UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER
STERNBERG LECTURE

Tuesday 13 March 2012

ADDRESS OF THE MOST REVEREND VINCENT NICHOLS

‘The Journey to God and Faith Today’

I am very grateful for this opportunity to return to Leicester University and present this Sternberg Lecture on the theme ‘The Journey to God and Faith Today’, touching on four interconnected aspects of that broad theme. First, a broad reflection on the sacredness of our world and how awareness of the sacred has fashioned so much of all that surrounds us; the second is a brief explanation of the principles which guide and shape the efforts of the Catholic Church in inter-religious dialogue; then, as three and four, applications of these broader observations to two more particular points: how our religious beliefs can contribute to public debate and one example of a remarkable witness to the importance of the spiritual quest in matters of faith and our journey to God.

Part One: Our Religious Heritage

This month a book was published called ‘Sacred Land’, by Martin Palmer. It invites us to look again at our world and see its almost hidden sacred character. It also argues strongly the environmental cause. The book insists that this country is full of very familiar places whose sacredness we can easily forget. It points to four kinds of such places: those made sacred by our acts of dedication: mosques, synagogues, gudwaras, churches; those places which are sacred because, in their beauty or majesty, they have the power to lift our hearts to the author all things; those which have been made sacred by an event which has given them an indelible character - Clifford Tower, in York, for example, where in 1190 a mass suicide of Jews occurred in the face of an anti-Semitic mob; and those places made sacred to us in a very personal way because of a defining experience or a crucial decision happened there.

Martin Palmer’s point is that we must not neglect or lose such perspectives because they form an important part of how we understand ourselves not only individually but also as a society.

He writes:

'These places are sacred because they link in to the divine and give us a sense of meaning. They add significance to what lies around us, to our work, families, community and histories. Believing that some places are sacred means that we do not see ourselves only as selfish genes or random acts of procreation but as parts of a greater narrative within which we have the opportunity to play a part.'

In this fascinating book we learn how to read the layout of streets in our older towns