

ST. ILLTYD'S CENTENARY MASS,
ST. ALBAN'S ON THE MOOR CHURCH, CARDIFF,
5th October 2023

Homily given by Fr Thomas OSB (Shaun Regan)

Your Grace, Brother Priests, Reverend Brothers, Illtydians, and all present.

My name is Shaun Regan. When I entered the monastery at Belmont Abbey 50 years ago, they changed my name to Thomas, but Shaun Regan is my name. If you try to imagine me with hair, some of you might remember me ... just as if I try hard to imagine you with teeth and a waistline rather than a Brains Beer Barrel, I might remember you!

I was in the 1964 intake at St. Illtyd's, the first intake at the new school in Rumney. To gain a place at St. Illtyd's was a first for many families. Many of our parents had left school at 13 or 14 with minimum education and therefore limited prospects. But to have a boy at St. Illtyd's was a step up the ladder to future success. It wasn't unusual for the wider family to rally round, one aunt to buy your shoes, another trousers, an uncle a satchel or tie, and your parents for the coveted green & gold cap and blazer.

Within days of arrival, new pupils were given a voice test. This led to selection to be members of St. David's Cathedral Choir. Whilst other youngsters in Cardiff were delighting in the Beatles, Shirley Bassey or Amen Corner, because of St. Illtyd's feeding the Cathedral, boys from Adamsdown & Splott, Roath and Grangetown, and every other district, were singing Palestrina, Victoria, Byrd and Gregorian Chant. The cathedral Choirmaster was Alan Rees who entered Belmont Abbey a few years later, becoming Abbot there. At St. Illtyd's he taught RE, music, history ... we were especially blessed to have teachers who knew their stuff, didn't give up on a pupil, and over the years became trusted mentors and even friends.

It was Archbishop Romanus Bilsborrow, a Benedictine and first archbishop of Cardiff who when dealing pastorally with the loss of life in the First World War and the gloom of the 20's, recognised that the way for Catholic children to get out of backstreets and find prospects, was to improve education. He lost his sight and had to retire, so it fell to his successor the second archbishop, Francis Mostyn, to take the bull by the horns. Somehow the De La Salle Brothers came, and thank God for every one of them¹. The rest is history.

Soon after starting at St. Illtyd's, the music master Edgar Watkins taught us the School Song:

*To green fields set with golden flowers
in ancient days Stilltyd came,
and there he set his college towers
where scholars flocked drawn by his fame.*

*Green and gold, green and gold
strong be your hearts and bold
to keep unsullied our great name
adding to ancient glory modern fame.
So ever honoured hold the green and gold.*

I hope my memory serves me well in recalling these lines. The green and gold signifies our uniform, of course. What few knew was that St. Illtyd was attributed with founding the first place of learning in this land where a disciplined course of study was provided. Indeed, his monastery at Llantwit Major (Llanilltud Fawr) became the school or seminary of many great Welsh saints.

The De La Salle Brothers without knowing anything about him perhaps, were worthy heirs to Illtyd. From the very beginning pupils were taught the value of self-discipline and self respect. They were encouraged to achieve and to go beyond what was expected. Inter house rivalry for Mostyn & Bute, De La Salle & St. David's was a good start.

The Brothers and the teachers had a secret weapon: everything at St. Illtyd's was rooted in the Catholic Faith. All members of staff, whether Baptist, Methodist, Anglican or whatever, began a class with the Sign of the Cross and an Our Father or Hail Mary. The Legion of Mary thrived. Mass was available every day in the Brother's Chapel— the school chaplain was Fr. John Rowan, PP at Trowbridge but the housing estate and his church were still being built. Boys attended Mass not simply to get out of the cold and rain: it was a basic principle: 'if God is on our side, who can be against?' as the opposing rugby teams were to discover.

Teachers, doctors, professors, managers, priests and brothers galore were the product of this enterprise. And although time has moved on, and education method and goals have changed, the tradition we experienced in the past still has much to offer today and for tomorrow.

The guests of honour this evening must be, without a doubt, the De La Salle Brothers who have travelled great distances to be here. Their vocation to teach is a response to the commission of Our Lord Himself: 'Go out into the whole world, proclaim the Good News, teach them ... And their teaching was never limited to the classroom:

I recall Headmaster Br. Claude. His nickname was 'Lippy'... can't think why. He tried to enact a principle: in so far as he could manage if, no one left St. Illtyd's without a place at College or University to go to, or a job. Stories about him are legends. One goes: he entered a form 5 classroom. And asked 'hands up those boys leaving school this week who have not yet found gainful employment'. Six hands went up. 'Meet me outside Curran's at 6am on Monday next.'. Curran's was a firm owned by a fervent Catholic family. They employed hundreds if not thousands. On a Holy Day of Obligation an Altar was erected on the shop floor so that during the morning break Mass could be said, and no Catholic would fail to keep the Holy Day. On the Monday at 6am, as arranged, six boys met Br. Claude who frog-marched them into the Manager's office 'Good morning Mr. Curran. These are the young men starting work for you today'. And Mr. Curran would take them on!

Governors and Staff of today: you are walking in the footsteps of good men. Be worthy of them, and please strive to learn the lessons of the past and pass them on in ways appropriate for today: Self-discipline and self-respect, determination to strive for personal and collective excellence, and all this rooted in the Truths of the Catholic Faith. If a child leaves after 12 years of Catholic education, and does not know the doctrine of the Faith, the Commandments of God, and responsibility of citizenship in the modern world, if they do not know this, our system has failed them. 'Prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God'. That is the foundation of all we do.

Our school blazers had a badge and a motto which read: Sanitas, Sanctitas, Scientia: Health, Holiness, Knowledge. Pretty good guideline a hundred years ago, and pretty good for the next hundred years too.

St. Illtyd, pray for us.

St. John Baptist De la salle, pray for us.

St. Alban, pray for us.

1. After the Mass Br Michael, Auxiliary Provincial, informed me that before Archbishop Romanus Bilsborrow came to Cardiff he was bishop of Port-Louis, Mauritius and it was on that island he met the De La Salle Brothers and admired the schools that they were running. That is why he invited to the De La Salle Brothers to setup a senior school for Catholic pupils in Cardiff.