

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Blessing Priory, Society of the Sacred Mission
Lesotho – 27 September 2008

Readings for the Feast of St Michael and All Angels:

Job 38:1-7 – God's answer to Job 'Where you there when I ...?'

Ps 148:1-6 – Verses of praise

Rev 12:7-12 – St Michael and his angels defeat the dragon

Mt 18:1-10 – Their angels behold the face of the Father

May I speak in the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – whose face the angels continually see.

Dear Brothers of the Society of the Sacred Mission, dear friends of the Society, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, it is such a joy to be here in Lesotho once again, and to join in today's celebrations.

What a joy it is to celebrate the building of the new Priory!

What a joy it is to celebrate the building of the Society, with such growth, such strength, among your community!

We have so much for which to be grateful to God!

We want to join our own words of praise to those of the Psalmist – alongside the praise of angels, of sun and moon and stars, of all creation.

The new building that we are blessing today very visibly declares our praise to God, and his faithfulness to us, in providing [? through so many generous donors] the resources for its construction.

Let me reflect today on a different sort of building – the building of community life, and the building of God's kingdom in his world.

Preparing to come here today, I was reminded of the founding vision of Father Herbert Hamilton Kelly, in 1893. He envisaged that members of the Society would 'share a common life of prayer and fellowship in a variety of educational, pastoral and community activities.'

All of us who are Christians are called to the common life of the body of Christ; and all of us are called to the common life of humanity, through the great commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves.

As we well know, this brings its own challenges!

It has been said that it is far easier to love our enemies, especially when they keep their distance, than it is to love our nearest and dearest!

Every family knows that it is those to whom we are closest with whom we have the greatest frustrations – if you don't believe me, ask my children!!

Yet God creates us to live in families and communities for a purpose – he uses our relationships with each other as part of his refining of us all in Christ-likeness.

It is as if we are rough, sharp-edged stones, all tumbled together in a big drum – rotating round and round, endlessly knocking up against each other, often quite painfully.

But, in that process, the rough edges are gradually knocked off, and worn down, and, over time, we become more and more smoothed and polished – polished so that we can more and more clearly reflect the God of love, and the face of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we should dare to believe that those who most rub us up the wrong way are among God's greatest gift to us: for it is often from these relationships, and the way God wants to work on us, through them, that we have the most to learn!

Can you, dare you, believe this?

Religious communities are not spared the frictions of other human relationships, just because they are founded on lives wholly dedicated to the Lord and his ways.

Let no-one think that community life is an easy option. My experience of communities indicates that the need to work, and keep on working, at relationships is as demanding as in any marriage!

There is a risk of idealised expectations – 'We are all being holy together and so we should be able to love one another without any problems between us.'

No, this is not the case. So, when rough patches occur, we should not be discouraged that we have failed; nor should we draw the conclusion that somebody else (and it is always somebody else, not ourselves!) is disobedient to God in some way, they are the cause of the problem, and we can give up on them; nor that our superiors are failing to listen to God's call on our lives so we can ignore them and so what we think is right. By no means!

I sometimes think that religious communities experience all that the rest of us experience, but in a particularly stark way – it is as though the struggles of which St Paul writes, of putting off the old life, and taking on the new, are brought into very sharp focus.

How you live shows the rest of us very clearly how God wants to deal with all of us – and we need you to show us how it is that we can cooperate with God, and find his answers to the burdensome life of being 'only human'.

Therefore Father Kelly was right to stress that your common life is one of prayer and fellowship.

Both prayer and fellowship can – and must – be worked at, to bring God's Holy Spirit as the oil in the machinery of your common life.

As St Paul put it in Romans 14:19, pursue, relentlessly and determinedly pursue, all that leads to peace and builds up your common life.

Pursuit of prayer and fellowship requires an act of will. It also requires the recognition that this is to some degree a spiritual battle.

You who have chosen the religious life live on the margins, where the boundaries between the material world and the spiritual world are particularly thin. Your lives declare the reality of God's active presence in this world – and the presence too of evil.

Yet we cannot make excuses for difficulties, or frictions in community life, by just blaming the influence of evil. For, as St Peter says, 'resist the devil and he will flee from you'.

Our celebration of the feast of St Michael and All Angels also reminds us that, in fact, we are on the winning side, if only we would realise it and act accordingly!

What I am trying to say is that you, and all of us, must engage with the spiritual dimension in the frustrations of life.

We must be prepared to say 'I will pray my way, we will pray our way, through this difficulty – for in *all* things God works for good, and so it is certain that he wants to work for good in and through these present circumstances, here and now.'

So whenever community life is hard work, know that you are all on the same side, God's side, and together take refuge in him, in building up the life of prayer and fellowship – pray especially for God's blessing of love and abundant life, on those whom you find most difficult, and let God share his love for them with you.

Please, my brothers, do this for us – strive for this, and show us how it is done. We live in a world with too much pain and friction between individuals, communities, peoples and nations. Share with us, with the communities to which you are sent, what it is to live in love together.

Out of this life of prayer and fellowship comes service – in educational, pastoral and community activities, said Fr Kelly.

We know the needs are great.

Here in Lesotho we know of the huge burdens of HIV and AIDS; of poverty; of harsh weather, especially drought; of unemployment; and more besides.

Life is hard – but the message that you bring to communities is that we serve a God who is love, and who desires our best.

As you dare to let God be at work 'in all things' in your own lives and in the life of the Society – this will shine forth from you, so you can help others to dare to let God be at work in the 'all things' that they face.

As you let God be Emmanuel – God present with you, in your own lives and in the life of the Society – this too will shine forth from you, so that others can dare to believe and discover that God is present with you.

This is the message at the heart of the incarnation.

We do not have a God who is distant and far off – like some foreign emperor, in a palace far away, who demands our loyalty, but cares nothing for us and for the struggles of our lives,

No, says St Paul to the Philippians, out of love Jesus emptied himself of the glories of heaven and became a human being, facing all the troubles and temptations of life that we face.

He is a God who comes alongside us in our pains, our hurts, our struggles.

The promise of his presence is to bring good news to the poor, and freedom from any and every sort of oppression – spiritual, material, physical, emotional, intellectual.

He tells his disciples that he ‘came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life’. He tells his disciples that they too are called to be servants.

Because of our past, the word ‘servant’ has difficult connotations for us – but we must not lose sight of the concept of service in leadership, at every level. This is why we call government officials ‘civil servants’ – it is their job to work for the good of all citizens, especially those in greatest need.

And the same is true of the service of the church – we do not go to other people to lord it over them and tell them how to live and how to worship; we go to walk along side them, as Jesus did with those he met, and to ask God to meet their needs, and make us channels of his deep compassion.

As Jesus tells us, we must all be humble – and never despise anyone else, or look down on them in any way. No matter who they are, what their circumstances, each individual is precious in God’s sight, and we should be in awe of the image of God they bear within them.

So, dear brothers of the Society of the Sacred Mission, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, gathered here today, let us learn what it is to be more like little children – not childish, but childlike.

There is quite a difference: between tantrums and selfishness and petulance on one hand – and trusting dependence and spontaneous love and joy on the other.

Let us learn to depend on God in prayer, in pursuing fellowship, and so build up the life of the Society, and the life of Christ-like service that you share with his world.

