



**Homily by Rev. James Hanvey SJ**

**St Jeanne de Lestonnac - ‘Behold the Handmaid of the Lord.’**

Rev. James Hanvey, S.J., Bishop Bernard Longley

Today we gather here in this College founded by the Sisters of the Order of the Company of Mary our Lady to celebrate the life not only of a very remarkable and holy woman, St Jeanne de Lestonnac, but the continued witness of the Order of women which she founded.

It is no coincidence that this year is also the centenary year for the Society of Jesus in which we commemorate the three of the founders of the Society, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier and Peter Favre. I am sure that St Jeanne, who was so influenced by the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and the educational tradition of the Society, would be more than happy to share her celebrations with them and they with her.

Yet, I am afraid I have to be brutally honest. I do not wish to spoil the occasion but we can no longer go on living this deception. Ah the world knows, because all the world seems to either have read the Da Vinci Code or at least have heard of it, that this is a great sham. The Church over two thousand years has been engaged in the most fraudulent hoax ever played upon humanity. Christ did not die and was not resurrected but lived very happily with Mary Magdalene and they had beautiful children who subsequently became the kings and queens of France. There you are, the truth is out! Not only has the Church tricked us all, but has denied honour to France - now surely, that could only be the work of some wicked English devil. Well, St Jeanne was herself French, and of noble blood, so perhaps there may be things about her that the Company of Mary Our Lady would rather keep from us. Well, I just thought I had to tell you these things right at the very beginning.

Of course, there is something rather puzzling about this ‘truth’. Not only is it extraordinary that it has broken just now, in this year, and Dan Brown is the only person in two thousand years to bring it to us - and, of course, such virtue has its own lucrative reward - but somehow we still stubbornly refuse to believe it. It makes perfect sense to the rest of the world, in fact, isn’t this the news they’ve been waiting to hear. What a relief— Jesus is normal: no more struggling to believe in the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, no more having to believe in the teachings of the Church about the dignity of every woman and man, because they are made in the image and likeness of God. Now all we’ll have to worry about is the dignity of people enshrined in some act of parliament or charter of human rights — so long as it is convenient to the most dominant

power. And we won't really have to attend too closely to loving our neighbour, unless, of course, they're nice neighbours and agree with us.

But perhaps we might just keep the buildings and the music and maybe the odd priest as a sort of relic of the great deception with a little light care-taking work — after they've been suitably re-educated by reading all of Dan Brown's books and learning them by heart! But, perhaps some Human Rights Lawyer might take up the case of that poor priest on the grounds that reading all of Dan Brown's work constitutes cruel and inhuman punishment. So, there you have it!

But there's something quietly puzzling - disturbing almost — now that we have this 'truth'. What is it that disturbs us about Christ so that we have to set up our resistances, preferring to believe that we have been duped. We are in an age which is itself easily duped because it refuses faith. What disturbs it most is that, for all its fault and struggles, the Church is somehow capable of producing women and men whose lives are just so extraordinary, so filled with love and self-sacrifice, so creative in their care and attention to the needs of other people that, though we don't like to say so, we glimpse in them something we can only describe as holiness - something which only makes sense when we see it as God's love active in their lives, reaching out in their witness and their deeds to hold us and bring us to his eternally joyous life.

Maybe today behind all our celebrations there is not only joy and gratitude but a bit of uneasiness, maybe even something puzzling, something to ponder? You see, Jeanne de Lestonnac had it all. She had a privileged, cultured life.

