

Homily Preached by His Grace, the Most Reverend Bernard Longley, Archbishop of Birmingham, at the Mass on the Triple Anniversary Celebrated by the Parish of the Immaculate Conception, Bicester, Oxfordshire.



You are God's building; worship the Father in spirit and in truth. Three overlapping and interconnected anniversaries have given us a very good reason to come together here tonight. The consolidation of the mission, as a parish, eighty years ago, predates the building of this fine church by twenty years, and seventy years ago the parish altar servers joined the Guild of Saint Stephen, in formal recognition of their ministry at the altar, beside successive priests. It is very fitting that we celebrate the three anniversaries with this evening's Mass of thanksgiving. Through the Eucharist, Our Lord has gathered this parish community together in this place and year by year, and in the Blessed Sacrament, he has been at the centre of your community, and at the heart of all your prayer, and work for the Kingdom of God. So, I thank Canon John, for inviting all of us to join the parish community for this wonderful celebration of your faith in Jesus Christ. Today we also give thanks for the last sixty years of parish life, since that moment when parishioners started gathering from across the growing town of Bicester at the Catholic community's new home here at the Immaculate Conception. We commemorate the first Mass to be celebrated here, once the church building was completed, for the benefit of the Catholic people of this parish; for through your following of Our Lord you dedicated yourselves to serve all the inhabitants of this town and the surrounding countryside, and as the years have proceeded you worked more and more closely with brothers and sisters in the other Christian churches and communities. Tonight, it is very good that ecumenical friends are gathered here together with us, to join in this celebration and to give thanks, and we remember also your communities in our prayers tonight. As part of our thanksgiving, we recognise the wonderful contribution that the Catholic community, and your school, have made to this neighbourhood over so many years. I want to thank Miss Pickering, and her predecessors, the staff, the governing body, and especially the generations of children, from Saint Mary's Primary School, for your commitment to Catholic education, and for your wonderful witness. Children, it does not seem so very long ago since we were here in this church to welcome and pray in the presence of the relics of Saint Bernadette. I am sure that some of you remember that Monday morning that we came to pray and ask for Saint Bernadette's intercession. Thank you all for being here tonight, and for helping to make this such a

special ceremony and occasion for all of us. Today we do recall with thanksgiving all the lay faithful, and the religious sisters, the deacons and the priests, who helped to shape parish life over the years, together with successive generations of believers you now witness to your faith, in continuity with those who first formed the Catholic Community in this part of Oxfordshire, with such confidence and hope, as long ago as 1869. We have inherited from them a responsibility to do the same for the coming generations of faithful. Above all, these three anniversaries call us to prayer, which is always the first and most important task of every parish community, to offer praise and worship. The presence of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament our churches is also a call to prayer, a daily invitation to visit and to pray here, a silent echo of the message we have heard in this evening's reading from Saint John's Gospel [4: 19-24], true worshippers, who worship the Father in spirit and truth. The faithful ministry of your altar servers, prayerfully united in the Guild of Saint Stephen, for the past seventy years, is a sign of the vocations that Our Lord is constantly planting in the hearts of young men and young women. Thank you to the servers who have gathered here tonight, the young and the less young too, who represent a long story of servers in this parish. We recall also with gratitude the Presentation Sisters, who lived and witnessed in this parish over many years, and today, the Ursuline Sisters of Mary the Immaculate, who continue the wonderful tradition of religious life and witness in the convent at King's End. Looking back over these eighty years we can record those significant moments when the Catholic community left its mark through praying, witnessing, and serving. We can also give thanks for those many, many hidden moments of faithful service, examples of service which have contributed to the life of your parish, and especially for the many hours of prayer that have been offered to God in this holy place, as well as the hidden works of mercy, which have taken place and been planned here, have been inspired by your worship, Sunday by Sunday, day by day. Today's anniversary will help you to establish fresh patterns of witnessing and serving, as we reflect together on the Diocesan Vision, with its priorities of evangelization, formation, liturgy and worship, and social outreach, with families and young people, at the heart of all that you do. Tonight, I offer thanks on the behalf of our Archdiocese and all its parishes, for the spiritual and pastoral leadership of all who have taken part in the life of the parish over the years. I offer thanks for those priests and deacons who served faithfully in this parish, and I thank Canon John and Deacons: Michael and Nick, for their steadfast service today. I also thank their predecessors: Father Paul Martin, Father Michael Stack, Father Aldo Tapparo, remembering too, Father Paul Moss, whose priestly vocation was nurtured here, and it is a delight to see some of those who served in this parish as assistant priests, remembering particularly Father Linh [Nguyen] and Father David Mead, who has made such a long journey from the West Country to be here today. Over those eighty years it is the steady and generous faithfulness of so many people to your parish mission that we celebrate tonight, but above all, you will know, we thank the Lord that he has always remained faithful to you, faithful to the parishioners, gathered under the patronage of Our Lady's Immaculate Conception. May you continue to worship, to witness, and to serve, here in the Lord's presence, and to be a true and fruitful sign of God's love, for the people of Bicester, well into the future. Amen.