

HOMILY OF BISHOP CRISPIAN HOLLIS

50th Anniversary of Ordination - Canon Michael J Fitzpatrick

7 June - Salisbury Cathedral

I think it was in the 1980s that we first gathered here in Salisbury Cathedral as the diocese of Clifton to celebrate a Mass together – perhaps for the first time in living memory. And, if I may, I would like to thank the authorities here who have made it possible for us to gather here again today to celebrate as a Catholic community.

That first celebration in the 1980s was, in some ways, a way of marking our place here and connecting with our pre-Reformation roots. Today's celebration is rather different for a number of reasons. First of all, it is a sign of the warm links between the Cathedral and the Catholic community. Our respective communities are increasingly growing together and so today we are actually recognising and celebrating the different gifts of members of both communities. But especially, we are here today to celebrate the ministry of Canon Michael Fitzpatrick, the parish priest of St Osmund's across the Green in Exeter St., who is celebrating his Golden Jubilee of ordination and, as it happens, his retirement as parish priest.

The actual date is tomorrow – June 8th – when in 1969 he was ordained as a priest for the Clifton Diocese in the cathedral at Waterford. His journey since 1969 has taken him to many different parishes in the diocese, ranging from Bristol to Gloucester and most recently here to Salisbury, where he has been parish priest since 2006. It's not for me to trace the details of his journey; that will be the task for the one who preaches at his funeral – hopefully many years hence. Our happy task today is to look back with thanksgiving on the ministry of Michael the priest and to bless the Lord for the fruitful way in which He has graced Michael's ministry – and that we do with all our hearts.

When he writes about priests and their way of life, Pope Francis has famously said that he essentially sees priesthood as missionary – pastoral, caring, effective and a Gospel-based ministry, particularly marked out by mercy and compassion. Francis wants his fellow priests to be those who have “the smell of the sheep” about them, rather than the bureaucratic gifts of administration, which can leave them sitting in offices and far from the real lives of the people.

Throughout his 50 years of ministry, Michael has had “the smell of the sheep” about his work as parish priest – he has been practical, cheerful, prayerful and Gospel-based, full of compassion and warmth – and many of you here can testify to that more eloquently than I can.

He will be best remembered and loved for this fruitful and pastoral ministry, which is why today we particularly thank the Lord for the great things he has been able to do through Michael's priestly work. But we thank God too for Michael's own fidelity to the call he has been given and to which he has given his life. Our first reading from Jeremiah reminds us of this: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you came to birth, I consecrated you; I appointed you as prophet to the nations...I have put my words into your mouth...to build and plant." So, friends, we have much for which to give thanks to the Lord and to celebrate today.

But, does it all end now after 50 years as Michael joins the ranks of the retired clergy? I hope not; in fact, I am sure not.

I can only speak for myself and commend to Michael what has been my own experience. I retired some 7 years ago and I can honestly say that in those 7 years, I have enjoyed some of the most fruitful and positive years of priesthood. No longer burdened with the demands of office and administration, I have been able to rediscover in a deeply personal way what it means to be a pastoral priest. I have been enabled to become a minister of Word and Sacrament in ways which, I hope, has been a blessing for the whole community. And along with this new becoming, I have found myself being led to a growing discovery of the person God wants me to be and a deeper and deeper understanding of the vocation with which He has graced me.

Retirement is not an end, or a gentle slipping away into a leisurely life of inactivity. It is a new beginning of an on-going and unfolding life, full of grace and truth. I'm sure that Michael understands this too, otherwise he would not be choosing to live next door to the parish in Patchway.

The injunction of tonight's Gospel remains very present and very cogent; priesthood and ministry are always about caring for and feeding the Lord's flock – this is the essence of what we are about. If there's a difference for the retired, then it's flagged up in the verses that follow our Gospel reading: "When you were young, you put on your own belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and somebody else will put a belt round you and take you where you would rather not go."

Bless you, Michael. Thank you for all that you have done for us and for the Lord and now, welcome into the next and newest chapter of your life as a priest.

May the Spirit grant you a new vision, a new experience, a new faithfulness and a new consecration to ministry and service for the Church and for the world.