

Homily for the Funeral Mass of Archbishop Noël Treanor

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Archbishop Noël always spoke with great affection for the place and the people from whom he came, in Monaghan. Above all, his admiration and affection for his parents and the warmth of his family home came through in many stories that he enjoyed telling. Two stories – about his parents - stand out for me and I think they tell us something important about the sources of the life he chose and was called to lead.

The first was a story about his father, John, who was perhaps his first teacher in the art of diplomacy. Younger people will find this hard to imagine, but the family had just got a television for the first time. There were only two, or at most three channels to choose from, but a row broke out among the children about what to watch. According to Noël, the television was immediately unplugged and taken back to the shop and that was that. For the next few years there would only be a television hired for the Christmas season and then returned. In the meantime, it would be a home of reading and learning; the important lesson that fights over superficial material things were not to be tolerated.

The second story was about his mother Molly – Archbishop Noël spoke of a mother who always sought to provide the best she could and whose creativity in the kitchen reflected the seasons. In the summer she would send the three children out in the heat of the day to pick elderflower from the hedgerows and she would make ‘elderflower wine’ patiently waiting each summer for the fermenting to take place. A few years later when Noël had made his Confirmation and taken the pledge, his mother denied him this homemade treat with its hint of alcohol, another lesson - commitments should always be kept. Now, this was a story that made its way out across this Diocese and elderflower cordial became a thing that often appeared on the table at Confirmation dinners.

He clearly loved his parents and his brother and sister, John and Mary, their spouses, Margaret and Jim and their children and their children’s children and the many cousins with whom he remained close throughout his life. The capacity for strong bonds of friendship that he shared with so many people, also beyond the confines of kinship, was born in the family home. (Noël always had a very full diary. When you would be trying to make an appointment with him, he might grumble when he could see business meetings filling the days ahead, but his eyes would light up when he saw time set aside for meeting his family. Those were a joy that he always cherished.)

From those two stories I want to point out that Noel learned early – and he greatly valued the lesson - that a good life will be one based on principles and values that have to be learned and put into practice. There was no doubt that the values espoused and expected in that Catholic home in County Monaghan in the 1950s were based on the Gospel and the teaching of Jesus and his Church.

Later in Noël’s life when he heard Pope John Paul II, and more recently Pope Francis, say that it is the duty of every generation of believers to ensure that ‘faith must become culture’ Noël will have understood instinctively what he meant because he knew that he had seen it

happen in his own family home. Pope John Paul II said: “Faith that does not become culture is not wholly embraced, fully thought out, or faithfully lived.”

I had the great privilege of working with Archbishop Noël here in Down and Connor in the Living Church project and later still as part of the Irish Bishops’ Conference and our shared work in Justice and Peace. His dream for the diocese was of all the baptized, clergy, laity and religious working together for the mission of the Church and for the common good. He admired equally the priest who ministered with joy, the business person who worked and provided jobs that sustained many people in work, the religious who were to be found on the front lines of poverty and injustice, the teachers who strove to make a better society through Catholic education and to bring Christ to young people.

Many people gathered in Brussels on Friday to give thanks for his work in COMECE, Justice & Peace Europe and his most recent role as Apostolic Nuncio to the European Union. All of us who worked with him in all of these different arenas will have witnessed his teasing out, in very sophisticated ways, the essential link between faith and culture.

We all know about his deep commitment to the European project. That was born out of a desire to forge a shared, life-giving culture in a situation of terrible division manifested at its worst in the horrible excesses of the Second World War. Noël saw that the great leaders of the recently warring nations had striven to create something in common that was authentically secular and inclusive. They were convinced, as was Noël, that the most reliable source for the values that could carry such a bold project was the Gospel of Jesus.

Archbishop Noël dearly wanted to share his passion for Catholic Social Teaching with all of us and especially young Catholics. In 2018, inspired by the World Peace Messages of Pope Francis, Archbishop Noël wrote a Pastoral Letter aimed at students and young adults. When I read over it now I have a sense of his frustration that the glorious patrimony of Catholic Social Teaching is not constantly before our eyes and on our lips; our faith tells us that ‘every human life, every human person is a mystery’ and must be treated as such.

Listen to some words from that Pastoral:

“The faith experience of the early Christian believers, since the first Easter, provided an impetus for them to reflect on how they should relate to their neighbours and to their persecutors. They emphasised the contribution of Christian values for the wellbeing of the body politic in dialogue with the Jewish, Roman and Hellenistic communities in which they were living.”

“Later on, during the Middle Ages, the Christians established conditions on how to act within situations of conflict which became known as the ‘Just War Theory’ emphasising the principles of proportionality, justice and protection of life in the face of adversity.” How important those medieval principles of ‘proportionality, justice and protection of life’ are in relation to the wars raging before our eyes today, most especially Gaza and Ukraine.

He quoted for the young people a section from the Letter to Diognetus, written around the year 130 AD.

“Christians are indistinguishable from other men and women either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human

doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law ... Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything ... They are defamed but vindicated."

Noël knew that the culture of the Treanor household in the 1950s was in continuity with the early Christians, with the Letter to Diognetus, and it was also very different from them. The Ireland of the 1950s was, of course, monochrome and had its great faults as well as its strengths. We are blessed and challenged in equal measure to be living into a future truly diverse, for which we are not well prepared. That, I believe, was why Archbishop Noël wanted our young people to be schooled in the social teaching of the Church. The role of committed Catholics in the formation of a new world order will not be to 'impose' our vision, as Pope Benedict XVI put it so well. It will be our duty, rather, to invite and 'propose' a wholesome culture worthy of human beings created in the Image of God, a culture inspired by the truth, justice and mercy taught to us by the Lord Jesus.

Here at his funeral Mass, we remember that Archbishop Noël was a family man and much-loved friend of many people; he was a very accomplished individual; a priest, a bishop, an archbishop, a papal nuncio. All of those things are hugely important but on his funeral day we are invited to remember that none of those is the most important.

The most important thing is that Noël Treanor was baptised and born into new life in Christ. The words written by St Paul to the Romans that we heard earlier were meant for him:

"If we are children, we are heirs as well; heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, sharing His suffering so as to share His glory. I think that what we suffer in this life can never be compared to the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is waiting for us."

"... the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is waiting for us." We do not say such things because they come naturally to our 21st century sensibilities, because we intuit them naturally ourselves. No, we do not; we say them because they have been promised us by the Risen Lord Jesus and we, by the grace of God, choose to believe them. On Noël's behalf, let us hear Jesus speak:

"I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too. You know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus said: 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.'"

We commend Archbishop Noël to Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

May he have a resting place in the company of the Saints.

Leaba i measc na naomh go raibh aige. Amen