

EDINBURGH 2010 CONFERENCE : POLLOCK HALLS, EDINBURGH

OPENING CELEBRATION OF CONFERENCE

‘WITNESSING TO CHRIST TODAY’

WELCOMING REMARKS FROM CARDINAL O’BRIEN

Introductory Remarks:

Can I begin by saying simply: “There is only one of me here – and there were none of me here in 1910!”.

I make that remark as an indication of the tremendous change which has occurred over the past 100 years since the first Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910.

Then, there were no Roman Catholics at all present at the Conference; and the thought of a Roman Catholic Cardinal being invited to speak at the Opening Service would have been unthinkable.

And, of course, I am not here as the only Roman Catholic. I had the privilege of welcoming the Catholic Delegation for lunch in my home here in Edinburgh this afternoon, with our Delegation led by our own Archbishop, the Archbishop of Glasgow, Mario Conti, who is the President of the Commission for Doctrine and Christian Unity of the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland; and also Bishop Brian Farrell, who is the Secretary of the Congregation for Christian Unity in Rome, as well as being directly responsible to Cardinal Kasper, the President, and then, of course, ultimately to the Pope.

Our Delegation of 20 members represents Catholics from literally all over the world actively involved in the work of promoting Christian Unity. How things have changed!

Relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and our National Church, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland:

A further indication as to how things have changed over the past 100 years is indicated in the fact that each year when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland takes place, there is a Roman Catholic delegate invited, who is invariably a Bishop and now has the right to speak during any of the debates. This has been one of my privileges over my past 25 years as a Bishop also.

However, I took particular pleasure from the invitation extended to me shortly after my creation as a Cardinal in October 2003, in being invited to address the General Assembly after a formal congratulatory greeting. On ascertaining that a reasonable dissertation would be welcomed, rather than a formal thank you, I brought with me to that General Assembly three particular visual aids:

- I had with me a small compass made from Iona Silver, which had been presented to me by the Very Reverend James Weatherhead, a previous Moderator of the General Assembly and his wife, Anne. What was most moving was the inscription going with the compass, which stated: ‘May this compass point us on the way ahead and may the cardinal points on the compass help us on our journey!’;

2.

- The second visual aid was a little towel which I indicated represented the ‘service’ of this newly-appointed Cardinal. I indicated that at the Last Supper, according to the Synoptic accounts from Matthew, Mark and Luke, the sign of service was indicated at the institution of the Eucharist. However, I also pointed out that the beloved disciple, John, had the act of washing of feet as the basic sign of service – an example to us all;
- Thirdly, I produced my little set of wooden rosary beads as a pre-Reformation sign of prayer, which united us all, whatever the form of prayer we use day by day as members of our Christian Churches.

Ongoing Apostolate of our Christian Churches:

The Moderator, the Very Reverend John Christie, has already spoken very eloquently of the 1910 Conference and the missionary endeavour then, which was an important part of the life of the Scottish Church – but he now points us forward.

And I would emphasise that we all face new challenges as Christians and as members of Christian Churches in witnessing to Jesus Christ at this present time.

The challenges are evident both in today’s society and in the world. And the challenges facing us include trying to spread the Gospel here at home in Scotland and in those countries where the Christian message has already taken root, far from home.

Among these challenges are those to life in all its aspects, from the beginning of life to natural death; during life itself, with increased poverty in our land, homelessness, drink and drugs problems and problems with trying to build up our young community, strong in our Christian faith.

However, there are indeed increasingly positive signs in what we Christians can and do together in witnessing to Christ today. In Scotland all the mainstream Christian Churches meet regularly as members of ‘Action of Churches Together in Scotland’ (ACTS) – bringing together representatives of our Churches, discussing possible ways of working together and seeing to the implementation of decisions taken. And, of course, at local level there are increasingly practical experiences of our Christian witness.

Liaison between Churches and Governments:

I would also say at this present time the efforts of the Christian Churches here in Scotland and the increasing value of what we say and do is recognised both by our Scottish Government here at home and the United Kingdom Government in Westminster. In Scotland the Christian leaders meet regularly with the First Minister of our Government, discussing issues of common concern – which help both us and the Government in formulating a policy which, hopefully, will coincide with Christian values. Similarly, in the Westminster Parliament, through the Secretary of State for Scotland, and our contact with Scottish Members of Parliament in Westminster, we are able to lobby, often successfully, with regard to Christian values.

3.

Further, here in Scotland we have a very valuable inter-faith outreach through our Scottish Inter Faith Council. This ensures that at every level we have the concerns of our people at heart, whatever their Christian denomination or whatever world faith they belong to.

Conclusion:

In our country at this present time, much has been made of the initials PC as standing for political correctness – an indication that perhaps everyone should observe their proper place and not speak out of turn! However, the Christian Churches would rather see PC as standing for proclaiming Christianity – and it is that that we are increasingly able to do together at this present time.

I see this as a natural ‘follow on’ over the past 100 years from what was tentatively beginning in 1910 – a magnificent Christian witness here at home to the message of Jesus Christ himself and, hopefully, our example extending throughout the world.