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Thoughts from Cardinal Newman and Oscar Romero

Cardinal Newman reminds us...

God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission—I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for His purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his—if, indeed, I fail, He can raise another, as He could make the stones children of Abraham. Yet I have a part in this great work; I am a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.

Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us. He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends, He may throw me among strangers, He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide the future from me—still He knows what He is about

While Oscar Romero notes (these words could have been written for School Chaplains!)

“We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete; no statement says all that could he said: no prayer fully expresses our faith; no confession brings perfection; no pastoral visit brings wholeness; no programme accomplishes the church's mission; no set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about: we plant seeds that one day will grow; we water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise; we lay foundations that will need further development; we provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

2) How did the new term feel?

Becky Ayers-Harris writes:

For me, the beginning of every autumn term is an advent; all that waiting and preparing, the new classes, the unknown students, the unexpected adventure of the classroom.

This year has not been disappointing. The frenetic pace, the new challenges have been immense, and the moment I've come up for air I have been reminded that this is life everywhere for every school Chaplain. Being the calm voice, the pastor of the Gaps, the reflection in the pauses has never been more difficult if you too have a teaching load, and other, perhaps more regimented commitments in school.

This year I experienced what it must be like for parents dropping their child off to school for that first term away from home. As a boarding school this is always a bit difficult for many, however many times this has been done in the past. For those in day schools the difficult moments come differently but in a boarding environment the goodbye can be mixed for some children and most parents. This term I have felt it myself and my sympathy with parents doing the same has increased a thousandfold! Even though it was actually only for two weeks, and his school was just down the road, I felt the gut wrenching realisation that my child was now beginning to really grow up. No matter that he is taller than me and has a voice several octaves below mine. He is my son, and always will be, as I embarrassingly remind him regularly.

It made the start of term quite a roller coaster, but I am really glad to have experienced it. Like so much of our job, we deal with the unexpected emotions and reactions of people facing turning points in their lives. To feel it myself, to feel the strength of the instinctive reactions of parenthood yet again, has helped me understand more deeply and hopefully more helpfully.

It reminded me too, that as Chaplains though we may be at the heart of the school philosophy in action, we work on the edges and borders where others may feel their responsibility or role ends. And this means in turn by necessity our jobs are not a 9-5, nor easily defined, controlled or curtailed, (important though a job description is!) Asked by a parent to 'keep an eye' on their child because of loss or difficulty at home is easy to say yes to, but much more difficult to predict how this might be lived out successfully. So the advent waiting and watching continues...

3) Remembrance Tide

This WW1 poem by Everard Owen can be a good link for School, Remembrance and Faith. (The first verse refers to Harrow school)

There is a hill in England,
Green fields and a school I know,
Where the balls fly fast in summer,
And the whispering elm-trees grow,

A little hill, a dear hill,
And the playing fields below.

There is a hill in Flanders,
Heaped with a thousand slain,
Where the shells fly night and noontide
And the ghosts that died in vain,—
A little hill, a hard hill
To the souls that died in pain.

There is a hill in Jewry,
Three crosses pierce the sky,
On the midmost He is dying
To save all those who die,—
A little hill, a kind hill
To souls in jeopardy.

“The Hiding Place” by Corrie Ten Boom can also be useful ‘suggested reading’ for those who wonder how faith can survive the horrors of war.

4) Chaplaincy and the wider church

One Chaplain writes about their diocese “There are a lot of unjoined dots going on in Chaplaincy around here - re-inventions of the wheel!” How do we as chaplains help our dioceses join up these dots...

Here are some suggestions:

Ask whom, among the senior staff, looks after school chaplains

Remind them of the existence of SCA, Bloxham, and Woodward

Ask that chaplains are included in all the usual mailings and emailings

Ask for a chaplaincy link to be included in the diocesan website

Ask if you can make a report to deanery synod about your chaplaincy

Attend Diocesan events, so it is remembered that we exist!

See if someone can arrange local chaplaincy meetings

Further ideas very welcome...