

## Homily at funeral of Msgr Vincent Foy, PH

Monday, March 20, 2017



Cardinal Thomas Collins provided the homily during the funeral Mass of Monsignor Vincent Foy, P.H. on March 18, 2017. Msgr. Foy was 101 years old and in his 78<sup>th</sup> year of the priesthood.

### **From Shadows and Illusion into Truth**

Cardinal Newman, who like Monsignor Foy lived a long life, though not as long as that of Monsignor Foy, chose as his epitaph the words "ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem", which the great Newman scholar, Fr Ian Ker translates as "out of unreality into Reality." Whether by earthly standards our life be long or short, death comes to us all; it dispels illusion, and compels us to face reality: certainly the fact of our mortality, which we too often are tempted to ignore, so full are we of fear, but also the reality of the providence of God, who is our loving creator and our judge, the source of our hope.

Samuel Johnson remarked that the prospect of imminent death concentrates the mind wonderfully, and that is true; we rush heedlessly through our brief experience of earthly life with scattered minds, bewitched by so many illusions. The prospect of our own death certainly brings us up short, and shocks us into recognizing our foolishness, our failure so often to distinguish reality from illusion. But that is true whenever we confront the hard fact of death, even the death of one who has lived a long life, by human standards, and has lived it well. The fact of death forces us to stop, and to be attentive to what is real, to what truly matters in life. The prospect of death does indeed concentrate the mind. If we are to navigate through this treacherous world we need concentrated minds.

Through the light of our Christian faith we can see the reality of God's providence that is hidden from the person without faith. That providence is reality, not illusion, as is the promise of the resurrection that is part of it.

In today's reading from the First Letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians, the earliest writing in the New Testament, written only about twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus, the Thessalonians and we also are comforted and given hope through the assurance that when we die in Christ we will experience the power of his resurrection: "We would not have you ignorant concerning those who are asleep, lest you should grieve, even as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so with Him God will bring those also who have fallen asleep through Jesus." We all grieve at the death of one we love, as Jesus himself mourned the death of his friend Lazarus; grief is an inescapable part of the human condition, for we suffer the pain of loss when the earthly bond of fellowship with those we love is broken through death. That human sorrow is real, and no illusion.

But our hope and consolation comes from the fact that when we die in Christ we will rise in Christ. There is no foundation for optimism in the face of death or of life, for that matter, for optimism is based on the illusion that all is well from a human perspective, and that is simply unreal: all is not well. But the knowledge of reality that comes from faith is the foundation for hope, and it is hope which consoles us as we mourn the death of one we love. True consolation can come only from what is real.

The Gospel today is taken from the account of the death of Lazarus, and the great miracle by which Jesus brought him back to earthly life, for a time. That astounded the onlookers, but all it meant was that Lazarus eventually had two funerals. The raising of Lazarus, like all the miracles of Jesus, was a sign that pointed far beyond itself to a deeper reality. The hope which Jesus offers in his dialogue with Martha is much more than a promise that her brother will be brought back to earthly life for a few more years, which was what she was asking for. Instead, Jesus tells her, and tells us: "I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in me, even though he die, shall live; and whoever lives and believes in Me, shall never die." In this world, death comes to us all, as it came to Jesus Himself; the reality that gives us hope is not an extension of life here, but the sharing in his resurrection, beyond the scope of this earthly world, in the home of the heavenly Father, which through Jesus is our home as well. Ever since the earliest disciples first experienced the presence of the Risen Lord in the days before he ascended to the Father, it has been clear that the Resurrection, which we are now preparing during Lent to celebrate liturgically, is the rock solid foundation for our hope, based on our faith in Our Risen Saviour: "I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in me, even though he die, shall live; and whoever lives and believes in Me, shall never die."

