and to be is to reflect Him and to reflect His love, and show His love to all of His creatures that He has loved into existence.

It’s why, as a priest, we’re given that great title of being called a father. Even though we are not able to be biological fathers—we take that promise of celibacy—we’re given the joy of being called father.

I’ve only been a couple of years a bishop, and it’s a funny thing, people come up to you all the time and call you Father and then apologise. You say, “No, don’t apologise.” It’s a lovely thing to be called a father. There isn’t a better thing to be called than a father. And so it’s something to receive with warmth.

Today is also the feast day of Mother Teresa. Again, someone who didn’t have her own children and yet had so many children, and has been given that great title of Mother.

It's a title of honour because it's so important and because it reflects God the Father. It reflects how He presents Himself in love and as love.

Therefore, a day like this today is to celebrate the gift and the privilege and the responsibility of parenthood—and, in that, also to reflect the responsibility that each of us has to support those who are parents, to support those who might become parents, and to support life in every instance. As I said, God has loved us into existence and continues to hold us in existence by His love. And so, we support that loving life in every moment.

I invite you this morning to reflect on another mother saint and take her example.

Last week, we celebrated the feast of Saint Monica before celebrating the feast of her son Augustine, which is so appropriate—that we celebrate the mother before we celebrate the son. And I remember, as a priest, taking a pilgrimage to Rome and going into the church of St Monica and telling the pilgrims there of the story of Monica, reminding them of it, and watching so many of the parents then go to the tomb because they had children to pray for.

And the importance of the story of Monica is that her son Augustine, to many, would have seemed to be so far gone that there was no coming back. To many, her words and entreaty were getting nowhere.

What was it that mattered? What was it that changed Augustine? We're told it was the tears and the prayers of Saint Monica and her perseverance. Those are the things that matter most.

And so, on a day like this, you face those who, in the strongest of language, disagree. And we show them respect. We must always respect every person.

And we can sometimes feel as if—we can be tempted to feel as if—things are only going in one direction in our corner of the world. That our society is so far gone that life is no longer respected in the way it should be and must be, according to God's plan.

We can be so tempted to believe in the inevitability of things only going in one direction, and that our arguments and our statement and our witness aren't getting anywhere. That temptation is the enemy of hope.

Instead of that, look to the example of someone like Saint Monica, who could have lost hope, who could have been tempted to say, "There's nothing else I can do." And yet, by her perseverance, by her tears and by her prayers, her son returned to God.

So, we keep doing what we're doing. We keep saying what has to be said. We keep speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

And we keep speaking up for God Himself, who wants us to reflect His love to all others and wants us to show that He has loved us into existence, and sustains us in His love. And we keep speaking up so that others know and understand the same.

And we do that with confidence.

We can feel put upon. We can feel attacked and put down. That's not new. Ask St Paul. He would tell you the Church experienced the same thing from the very beginning.

What matters is to take the example of the great saints like Saint Monica and keep doing what you're doing. And, in so doing, take what St Paul said:

"When reviled, we bless. When persecuted, we endure. When slandered, we entreat."

Why do we do this?

Because each child has a place in God's heart from all eternity. Once he or she is conceived, the Creator's eternal dream comes true.