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A Message from Bishop Tom Burns Bishop Emeritus in Ordinary to the Forces and Bishop elect of Menevia

I feel honoured yet humbled by the Holy Father's wish that I should become the next Bishop of Menevia. It is with mixed feelings that I leave the Forces environment, which has been my life for nearly 25 years, first of all as a Naval Chaplain, then as Principal Chaplain and Vicar General, and for the last 6 years as military Bishop. The average age of serving personnel in the Forces is in the mid-twenties; generally they retire at 55 years of age or earlier; and even the most senior officers do not go on longer than 60. It is only right, therefore, to make way for a younger man to serve them as their Bishop, and the Holy Father has graciously acknowledged this situation, which is the same in many other countries.

I have enjoyed enormously my time with Forces personnel and their families. Now I am looking forward to joining my new family in Wales, and getting to know the priests and people of my new Diocese.

The memories that I will cherish most are my attempts to make Church in often very unusual and challenging circumstances, in different parts of the world. It is not everyone who will have the opportunity to say Mass in the Exocet missile room of a frigate during the First Iraq War (1990), or on top of a torpedo in a submarine. I have been privileged to be allowed into the lives of young people in all three Services, far from home, often burdened with anxieties, yet seeking someone whom they can use as a sounding-board or whose shoulder they can lean on for confidential advice or guidance. Even a group of Muslim officers under training accepted classes on board ship from me as a Naval Chaplain. At the end of the 6-week course, they presented me simply with a Bounty chocolate bar. Grinning, they pointed out the message on the side of the wrapper: a taste of paradise. As they said, with more ecumenical implications than they were aware of: We think that suits you, sir!

I have similar memories of the other two Services too. The RAF were kind enough to drop me from a helicopter onto the stern of a Navy patrol boat off Cyprus, as both craft moved through the air and sea at speed - a fearsome and exhilarating experience! An Army Challenger tank lurching across broken terrain in Germany seemed intent on breaking every



Bishop Tom Burns with the Holy Father

bone in my body, even though I was firmly strapped into the turret. In the tank simulator where young 18 year old soldiers were being trained, I asked the Staff Sergeant who was quicker at identifying targets: him or the recruits. Without hesitation he replied: "Officially I am, sir. Unofficially, they are!"

I approach my new job with no preconceptions. After all, if you want to make God laugh, just tell him your plans! At this stage, I have no projects or objectives, and it is possible that I never will. It will depend on the local situation, which it will be important for me to grasp as quickly as possible. My first priority, therefore, will be to meet as many of the priests and people of the Diocese as possible. I want to hear what they have to say about their parishes and their other responsibilities in and around the Diocese. I hope that there will be a meeting of minds and hearts as they tell me about the life of the Church in Menevia, its needs, their hopes, their joys, and their fears. This will be an open dialogue, carried out with frankness and in a spirit of collaboration, with mutual generosity and sharing, for the benefit of everyone.

At present, I do not know the Diocese very well. My niece and her husband have just moved to Haverfordwest, and when the Marists were responsible for the parishes in Carmarthen and Rhayader I had the opportunity to visit my colleagues. Tragically, I had to attend the funeral of one of my former students who went on to study at Aberystwyth University but was drowned in an

unfortunate accident offshore. In these visits I was struck by the vastness and the beauty of the Welsh countryside and coastline. Only recently, in August, as Bishop Promoter for the Apostleship of the Sea (AOS), I concelebrated the Requiem Mass in St Joseph's Cathedral for Father John Dermody, a much loved Parish Priest and AOS Chaplain at Pembroke Dock.

The Apostleship of the Sea provides Chaplains and drop-in centres in ports around the British coastline. Some of these centres are better known as 'Anchor House' or 'Stella Maris'. Nowadays ships turn round and are back at sea inside 9 hours, so a seafarers' centre in the heart of the docks allows ships' crews to have easy access to opportunities for rest and relaxation, to make phone-calls home, or to use Internet facilities. There are many such seaports in the Diocese of Menevia: e.g. Swansea, Fishguard, Port Talbot, Milford Haven and Pembroke Dock. Several Menevia priests and a huge number of parishes support the work of the Apostleship of the Sea. Indeed, one priest in the past week or so has served as Chaplain on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean. I myself have just returned from a cruise to Alaska. The presence of a Chaplain on board is not only welcomed by the passengers (250 out of 1200 came to Mass), but especially by the crew, many of whom are Catholics from the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, India, Goa, and other Catholic countries. The Diocese of Menevia has a wide variety of Church commitments and apostolates, and I look forward to the challenge of acquainting myself with much more of the area in the near future.

Do I speak Welsh? I wish I did! I wish I could speak as fluently as Bishop Daniel Mullins (retired Bishop of Menevia). There is so much to learn about the Diocese, its people and its own particular culture. Being able to speak, or at least to understand Welsh would be an added advantage in my learning process. Perhaps Bishop Mullins will give me a few tips!

I thank God for the many gifts he has conferred upon me. He is giving me the privilege of serving the people and priests of the Diocese of Menevia. Please keep me in your prayers, as I promise to remember you in mine.

+ Tom Burns, SM
Bishop elect of Menevia

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