The prospect of death, our own or that of one we love, forces us to shed our illusions and to be attentive to reality. We see our mortality in the context of divine providence and the glory of the resurrection, and we are consoled with hope; but we also recognize our need to repent of our sins, and so are challenged to come to conversion. St Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "For the Lord himself will cry a command, with the voice of an Archangel, and with trumpet of God, shall descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise up first." He is describing the sharing in the resurrection by those who have died in Christ, but he is also describing the last judgment. So at a Christian funeral, we pray for the repose of the soul of the one who has died, and for the forgiveness of his sins. St Theresa of Avila famously rejected the praise of those who sought to declare her a saint while she was alive, saying: "But if you call me a saint, no one will pray for me when I am dead." And so we pray for Monsignor Foy, that great and faithful priest, as he would surely ask us to.

But we also realize that we will face judgment ourselves, from our Loving Saviour, who calls us to account for our use of the time, long or short, which God entrusted to us for our journey through this vale of tears. Even a hundred years is a mere moment in the divine perspective of eternity, and most of us will live a lot shorter life than that. We realize especially at a Christian funeral, as also during every Lent, that we must make good use of the very limited time we are given to prepare to meet the Lord, and to respond to his first evangelical message: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near at hand." There is an urgency in the call to repentance, and we are given a salutary reminder of that when we reflect on the inescapable fact of death. Very few people live as long as Monsignor Foy, and he was quite conscious with an understandable human satisfaction of the fact that he was indeed rare in having been a priest so long. But I remember a few years ago visiting him at Providence, and he cheerfully remarked "I'm on the way out, you know." I recall my bishop, Bishop Paul Reding, who died of cancer at the relatively young age of 58, still able to do confirmations for several months after the diagnosis. A little boy said to him "Are you the bishop who is dying?" He replied: "Yes, but I think we all are." So we need to be attentive, each day, to the urgent need to prepare for our death by a life lived with fidelity and repentance.

There is a sign in many sacristies: "Priest of God, celebrate this Mass as if it were your first Mass, as if it were your last Mass, as if it were your only Mass." We could all have at least a figurative sign in our minds: "Christian, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day." We need to be attentive each day, ready to meet the Lord, and seeking to dispel the illusions that lead us to disaster, and hold fast to the path that leads us home to our heavenly Father. If we are to journey through unreality to Reality, we need to know which is which.

This is where Monsignor Foy made a priceless contribution to our life in Christ, for he insisted passionately and persistently decade after decade that our navigation system through the pitfalls of this world, that is, our conscience, must be grounded on objective reality and not on subjective sentiment, so prone to illusion. In the late 1960's that insistence on the formation of conscience according to objective reality in light of the Word of God, the living faith of the Church, and natural law was surely needed. But it is needed far more in these days.

This insistence on objective reality as the norm which guides and challenges our subjective desires and perceptions is essential to our life in Christ, and indeed to any human life lived well, for if we are blown about by our subjective impulses and take them as our norm of behavior, then we return to the sin of our first parents, and make the human will a false god. There is nothing harsh or lacking in compassion in insisting that we be guided by objective norms external to our subjective will, though because of our ego we will always struggle in becoming what God calls us to be, but God's grace triumphs over human frailty and hardness of heart. It is a matter of being lovingly attentive to human weakness, and always proposing and not imposing the call of the Gospel. But we must not let sentiment, which is compassion's false twin, subvert the call to conversion. As Monsignor told me forty years ago "suaviter in modo, firmiter in re", or, in the spirit of St Francis de Sales, clarity and charity. They are not opposed to one another.

We celebrate this requiem Mass for a great priest, a faithful servant of Jesus, who through a long life well lived always was true to the commitment he made on the day of his ordination, and indeed which his parents and godparents made on the day of his baptism. Over his 78 years of priestly ministry he celebrated Mass more than any priest of this diocese has done, and each time he, like each of us at every Mass, was joined to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Each Mass is a preparation for the hour of our death, for in each Mass we encounter the Risen Lord. When we meet him at death, as Monsignor Foy has met him now, he will be no stranger, for we have grown to know and love him in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

We pray for the repose of the soul of Monsignor Foy, a great and holy priest of Jesus Christ:

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.

May his soul, and the souls of all of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen