

HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CORMAC MURPHY-O'CONNOR

SERMON FOR 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF PROGRESSIO

ECUMENICAL SERVICE AT TEMPLE CHURCH

2nd November, 2015

It is good that we should be meeting today in this Temple Church, a place which is part of a long story beginning 900 years ago in Magna Carta which, as you know, was the early foundation of democracy and above all of justice and respect for every human being. In this very year, too, Pope Francis in his latest encyclical which is addressed to every person of good will, challenges us to take that story further; to take up our human responsibility to strive for the well-being and rights of all humanity and the well-being of creation; to safeguard our planetary home for future generations.

Today we celebrate seventy-five years of *Progressio*, of which I have had the privilege of being President for some fourteen years. While it is just one of many organisations and individuals who have played a part in this long history of the struggle for justice and for peace, it has played a very significant role. *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they shall have their fill.* Those words of the Gospel, uttered by Jesus Christ, quite often haunt me as I think of what little I have done to truly promote justice in our world today and I suppose that applies to all of us who are here this afternoon. Are we blessed with the desire to spread justice in any way we can? More and more, as I get older, I think my God, the God of Jesus Christ, was, is and always will be the God of the poor, of the oppressed, those who mourn and suffer. My brother, who was a priest and is now dead, was a quite marvellous chaplain of a prison

in Winchester. In prisons, as you know well, there are the Governor and the prison visitors and the prison officers but at the bottom of the pile are the prisoners themselves. My brother Pat was just great with them. He laughed with them, he served them, he visited their families, he tried to look after them when they left prison. And they loved him because they thought that if this man, a man of religion, a man of God, if he is like that with us and if he knows us and cares for us, well, if he is on our side, just possibly, God is on our side too. In other words, a preferential option for the poor.

There is no doubt that the work of *Progressio* has had a very great impact in many different ways. Let me just list a few. There are the farmers in Zimbabwe who have been helped to improve productivity, to farm sustainably and to gain the self-esteem and confidence to interact freely with policy makers in their neighbourhood. Nor should I forget *Progressio*'s work with Islamic leaders in The Yemen to develop greater HIV Aids awareness among the Islamic communities. I remember some years ago going to Zimbabwe and going to a large hostel where AIDS sufferers were cared for. And I remember the nun who was in charge there saying to me, "It's quite tragic here. The people come and I can get drugs from all kinds of people which enable AIDS victims to continue to live. But, she said, when many of them come, they are so emaciated and under-nourished that the drugs can't work and they slowly die. All that we can offer them is love."

Then there is the Dominican Republic where *Progressio* helps, with other people, to achieve a new national law to ensure every community can influence how government money is spent and this has led to the doubling of the national education budget. Notice that the work of *Progressio* is not so much to give things – food or resources as such – to people, like other good agencies such as

Cafod or Christian Aid or Oxfam; its work is rather to change the social and political scene in these very poor countries. In Somalia, for instance, it supports women to achieve a rise in female parliamentary candidates and a quota of representation of the national party. A particular focus of Progressio's work is not just the emancipation of women but enabling them to play their proper part in the social and political life of their country - at the family level, local level, national level. The approach of Progressio is always to share skills, or as someone said, not just giving people fish to eat but enabling them to fish more effectively so that they can feed themselves.

In the past two centuries, despite some wonderful advances we, the human community, have also offended or mistreated our common home in many ways and there is need now to take stock and choose a change of direction. There is a sense of urgency and time may indeed be short. You will remember that after the terrible atrocity of 9/11 in the United States when the American Government, led by their President, proclaimed a 'war against terror', I thought it might have been better to declare a war against want, against poverty, against injustice. To put it somewhat crudely, in a crisis don't always tackle it head on – hit the ball in a different direction. If the billions that have been spent on the war against terror had been spent on alleviating the poor, alleviating injustice and social deprivation then, in my view, it might have been a more fruitful war – a real step towards justice and peace. There will be no peace without true justice for all.

We in our own country have the privilege of some comfort, some wealth, some power and some peace. It seems to me that it is all the more important that each of us can work on that inner change and identify ourselves in different ways with those who are on the periphery, who have no privileges and often

have no way to tackle the injustices and the poverty that burden them. What I like about Pope Francis is that he tackles things immediately. Shortly after being elected Pope, he saw the report of these poor refugees drowning off the Island of Lampedusa. What does he do? He immediately gets on a 'plane and goes down to help and comfort and sustain those who were suffering so much. Or something very simple – this is just a story – he gets up one morning at half past five, goes outside his room in the modest hostel where he lives and he sees there a Swiss Guard standing outside. And he says to him, *What are you doing here?* The guard says, *I've been protecting you, Holy Father. And how long have you been standing there?* *I've been standing for four hours.* Oh, said Pope Francis, *you must be tired, I'll get you a chair.* No, says the Guard, *I can't sit down. Why not?*, says the pope. *Because the Captain says I've got to stand.* Pope Francis said, *I'm the Captain of the Captain. I'm getting you a chair. Sit down. I'll also get a sandwich which I'll give you to eat.* You see, something very simple. In a sense, an example for each of us, in small ways, to see first of all the other person and, above all and first of all, those in need. I think the story of Progressio can in many ways help us. It's the story of complete respect for every single human being; a commitment to working in solidarity with others rather than to narrow self-interest. And for so many it is a sign of hope. I hope that in small ways each of us can live to create some good for others.

I have been reading with great interest and admiration the booklet which you all have received of the Annual Review and how in so many ways Progressio has promoted human rights, fostered the dignity of women, benefitted thousands of people which it did in Africa with AIDS. You may think of Progressio as just a small agency in the light of perhaps bigger ones of the United Nations and others. But it is essential. No one agency can do

everything but it can do something and, as the saying goes, it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. I remember someone asking Mother Teresa of Calcutta, *How on earth, Mother Teresa, with these thousands and thousands of children dying on the streets in Calcutta, how can you help all of them?*

Mother Teresa replied, *One by one!* Not a bad little beacon for each one of us – one by one, little by little, but it is something.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,, they shall have their fill. I want to give thanks to God and to so many people for the work of Progressio, for the barriers that they have been able to work through and the challenges that they have undertaken. I hope you and I and so many others can respond to the challenges of our time. I hope you will support Progressio in its wonderful work in any way you can, so that it may flourish in the future. There is just one more point which I think should touch all of us. It is not entirely irrelevant and more personal. The correct attitude to God is the Augustinian one: Seeking God to find Him and finding Him to seek Him forever. Each of us should know that God seeks us first. We find Him in everyday life and I mean in our own personal pilgrimages. He comes first, He is ahead of us, waiting for us, to forgive us. At the end of Night Prayer in Orthodox monasteries, the Abbot sits in his abbatial chair and one by one the monks go up and he kisses each one on the top of the head, a sign of acceptance, forgiveness and love. Our world is bereft for not understanding that that is what God our Father does to you and me. He accepts us, He forgives us, He loves us. But He also has a purpose for us which each one of us can focus on, which in life is not about rules and regulations or even about commandments. The Christian life is about the Beatitudes, *How blessed are the poor in spirit; pure of heart; the gentle, the merciful, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.* Perhaps crucial for our

purpose this evening is how happy, how blest are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they shall have their fill.