**Tribute to the late Bishop Samuel Poyntz by The Rt Revd Michael Burrows, Bishop of Cashel, Ferns & Ossory**

**Delivered at a Service of Thanksgiving at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin**

**Saturday 25th February 2017, 11.30am**

My mind goes back to the September day in 1978 when in this cathedral Samuel Greenfield Poyntz was consecrated bishop in the Church of God, following his election by the House of Bishops to the See of Cork, Cloyne and Ross. The election to Cork had, most unusually, lapsed to the bishops and Dr Poyntz was their choice for Cork just as, nine years later, he would also be their choice for Connor. There must be some deep meaning in the fact that one of the most energetic, effective and versatile bishops of his generation was never elected to the office by an electoral college.

There was a certain apprehension therefore by the banks of the Lee as the arrival of Samuel their new bishop was awaited. This was a man of outstanding intellectual ability who had a track record of innovative city centre ministry, and who had in the mid 70s demonstrated as archdeacon of Dublin his capacity for no-nonsense and modernising diocesan administration. There is no doubt that Sam Poyntz approached the business of bishoping confident both about the importance of the task and also – I think it is fair to say – his capacity to attempt it. His appointment as archdeacon in Dublin by Archbishop Buchanan had been courageous and to some surprising. But the archbishop has seen in Sam someone of vision who in many ways would change the culture of the diocese. The role of archdeacon became very visibly hands-on, accountability was increased, in service training was expected of clergy who could no longer live untouched in their parochial fiefs. But over the years even those who had been initially uneasy about his appointment came to recognise that Sam represented the future as it needed to be. And they knew in their hearts that he emerged from a St Ann’s which he had truly made ‘a church at the heart of the city with the city at its heart’, buzzing with life on weekdays as much as on Sundays. St Ann’s was famed not just for its organisations and its choir, but also for the genuine humanity of its vicar who amid all his energetic initiatives had time for the insignificant people, those on the edge and the sick. And, often the best test of an incumbent, his loyal curates admired and emulated his approach and his versatility.

This was what Cork received in 1978. And, having been ordained deacon by him in that diocese, and having worked in it during and after his time and witnessed his enduring impact upon it, it is of that context that I can speak best. Bishop Poyntz took to Cork in a very special way; to the end of his days a painting of the Palace there remained in his room. He strode along Patrick Street and recognised its characters almost like something of a prince bishop. The roads to rural parishes knew him, and his erratic driving style and purple Volvo, well. He would stand in the diocesan office and dictate letters giving birth to this scheme and that initiative, characteristically ending ‘with my prayerful good wishes’. The word ‘prayerful’ was never a formality for him. He was superbly kind to and supportive of clergy, provided they worked hard. If occasionally he felt they did not, he could be very direct indeed about it. The diocese fizzed with his energy and ideas, the Cork Examiner testified almost daily to his views on things, no one in the wider life of Cork was allowed to forget that the Church of Ireland had a bishop who had opinions. And the people became very proud of him. As his second Cork archdeacon, Michael Mayes, was to say of working with him when he was taking his leave of Cork – ‘working with Sam Poyntz was like being in the presence of a tornado… you heard twenty wonderful ideas in every conversation but had to pretend you had only heard three of them’.

Let me be more personal, but only to attempt to illustrate something of the bishop’s character. I was nominated to a curacy in his diocese early in 1987. He commanded me to meet him for tea at a house in Clontarf where he normally stayed during RB weeks. At our very cordial meeting he asked me a myriad of questions, nearly all of which he answered himself. Yet when I left his company I felt he knew me well and he had given me confidence. He had this uncanny knack of getting his mind around every situation even when he appeared to be doing most of the talking. When the day of my ordination came, he and Noreen held a most marvellous afternoon party in the Palace for my family and other visitors, and he also found time to talk and pray with me privately in the study. He told me to read the Church Times, and especially the book reviews, word for word every week – one piece of episcopal advice that I have taken! I think I realised that afternoon that, like many of us, Bishop Sam was a man of paradoxes, but yet there was a deep integrity to his multi-faceted self-presentation. He came across to me (and I have thought much about the phrase I am going to use) as a person of almost bombastic holiness  - in your face, radiating energy, yet utterly sincere in his prayer with you and for you. You knew in his diocese that he always bore you on his heart.