She was part of that glittering circle and could number Montaigne as family. She was part of the social and religious discussions and movements that swept through Europe in the 16 and 17 century - the flowering of humanism, the Reformation, the early beginnings of the Enlightenment in which many of the values and presuppositions of our own world began to take root. And she was married, happily, and she was a mother. Yet, there was something else, deep in her own inner and sacred core she had been called — she had heard not the voice of a fictitious Christ, not the clever spiritual deception of a decadent Church, but the living voice of Christ. Even before she founded the Order, she was already on the move in the ordinary practice of the virtue of love - love of the poor, love of those who did not have the privileges she had. I don't suppose she thought of herself as exceptional, she was just being an 'ordinary Christian wife and mother' - an 'ordinary Christian'. But you see there is no such thing as an ordinary Christian; for all its familiarity, the Christian life is extraordinary, it doesn't fit into any of the normal explanations for living. Jeanne, had never read Dan Brown, but she knew she was not deceived. She knew that this truth on which she had staked her life is not a series of propositions that one can prove or disprove by reason or experimentation. She knew that Christ was no clever myth to control and oppress us. For her, Christ was everything; he was the truth - not as an argument, a beautiful story or ideal, but a living person. Christ is not the product of our ability to argue or discover the truth, he is the Truth. And he is more - he is the unquenchable passionate love of God for us and for our world — for all everything that has life. In the presence of this truth and this love there can be only one response — the total gift of one's self.

Jeanne de Lestonnac knew this from another woman, Mary, the mother of God, a total 'yes' with no qualifying clauses, no secret deals or reservations, just 'yes'. And she knew, too, that this Christ is no hidden truth, no esoteric secret known only to a few members of inner circle, but one that stands always in the public square longing to be seen. Christ wears no disguise; he does not seek to trick us but to call us to life — he has broken the darkest of all codes for us, the meaning and value of all existence. He has loved us.

That is what Jeanne did and that is what she founded her Order to do; that is what we celebrate today. She chose to do this in a highly original way - educating girls. In the midst of all our performance indicators, measurements and curriculum designs we can miss the point which she saw so clearly. That the human person is a unique and precious gift, each one carries the whole mystery of life and history, each one has purpose and destiny. Each one is loved and called and cherished by Christ and each one has something of infinite value to contribute to the lives of all humanity, just by being a good person, a holy person. With great creativity she fashioned an understanding of what it meant to be a deeply and truly educated woman, and developed the means to achieve that end. She also created a unique religious order dedicated to that purpose which required change and innovation in the whole concept of women religious — not enclosed but open and apostolic educators. Now, 400 years later, we can see how inspiring and enduring that vision was. So many lives touched by its grace through all the turbulent history of Europe and the many countries throughout the world in which the Company has tirelessly and generously given itself to the liberating service of education

Jeanne's uncle Michel de Montaigne in one of his essays on Education, which she would have undoubtedly known and studied, wrote, "The conduct of our lives is the true mirror of our doctrine." When we look at the witness of so many lives we cannot doubt the depth, the beauty and the truth of the doctrine — Jesus Christ, the source of life.

Even the Da Vinci Code will cease to sell and our world will move on to some new event, fashion or fad. It will pass because it is only fiction and not a good one at that. But the Holy Spirit does not cease to write in the lives of women and men the truth of the Gospel - the greatest of all stories. In every moment, in every age and in every corner of the world, the Spirit writes the new covenant of grace. What is it that inspires St Jeanne and all her daughters to allow that Spirit to write in and with their lives? What is it that allows these women to go on giving their lives to the service of other women and to the whole of our culture? Perhaps we glimpse the answer in a document of the Order, "The Company of Mary, an educational project."

"This end requires of us a personal experience of salvation which is received as a gratuitous gift from God; it moves us to conversion, it leads us to live the Gospel radically and to proclaim with our words and our life that it is in Jesus Christ that the love of the Father is revealed to us and the Holy Spirit is given to us.."

It is no great ideological vision or policy but that personal experience — that love of Christ that makes us attentive to the deepest, often unspoken need, in so many young lives - the need for meaning, understanding, purpose, love. The need for a human face that they can trust with the precious gift of their young lives with all its hopes and dreams and promise.

The same document says of the response that St Jeanne made,

“One day, carved in history four centuries ago, Mary sought a pair of hands that, in her name, would answer the call to fill the great lack of faith, the loss of the sense of meaning of life and the emptiness of culture.... She found the hands of a woman.”

And so there you have the secret - the hands of a woman: the hands of Mary, the Mother of God, the hands of Mary Magelene, the apostle to the apostles, the hands of Mary, the hands of Clare and Teresa and Catherine, and St Jeanne and all the women of the Company of Mary - so many, many witnesses.

Let us pray that they will take our hands and lead us to the source of all truth: Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Giver of the Spirit of Life.

James Hanvey SJ

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