**SAINT ANNE’S CATHEDRAL BELFAST**

**Mothers’ Union – General Meeting 2014**

Friday 20 June 2014

**“Mercy and truth are met together..” (Psalm 85.10)**

The twentieth century Russian poet Anna Akhmatova brings together in both her life and poetry the dark and frightening side of the earthly life that can accompany motherhood. Born one hundred and twenty five years ago this year in Odessa, she experienced all that Stalinism could bring to those who did not fit into its totalitarian scheme of things. Akhmatova’s husband Nicolai Gumilev was one of the early victims of post-revolutionary Russia, and was executed in 1921. Her son Lev was arrested in one of Stalin’s many purges before the Second World War, and for years Anna had no idea whether he was alive or dead, as she searched for him. Until after Stalin’s death, she herself was expelled from Russian society as a writer who was regarded as a danger to the communist state and so she was, for more than twenty years, in effect a non-person in Stalin’s Russia, a desperately dangerous place in which to find oneself.

In her prologue to what many would see as her great masterpiece, the poem “Requiem”, Anna Akhmatova tells of life under constant surveillance and relentless harassment in Leningrad in the early years of World War II. As she stood in a prison queue waiting for food:

*One day, somehow, someone recognised me. Then a woman standing behind me, her lips blue with cold, who, of course, had never in her life heard my name, came out of the numbness that affected us all and whispered into my ear (everyone whispered there) – ‘Can you describe this?' And I answered - 'I can.' It was then that something resembling a smile slipped across what had once been her face.*

In many ways, Akhmatova devoted her best and most lyrical poetry to exposing bitter truth, but always with generosity, with mercy: mercy and truth were indeed met together. But mercy and truth are all too rarely allowed to meet, even less to grow together. And I believe sincerely that the theme for the Mothers’ Union in this year – “Sowing the future together” – invites you to bring together, *as you can*, those motifs of mercy and truth, and to sow a harvest of mercy and truth together for God’s future.

*The bringing together of the delivery of mercy with the pursuit of truth – that is your vocation..* Without any intent at flattery, I know well that the Mothers’ Union has, in many many places and over many years, done precisely that. It has been on the side of pursuing truth and justice for those who have been cruelly and cold-heartedly battered by systemic discrimination and calculated evil. Equally, you have sustained a sense of God’s mercy and sacrificial concern for families, and particularly for children. And that can indeed be a perilous, lonely and dangerous place. Akhmatova’s poem “Requiem” underscores the pain that can be endured on that journey, as she tries to discover her son’s fate.

For seventeen months I have been screaming,

Calling you home.

I've thrown myself at the feet of executioners

For you, my son and my terror.

Everything has become muddled forever –

I can no longer distinguish

Who is an animal, who a person, and how long

The wait can be for an execution.

It is scarcely surprising that this was one poem that was not rehabilitated in Russia, even after Akhmatova had been restored to favour following Stalin’s death and subsequent denunciation by the Communist Party of the USSR. To “speak truth to power” - to use a familiar phrase that has its origins with American Quakers - is always a dangerous business. To seek for truth with mercy is more dangerous still.

You have come to Belfast for this General Meeting and we are truly honoured and delighted to welcome you here. And, as you may already have discovered, Belfast is a very attractive city. You have come, however, to a place that has known the terrible tensions and fears of civil violence over many years, and dangerous tensions and fears are still apparent, a full decade and a half after the Good Friday agreement. We have still to find ways of working fully through a bitter legacy of past violence and the near disintegration of society. Part of that task will ultimately be to enable mercy and truth to meet together. The problem is that, as we survey the past, it is far too easy for us to want *mercy* to be manifest for “our side”, but for *truth* to surface about “the others”. And what is true for us in this Province is true in every place and every situation.

Sowing the future can only be done when - in biblical phrases - we love mercy, even as seek also to be led into all truth. *Mercy* is for the other, just as *truth* is to be about us. The work that the Mothers’ Union does on these islands in prisons and with the families of those in prison, in giving hope where many have lost hope for themselves and for their families is emblematic of the task of going beyond a precise justice to a place beyond, where God’s mercy prevails. To give a further example from the wider Church mercy and truth meet in Malawi where Mothers' Union members run an agricultural project which is helping to fund the education of several dozen children while at the same time other members are raising public awareness on gender equality and gender-based violence. Again (and this is simply to give a further example from the work of a world-wide Mothers’ Union), the Sri Lanka Mothers’ Union supports a Blind Elders Home and also a skills development centre for the blind, while at the same time being active in public advocacy, with a particular concentration on the rights of children. Mercy and truth are met together. It is when you and I can make them meet together that we are sowing a worthwhile future together.

Within our own lives and the lives of our families we do almost seek instinctively to uphold and to bring together the values of integrity and generosity. And yet this may not be without pain.

On these islands, we live in a strange culture where good people can suggest, apparently unblinkingly and without any sense of the sheer depravity of what they are saying, that perception is more important than truth.

We live also in a peculiar society where mercy - true generosity of spirit - is seen as pathetic if not pathological. To counter this in our context is a task which makes massive demands on any who undertake it. It will often be a place both of misunderstanding and of loneliness. But it is following the path of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a supreme exemplar of the work for the Mothers’ Union. The strident demand for truth and justice in the *Magnificat* leads on to the loneliness of a mother’s love and mercy at Calvary, the place where Anna Akhmatova concludes her “Requiem”:

Mary Magdalene smote her breast and wept,

The disciple whom he loved turned to stone,

But where the mother stood in silence,

Nobody even dared look.

But amidst those hurtful anxieties and the puzzling contradictions of daily life, you and I are always being called forwards and onwards by God, called in hope to a future which is His future, called to sow a harvest for future generations of his people, a joyful harvest for which mercy and truth are to be sown together with confidence and with courage. It is then that we will complete that verse from the psalms with which I began - *Mercy and truth are met together… righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

For that righteousness and peace we pray, and for that righteousness and peace we commit ourselves to work unceasingly, in sowing together those godly crops of mercy and of truth.