



Homily - Michelle Jones - Mass of Commitment

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This year, in December, many people will be celebrating the 140th anniversary of the birth of an English Anglican lay woman called Evelyn Underhill. She was a married woman, a writer, a pacifist and a spiritual director and retreat giver.

In one of her retreat talks, she began this way: *“If God is real, it is the most important fact of our life. Attention to God is the primary religious act. He is here, now, in this room, calling you, demanding your complete surrender in order that you may become complete. Nothing matters but that demand and your soul’s response”.*

Evelyn Underhill wasn’t speaking to priests or nuns. She was speaking to people who were fully involved in the daily realities of life: work, family, financial pressures, multiple commitments. And it was precisely to these people, people like many of us, that she wanted to stress, as she put it, that *“if God is real it is the most important fact of our life”.*

For Christians, of course, and Evelyn Underhill was a Christian, it is Jesus Christ who makes God known to us. In that sense, the reality of Jesus, and His presence in our lives, is indeed the most important fact of our life.

Another great Christian writer, still alive but now retired, expressed the same thought in these words:

“Only in a personal relationship with Christ, only in an encounter with the Risen One do we really become Christians. And in this way, our reason opens up, the whole of Christ’s wisdom opens up and all the richness of the truth... we touch Christ’s heart and feel Him touch ours.”

With these beautiful words, Pope Benedict XVI really captured the essence of the Christian faith. Before anything else – before particular doctrines or teachings, before detailed rules and regulations, before programs, policies or structures, Christianity, and our rich Catholic living of Christianity, is about Jesus who calls to us, inviting us to make our home in and with Him. *“I do not call you servants,”* he says, *“I call you friends... I want my joy to be in you so that your joy can be full”.*



We Catholics have not always been very good in approaching our faith in this way. We have often fallen into the trap of placing structures before spirit, of insisting on conformism rather than conviction, of exalting the external over the internal. It is not that structures are unimportant or that outward behaviour doesn't matter. Without them, our faith would run the risk of being nothing more than superficial sentiment. But, at the same time, if our faith is little more than outward show, it will not be life-giving for us and we therefore will not be life-giving for others.

By the choice which Michelle has made for her life journey, and by the definitive commitment to that journey which today's celebration crystallises, Michelle becomes for all of us a kind of living sacrament, a powerful and compelling sign, of what lies not only at the heart of her own life, but of what the Lord is inviting all of us, each in our own way and in the concrete circumstances of our own lives, to enthrone at the heart of our lives as well. If Jesus really is, as our faith says He is and as He Himself says He is, the Way, the Truth and the Life, then our own lives will not really make much sense, and will never be complete, unless we allow Him to be our Way, and our Truth, and our Life. That the Lord is exactly this for Michelle is what today's celebration affirms.

But, more than this, today's celebration invites us to see that the Lord has given the gift of her unique vocation to Michelle, and given it to her in our time and in our place, because He wants, through her, to offer the very same gift to us: the gift of knowing Jesus as He really is and placing Him where he belongs - at the heart of our lives. By her choice today, Michelle does exactly what Jesus did – she makes her life a gift so that, through her, others may receive the gift of life from the Lord.

Some of us may find the language of today's ceremony somewhat old-fashioned, even quaint, and some may perhaps find the concepts expressed by the language puzzling and even confronting. Today, Michelle will commit herself to a way of life which combines ideas of virginity and spousal love. The common link between them is fidelity. It is a fidelity to the one who calls to her and asks for this particular and surprising gift from her. In its most simple terms, this gift is all about a radical commitment to the fundamental values of the Gospel. At a time when wealth, luxury and excessive consumption are very much sought after, the idea of living according to these Gospel values seems to many unrealistic, although perhaps strangely attractive in a romantic sort of way. In particular, at a time when the traditional values around sexual morality are regarded as hopelessly out of date and even, to some, offensive and discriminatory, the idea of living a life of celibate chastity seems incomprehensible to many. The thought of basing one's whole life on an active and uncompromising search for God's will and striving to respond to it with courage seems to some to be a denial of human autonomy and unworthy of human dignity. But it is precisely because the values of Christian faith are no longer regarded with respect that we need the witness of those who choose to live by them.

Of course, the why of Michelle's choice is as important as the choice itself. At the heart of that "why" stands Jesus. As many of you know, I come from the Salesian tradition, one of the many expressions of the consecrated life in the Church. In the Salesian tradition, the choice of Gospel values is explained in these words:

In a world tempted by atheism and the idolatry of pleasure, possessions and power, our way of life bears witness, especially to the young, that God exists, that His love can fill a life completely, and that the need to love, the urge to



possess and the freedom to control one's whole existence, find their fullest meaning in Christ the Saviour.

It is this conviction that life finally begins to make sense only when we have really opened our hearts to Christ and His offer of friendship that is at the heart of what Michelle is doing here this afternoon. Some may be surprised that God would ask this of Michelle. Some may be puzzled that Michelle has decided to respond so completely and in such a radical way. But no-one should be in any doubt that what Michelle is doing today is an act of love, an act of commitment, an act of courage and an act of faith. In all of this, Michelle is inviting us to search our own hearts to see what God might be asking of us – and to pray that we will find the same love, commitment, courage and faith to say “yes” to all that God is asking of us, whatever that might be and whatever that might mean for us.