Connor beckoned unexpectedly late in 1987 after the failure to elect of another electoral college. It was a courageous, open-minded, obedient move for the Poyntz s to make (all the more so because his translation took effect absolutely instantly), but perhaps it was time for a new and larger stage and quite a different context. Sam quickly gained the respect of clergy who admired his energetic and caring style, and he tirelessly affirmed those who worked hard at the parochial coal face, often in demanding situations of tension and inner city deprivation. It was during this period that he made history by ordaining the first women priests in these islands. He and Archbishop Eames were numbered, with others, amongst the key public faces of a Church of Ireland that constantly denounced violence, combated extremism and longed to encourage a pathway to political progress. It is all rather a long time ago now – Bishop Sam was well retired even before the Belfast agreement. But he would want it emphasised to day that that courage and the compassion of clergy all over the North in those painful years must never be forgotten. Much of Sam’s experience was summed up in a quite emotional and in effect valedictory address to the General Synod of 1994. There were tears in the eyes of many as they heard him testify to the on-the-ground exhausting faithfulness of clergy in flashpoints and testing contexts the like of which many of his hearers had never experienced.

The earlier retirement years were spent happily and busily in Lisburn; then Dublin beckoned again. Here family relationships could be cherished all the more, grandchildren esteemed and enjoyed and entertained. So today, thanking God for so full a life, we return to the cathedral where his journey as a bishop began, yet we are not far either from St Michan’s  where in the early years of his ordained life he was most unusually his father’s curate while he studied for his doctorate. I know there is still much I should say about his commitment to wider causes, some of which have already been mentioned in the published obituaries. He was proud to have been the vice –president of the then British Council of Churches, and to have hosted a major gathering in Cork in that capacity. He led an Irish ecumenical delegation to the then USSR in 1987, and after that the concept of glasnost and indeed its relevance to church life was on his lips almost before anyone else had heard the word! He was a founder participant in the process that established the International Anglican Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission (IARCCUM), which brought about increased fellowship and pastoral cooperation not least amongst bishops. His passion for justice, and the generous and practical application of faith, led him to be a leader in the process which led the General Synod towards establishing what would become the Bishops’ Appeal.

We all have our memories and stories about Sam. The best will probably be shared outside with Jennifer and Timothy and Stephanie after the service. He undoubtedly hoped we would enjoy remembering him today, celebrating his influence for good on so many of us. And he wanted us to sing rousing robust hymns at this service… Sam loved lots of big hymns. It has even been said that his Quiet Days were noted for the volume of singing included in them! And, in a very particular way, we want to surround Noreen, truly his best friend as well as his wife of 65 years, with our gratitude and love. All of us who worked with or under Sam had evidence of Noreen’s quiet kindnesses, knowledge of our needs, capacity to be a relieving contrast to the tornado which he was. Sometimes we wondered on the face of it how she lived with him!… but deep down we knew this to be the most resilient, devoted and mutually dependent of partnerships. No further words are needed.

I end with this comment. As we go through life, there are for all of us a few people who truly help us believe better in God. For me as for many others Sam was one of those. There was something about his conviction, his integrity, his commitment and his confidence that made one say – What matters to him matters to me. I want to travel like him on the way of Christ, to make a difference to others for God’s sake just as he did. This was the particular experience of those of us whom he ordained. Inside the Greek Testament he gave me when I was made deacon he wrote  - *the deacon is the enfleshment of that diakonia* (servanthood) *which is properly Christ’s and which constitutes the very being of the Church.*

And for all his loudness, all his bombastic style, such *diakonia* was also, touchingly humbly, part of the very being of Sam.

Bishop Sam Poyntz leaves a mighty gap in all our lives, especially the lives of those who loved him most. I really cannot imagine ever meeting anyone quite like him again, but thank God we were the people and the generation enriched through knowing him.