

*Homily of Archbishop Leo Cushley*

*On the departure of the Daughters of Charity from St Paul's, Muirhouse*

*19 October 2013*

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we say goodbye to the Daughters of Charity today, we offer up this Mass in thanksgiving to God for the many blessings that have been bestowed by him upon St Paul's and this community through their presence here over the years.

The sisters' company was founded by the great Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, in 1633 in France and, among the many, many religious congregations for women in the world – today there are an assortment of about a million sisters in the world, you know – the Daughters of Charity are one of the groups who have remained consistent and clear-minded about who they are and what they must do. They have done so throughout a long and distinguished history of prayer and loving service that has one object in mind and one reason for it.

The one object is, and has always been, simply this: to serve the poor. Their one reason for it is: the love of Christ urges us. They have always remained faithful to this through thick and thin, and as a result, they have always been an especially consistent example of authentic, loving, faithful religious life.

You would think that their simple motto and way of life would always be welcome, but things change. After the revolution in France, sisters doing simply what you have seen these sisters do were put in front of firing squads. They were beheaded at the guillotine. The service of Christ in the poor is not always understood or welcomed. That was barely two hundred years ago. Nowadays, of course, they don't usually have to be so heroic. But there is still

a strength of character required to be open to God's grace, to have the obedience and the humility to place your life in the hands of someone else, to accept a mission in a far away country, to leave your family and friends to serve the poor for the love of God; but the sisters here are among those who have done that, and we are very grateful that we have had them among us in - numerous and in many places in the Archdiocese since 1898 - and that we have been inspired by the spirit of St Vincent and St Louise and of the very many Daughters of Charity whose spirit has lived in our midst through them. We wish them well in their next mission and our prayers and affection accompany them.

The sisters chose today to thank God through this celebration of a Mass of Our Lady and with the readings we have just heard. Every Christian has a special place in his or her heart for Our Lady, but the Daughters of Charity have a particular reason for their devotion to the Mother of God. In 1830 Our Lady appeared to one of their sisters, St Catherine Labouré, who later had the first Miraculous Medal struck, and the devotion to the Immaculate Conception – a very old devotion – was revived and became extremely popular. Now the Miraculous Medal is to be found all over the world – and I bet the sisters would be delighted to give you one after Mass if you ask them.

There is another reason for the Gospel reading today and why it is dear to virgins and religious women. When the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary in today's Gospel, he asks her to cooperate with God's plan for all mankind by giving birth to the Son of God. Mary at first wonders what is happening but then she quickly, decisively and willingly opens herself to receive God's call to work with him for the salvation of the world; she opens her heart to receive the Word of God spoken by the angel; and in due course she gives birth to the Word of God, Jesus Christ. That Word, that spiritual word spoken to her by the angel becomes flesh, quite literally: it becomes flesh and lives in the world, Jesus Christ living among us.

Religious women are called to do exactly the same as Our Lady. They listen to the Word of God; they submit to God's loving call to cooperate with him; they open their hearts willingly, promptly and decisively; the seeds of the Holy Spirit are planted within their hearts; and they give birth to Jesus Christ in the world.

The sisters give birth to Jesus Christ in the world in two ways. First they make him present by their very own presence among us. By listening to the Word of God as Mary did, that word matures within them, and his charity urges them to live and to work among us for love of him and of us. Their presence becomes a way for Christ to be lovingly present among us visibly before our eyes. So they make Christ present among us in themselves, by their own example.

But there is another way that they give birth to Jesus Christ in the world. Through that example, and prayer and hard work in favour of the poor, these sisters touch us and our lives – they change us and make us better for their presence. By changing us they give birth to something new, because they help turn us into sons and daughter of God. Slowly and patiently, like loving mothers, they give birth to us as better Christians. In fact, that is precisely what they are: these sisters are in reality mothers. They are our spiritual mothers and they are due our love and respect in so far as they have given spiritual rebirth to us, by the way they have helped changed our lives for the better, and by making Christ's own charity a reality among us.

The Daughters of Charity have been among the most faithful and coherent of religious women down through the years, and we hope and pray that they will thrive and inspire us for many years to come. We thank God for their example and for their patient and loving spiritual motherhood among us, giving birth to us as better sons and daughters of God for having known them and been loved by them.

The Daughters of Charity have always had one object in mind and one reason for it. Their object is to serve the poor. Their reason for it is one that all of us should take as a motto: the love of Christ urges us.