

Homily for Fr C Shepherd C.Ss.R., RIP

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CHARLIE SHEPHERD 1914 – 2006

Preached by Very Rev. Fr James Casey C.Ss.R.

Rector of Bishop Eton Community

Let me begin with a much-abbreviated account of the genealogy of the good Shepherd – hereafter to be referred to as Charlie. Eli was the Father of Seth and Seth was the Father of Charles and Charles was the Father Charles Shepherd, who first came here to Bishop Eton as a boy of thirteen, seventy-nine years ago and is only now leaving. The year he first came was 1927.

The wonderful biblical names of Charlie's father and grandfather, Seth and Eli, are explained by the fact that the Shepherd family belonged to the primitive Methodist tradition. Charlie's father, a Bradford man, was working in Dublin when he met and fell in love with Margaret Cleary. Seth and Margaret married, but not before Seth had taken instructions and was received into the Church. Charlie was the fifth and last child of that union. The last surviving child of that same union is Charlie's big brother, Paddy, who is here with us today. The Shepherd family returned to Bradford from Dublin in 1915 when Charlie was not yet one year old.

Charlie started his epic voyage in the good ship C.Ss.R. in 1927 when he entered what we called the Juvenate and others called the minor seminary. He started his novitiate in Perth in July 1932 and made his first profession the following year, the day after which, to quote Charlie, he and the other newly professed were entrained for Hawkstone to complete their higher studies. Charlie was ordained priest at Easter 1939. He was then what he wanted to be - a priest, but not just any kind of priest; he was a Redemptorist priest and come hell or high water he would remain one.

Charlie was, of course, a man of his time; and in his time, time stood still, especially in the Church. Peter's bark had set its course and was steaming slowly but surely to the Promised Land; its crew was highly disciplined; orders handed down from the top were promptly obeyed, the rum ration was regular and in those days few jumped ship. There were, from time to time, minor squalls, but with all hands on deck and the captain calling, "Heave ho me hearties", there was never panic among the crew or the passengers.

In those days, Charlie, with more or less everyone else, believed in and was more than comfortable with discipline and good order. He not only believed it, he lived it. The very day he completed his higher studies, he was informed by the Provincial Superior that he was to return to the junior seminary in Bishop Eton to teach – wait for it - to teach Greek and geography. He had a month to prepare. Oh, the graces that God granted to young men in those days! Eight years later in the summer of 1947, he was appointed head of the same junior seminary until it was transferred to Birmingham three years later. Having just closed one junior seminary in England, Charlie was told in March 1951 to go to South Africa and open a new one in Pretoria. This he did. In some notes I found in his room, he writes; "This was very much against the grain," but adds that, "it might be worth while to remark that obedience can work wonders, and that if one tries to accept what seems to be very hard, it is amazing how happy things turn out to be." However, his South African sojourn lasted but three years. In 1954, aged forty, he was told to return to England to fill the role of novice master and in this post he lived and reigned for the next ten years.

It was as novice master that most of the Redemptorist priests and brothers here got to know Charlie Shepherd. Although only forty years of age, his hair was already white and his figure was filling out, so to speak. He was benign. His tone was sonorous and his gate sedate. He was never seen to hurry. He sighed a lot. He produced and delivered pious conferences by the ream, usually written in his neat spidery handwriting on scraps of paper

other people would have discarded. His emphasis was Alphonsian: he spoke of the wonder of the Incarnation – God becoming not only man, but baby; the reality of the passion of Christ; and then Christ’s determination to remain with us in the Blessed Sacrament. And then, of course, he spoke always of the necessity of prayer.

As Charlie scrutinised his novices, so his novices scrutinised Charlie. His virtues were obvious, but what were his vices? Well chocolate, for example, to which his hands were somehow magnetically drawn. There is even now, as I speak, a symbolic half-eaten bar of Cadbury’s fruit and nut secreted in a wardrobe in his room. And then, of course, there were cream cakes. From time to time, as a break from his duties as novice master, he would depart to conduct a nun’s retreat. You know, he had a nose for the convents that had the best pastry cooks. And on his return, his full figure was always noticeably fuller. But all this took place in the years B.C., that is, before cholesterol.

I have already said that Charlie was determined to be faithful to his vocation come hell or high water. Well hell and high water were fast approaching. He was, in 1964, appointed Rector of the House of Studies. He had to deal with forty-five students, and even some of the staff, who were suffering from Vatican II fever. There was clamour for change, open divergences among the staff and students about the curriculum, about religious observance and about most other things besides. Then there were the losses – the departure of many students and priests. All of which saddened and mystified Charlie. “It was the hardest assignment of my Redemptorist life,” he sighed. But was it?

Charlie’s next appointment in 1969 was as Provincial Superior. Commenting on this honour conferred on him, he wrote simply: “Out of the frying pan into the fire.” Now resting on his well-padded shoulders were the problems of the entire Province – too many and varied to be listed here. By then, I’m sure, Charlie’s sighing had reached furnace-like ferocity. I wonder how many times he read, with hope in his heart, these words from today’s gospel: “Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened and I will give you rest.”

Rest did eventually come when Charlie returned to Bishop Eton in 1978 as an ordinary member of the community, free to preach in church, especially at the Novena to Our Lady, to give the occasional mission or nun’s retreat. He was especially appreciative of community; of the prayers said in common, of the meals shared with people who were more or less his contemporaries in thought, word and deed. Despite his ascetical aspirations, he enjoyed feast days. When the good food was being served and the wine was being gurgled into glasses, you could almost hear his Methodist and Irish Catholic genes battling it out. Even as recently as last Christmas, he was heard to enquire at the end of a rather sumptuous meal: “You don’t have any Drambuie, do you?”

Charlie’s last illness lasted about ten weeks. He had suffered a stroke and as a result he was rendered immobile; in addition, he could eat no solid food, but worse of all he could not speak. But there was one word – only one word - he could say. And on our every visit to the hospital or to St. Joseph’s Home in Manchester where he died that word was plaintively repeated. That word was, “home”. The Church was his home. The worldwide Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, with all its history and traditions, was his home. The local community here in Bishop Eton was his home. He’s home now – here with us and in his heavenly home. He’ll never sigh again!

These last words are Charlie’s:

“I thank God for my vocation, for my life as a Redemptorist, for the great happiness I’ve had in and with my confreres; and for the work of all kinds that the God has let me do. Perhaps I should rather say the work that he has done through me, even if sometimes my share has not been what it could and should have been. What more can I say!”