



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND & WALES

## Taking Possession of his Titular Church

*Cardinal Vincent Nichols*

*SANT'ALFONSO DE'LIQUORI ALL'ESQUILINO, ROME, 2 OCTOBER 2014*

**I am so pleased to be here this evening in this beautiful Church of St Alfonso. It is surely a hidden gem in the riches of Rome. I thank you for the warmth of your welcome and I assure you of my delight at this moment.**

At the Consistory last February I was given this as my Titular Church, so that I may take my place among the clergy of the Diocese of Rome and thereby be in a position to play my part as a true helper to our Holy Father, Pope Francis. Since then I have been thinking about how providential is this nomination and about my connections with this Church and Shrine.

I have many Redemptorist friends. Indeed I first came to this Church one Easter, many years ago, with an English Redemptorist priest whom some of you will remember. He was Fr William Maram, better known, at least in his later years, as Bill. He was a great character and had a wonderful love for all things Redemptorist. Indeed, I think a great thrill in his life was the fact that he looked just a little bit like St Alphonsus himself. How he loved it when people pointed that out.

We came here to offer Mass in front of the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, just as priests and people have always wanted to do, since the icon arrived here in 1865. It is wonderful to know that when so many pilgrims come they will at least see my picture and, hopefully, remember to say a prayer for their Cardinal. He certainly needs them.

There is a second connection for me with this Church. Many will not know but one of my predecessors, Cardinal Francis Bourne, always chose to stay here, at San Alfonso, whenever he came to Rome. He preferred this house, among the Redemptorists, to all the alternative places of accommodation, including the Venerable English College, our traditional resting place. At present the entire community of the English College is on pilgrimage in the Holy Land and so are not with us this evening. But the Beda College is and I thank the staff and students of the Beda for the part they are playing in enriching our celebration of this Holy Mass.

Cardinal Bourne came here to San Alfonso because as a boy he was baptised and grew up in the Redemptorist parish in Clapham, in south London. He was fond of that place, often, I learned, taking a walk to Clapham from Westminster in an afternoon.

So, in my turn, I am pleased to be here today.

But the deepest link I feel with San Alfonso is, of course, with the icon and shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour. This is an icon and a devotion of my youngest days. In our home, as in many homes, there was a copy of this icon, a focus of prayer and reassurance. I now have a copy in my office in Archbishop's House and one newly installed in our Cathedral.

Any time I glance at this icon I feel better. I feel secure. I am touched deeply.

Sometimes I wonder why that it so.

There is, I think, a real sense of depth in this beautiful image of Mary and her child Jesus. The icon draws us into that depth.

To begin with, there is such a depth of compassion in the eyes of the Blessed Mother. She sees. She knows. She sees me. She knows me. She sees all the suffering of the world and gazes on it with such love and compassion. She sees my anxieties, my small sufferings, and helps me to see them in a true perspective. In the warmth of her compassion, I know I am not alone. I know I can bring my burden to her and, literally, leave it with her.

This is so because, in the icon, she is already carrying all the weight of the suffering of her Son. That suffering is already being shared between them. It seems as if it is their shared secret. They know what will come about. It causes distress in the child, but his mother calms and supports him for her gaze is always profoundly on the will of God. 'Let it be done to me according to your word.' There she finds her peace. There we learn to find ours too.

The icon, then, draws us into the presence of mystery of suffering in our lives and in our world, a suffering that is always seen by God, always embraced by God, just as we see in the death of his own beloved Son for our sake. Here we learn that no suffering is pointless because it is swept up into the divine Providence that shapes the life of each of us. There it becomes part of God's redemptive plan.

In these ways, it seems to me, this icon opens for us something of the depth of God, something of the greatness of God. Here we see the angels, the messengers of God himself, bringing forward the symbols of the Lord's passion and death. They bring them forward with dignity and majesty. This is not random evil, arbitrary pain, pointless suffering. No, they are being carried towards Jesus for his willing acceptance and his highest purpose. In their light we begin to glimpse that he is no ordinary child who will come to a sad end, but he is fully of God, uniquely one with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the divine nature. Yet is he also fully one of us. He is truly God and truly man and, through the instruments of his Passion, will transform our fallen mortal nature into an image of his own divine nature.

This icon, then, helps us to find our place in God's great mystery of salvation. It draws us to see the almost incredible: that through our suffering and pain, whatever form it may take, we can become part of this great work of Jesus. We can unite our sufferings with his and offer them to the Father. They can become a moment, even a long moment, of deep achievement for through our suffering we can be shaped more deeply for God's purpose, purified for his desire. And that desire, that purpose is that we will be drawn fully into his presence and totally filled with his light and joy. As we are emptied of self, we are ready to be filled with God.

Somehow this is what the depth of this icon whispers to me.

So I see this blessed icon, here most especially and wherever it is to be seen, as an antidote to the shallowness of our lives and of so many aspects of our times.

So often we flee pain and go to great lengths to obliterate it from our lives. Here we learn a new and startling way, from this Blessed Mother and her Divine Son.

So often we hide from God, turning away, turning towards a passing pleasure in order to mask our need and redirect our emptiness away from the one source which can truly meet and fill it.

So often we fail to invite this child, Jesus, to walk with us, preferring to struggle on alone, sometimes rejoicing in great love and friendship and sometimes feeling desolate and alone. Yet he wants to walk with us on every path, on the pathway of our joy and love, on the pathways of our desolation and loneliness. He looks out towards us with a longing in his eyes, a longing for us to be with him and a longing that he can be with us.

Our Lady of Unfailing Help is there, offering him to us, that we may discover afresh each day the true depth of our living, and of our loving, and of our servings, and of our suffering. Under her guidance, with her unfailing help, we can find the way again. With her we can bring so many others to walk this same path and receive this same consolation and love.

This is the great mission I receive from this icon, here at this shrine. I pray that you do too.

Thank you again for your welcome. Thank you to my friends and colleagues who have travelled to be with me. Thank you to Fr Luciano and the community here and to Mgr Gillespie for the impeccable preparations he put in place and for his guidance this evening. Thank you for all the prayers that will be said for me here.

I offer you all my greetings and loving esteem, as your titular 'parish priest'. All I can do is promise to keep an eye on you from a distance, always having a place for you in my heart. All I ask if you is your prayers and your remembrance here before Our Lady of Perpetual Succour.

*Amen.*

**Cardinal Vincent Nichols**

Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster

*President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales*