

Homily for the Ordination of Christopher Brolly SJ  
Saint Mary's Cathedral, Newcastle-upon-Tyne  
13<sup>th</sup> June 2026

*He was found to be remarkably endowed with the grace of discretion, which is the mother of the virtues. So they ordained him and sent him forth to preach; and, as time went on, his other virtues became apparent, as well as more of that well-balanced discretion which had marked him from the first.* This is Bede in the *Ecclesiastical History of England* writing about Aidan of Lindisfarne. The *grace of discretion* is a quality which showed itself in Saint Aidan in his way of being a shepherd after the model of the good shepherd Jesus Christ. This special, pastoral *discretion* is the gift of knowing how to listen to and talk to people in a way that helps them open their heart to the Word of God, to Christ and his sacraments and teaching and to all the gifts and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God is addressing everyone. We all need help to understand him. And we need strength to respond to him. Discreetly, discerningly, carefully the good shepherd guides us towards understanding and towards living the kind of life to which we are called. At the heart of that life is prayer and worship of the living God and the service of his people and of the world. In this we all have our own responsibilities and particular purpose. We often need of the shepherd for guidance and leadership. The pastoral discretion is in an appreciation of how different people are and how diverse their situations.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* honours the discreet charity, the *discreta caritas* by which tireless proclaiming of the good news of the divine commandment of love is tempered by prudence, discernment, and an attention to specific circumstances. The discretion of Saint Aidan is shared by a friend of that saint, who is well known to us. Christopher is devoted to all the ancient saints of Northumberland who surely surround us here in St Mary's Cathedral today. This friend of Aidan, Cuthbert and Bede is also a son of Ignatius. The priestly service of Christopher will be a following of Jesus who is the Lord of the whole of history and the Lord also of the life of each of us, with all its particularity. The new priest discovers his own *discreta caritas* inside the Society of Jesus. He has the zeal, the courage, the apostolic imagination and the willingness to go wherever he is needed.

Bishop Stephen is giving the sacrament of holy orders to Christopher today to strengthen him for a new stage in the adventure of discipleship and of religious life and to carry him forward on a pilgrimage on which he embarked long ago. The shepherd, humble, self-sacrificial and discreet, is at the service of others. The Word, the sacraments, the doctrine and the Spirit and the splendour and beauty of all these gifts, do not belong to him. He is a conduit, a messenger and a channel. The ambassador for Christ conveys the message and does so accurately and truthfully. He is passionately devoted to it but also appropriately and pastorally detached. The good news is shared in its integrity, unchanged and complete by one to whom it is also addressed and who is not its proprietor. The shepherd chooses the moment to share the gift. Or if the right moment arrives unexpectedly, there is a discernment about the way in which to work best. There is a shrewd and compassionate assessment of who is being addressed, the person, the community. The shepherd is a Christ-bearer, a Christopher. He hands on Jesus with joy and enthusiasm, with care and precision, with devotion. He offers no trivial gift. What the messenger brings is the best of all news, the one thing necessary, the highest good.

Saint Bede the Venerable considered that Aidan's discreet and intelligent way of sharing the faith was the key strength which somehow contained all his other qualities and to which gradually all the virtues were added. Aidan did not start from nothing. There were his natural gifts. There had been a long and rigorous training. There was a solid experience of evangelism practised with discretion and wisdom. There had been achievement and fruitfulness. It is the same for Christopher. We celebrate today the formation which has taken place in his family. In our prayers at the ordination, there are heartfelt thanks for his mother and father, for all the family and for a fine upbringing. We also remember appreciatively friends and teachers, schools, colleges, universities and the world of work which have already shaped, and which continue to form the new priest.

Saint Bede would have noted with approval the gradual accumulation of competences and strengths. He would also find support at this ordination for his intuition that there is a key grace or virtue to which all the others are added and, in which, somehow, from the beginning all the other qualities are contained, waiting to be realised. The call is decisive. The vocation. Christ's intervention in a life. *Follow me. Do not be afraid. Come and see. I am the way.* And then the long testing of call and the response by the Church, by the Society of Jesus, by Ignatian spirituality, by much learning, by many tests, experiments and probations, by experience, by success, by renunciation, by gratitude, by set-back, by improvement, by some hard knocks, by sacrifice, by grace, by questioning, by faith, by trust in providence, by steady, persevering, faithful service, by the love of God. The probing of the intuition that there has been a call to priesthood by all these testing experiences does not culminate in the sacrament of orders. This is a new beginning, not a conclusion. The sacrament, which is a pure gift of God, not deserved or earned, allows all those probations and tests, and the challenges that lie ahead, to find their right place in the discipleship of the whole Church and in the life and struggles of this particular new Jesuit priest.

There is a transformation today, which gathers up all the earlier progress, and goes to the heart of the mission of Christ in the world. There is a revelation of who the new priest is in the core of his being. Christopher has not endured a long training to arrive at this moment. Today he finds himself. From today, his life force, his *élan vital*, will come from Jesus the High priest whose anointed follower he is. This alters everything that he does and everything that happens to him. There is a being-with Christ which reveals all the reality and all the truth of which we need knowledge in order to live as God wants us to do. Ordination is such a placing with the Lord.

This wonderful proximity to God is something to be proclaimed from the housetops *and* to be shared with all the discreet subtlety that a particular mission may demand. It is also, since it goes to the depths, to the most profound reality, something for which there is as yet no complete description. Words fail us. We are before the mystery. We are silent, kneeling, bowing down, worshipping the holy, lost in admiration, in awe of One, it is almighty God, who is infinitely greater than us and yet in this moment wonderfully close. A sacrament makes us prize an intense moment of nearness to Jesus. A sacrament encourages us in our faithful service in the world, in solidarity with the many who are in great need. A sacrament prompts us to long for heaven, where all that we do not now understand will be made clear, and where unity, peace and holiness will have their perfect fulfilment.

In the *Life of Saint Cuthbert* by Saint Bede, we read of a remark made to the young Cuthbert by one of his school friends: *the Lord has appointed you to be a teacher of virtue even to those who are older than yourself.* At an ordination, we pray joyfully and with trust, for the

person being ordained. Ahead of him, ahead of us is a life of loving service of the God who calls, who gives the grace and strength necessary and who awaits us at the end of the journey, as well as accompanying us on it. The priest has many tasks but one is to be *a teacher*. Christopher has accepted this part of the work with delight. In the first place it will be by allowing himself to be like Christ. Jesus the Good Shepherd to whose voice *they will listen*. ‘They’ are those many others who are waiting so desperately. The ambassador for Christ carries to those who long to receive it the words and example of the One who sends. *They will listen to his voice*.

Those who do *not* listen Jesus often wins over. He sometimes does so through the good offices of the ambassador, the teacher, the shepherd. The teacher wins the hearts and minds of the students by his conduct as well as by his words. Schools are always trying to include and engage with students who are tempted to exclude themselves or not to engage. The educator engages as well as helping engagement. Discreet charity exhorts the large assembly, persuasively and efficiently, and converses quietly with the one who feels blocked. Christopher has experience of this kind of priestly, educative work. It is the drawing into the world of learning and knowledge of the one who hesitates to learn. This is the good shepherd folding the lost sheep, allowing the voice of God to be listened to, driving away the wolf.

*The Lord has appointed you to be a teacher... even to those who are older than yourself.* We would be surprised if a new priest on his ordination day offered a few pointers to a senior Bishop celebrating sixty years of priesthood, or to others of his elders. However, Saint Bede the Venerable, and Saint Cuthbert’s fellow student, and, no doubt, Cuthbert himself, and Saint Aidan, and Saint Ignatius, an honorary Northumbrian today, all tell us something important about speaking up boldly for Christ, *parrhesia* and about apostolic courage. The readiness to instruct everyone is not precocity, certainly not impertinence and not even some kind of persuasive charm. The young priest has a service to give and sometimes, all humility preserved, an authority to exercise. These tasks are entrusted to him not because of his virtues, his experience or his long training. They arise from the surpassing value of the treasure that is to be shared. The Gospel, the sacraments, the guidance in holiness discreetly offered. These are gifts from God. We all play a part in sharing them. The priest helps us.

The ministry is exercised boldly and subtly. The sacraments and the Word are offered with zeal, intelligence and passion and also prayerfully, conscious of weakness and by handing everything over to God. We give thanks on this great day that Christopher continues to seek understanding for himself and for us the flock; that he imitates his own teacher Jesus Christ; and that this day and every day he is conforming his life to the mystery of the Cross. Upon that Cross hangs the One who died for us and rises to bring us to glory. From his side, from his Sacred Heart, flows the sacramental, contemplative and missionary life of the Church. To this we are drawn, not in mere curiosity or as casual observers but as participants, as eager learners, as disciples. We pray for Christopher. We give thanks.