

The Right Reverend Francis Thomson M.A. S.T.L.



Very Rev. Francis Thomson was born in Edinburgh, 15th May 1917 his father having died two months earlier leaving his mother to bring him up alone; his mother's family were natives of Elgin where they had been received into the church.

A graduate of both Edinburgh and Cambridge Universities, he was ordained priest for the archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, 15th June 1946, and subsequently continued his studies in Rome.

The announcement of his appointment as Bishop of Motherwell was made on the 8th of December 1964 and he was ordained in the Cathedral Church of Our Lady of Good Aid by Archbishop James Scanlon, Bishop James Black and Bishop Stephen McGill on the 24th Feb 1965.

One of his very first appointments as Bishop was to concelebrate High Pontifical Mass with Cardinal Gordon Joseph Gray at the opening of the new St Patrick's Church in Kilsyth on the 17th March 1965 where he had served as a curate between 1946 and 1948. It was the task of Bishop Thomson to preach the sermon at this Mass to the congregation with whom he was so familiar. This was to become a recurring theme as during his episcopate as he was to open twelve new parishes within his own diocese.

During a distinguished career of 42 years a priest, of which he served 23 as Bishop, he held many posts including rector of St Mary's College Blairs from 1960 until his appointment as Bishop. Notably he took part in the last session of the **Second Vatican Council** in 1965. He also represented the Scottish Hierarchy at the first **Synod of Bishops** in Rome in 1967, and was first chairman of the **Scottish Catholic Press Office** in 1968. He visited foreign missions in West Africa and South America in 1972. Bishop Thomson was also the founding Episcopal President of **The Scottish Catholic Education Commission (SCEC)** which was formally constituted in 1972. He was appointed by the Scottish Hierarchy in 1980 to plan the papal visit to Scotland of Pope John Paul II in June 1982. He was also the principle co-consecrator of Thomas Joseph Cardinal Winning, metropolitan Archbishop of Glasgow.

On the grounds that at the age of 64 he did not have "*the same energy, initiative, and capacity for active leadership as in earlier years*", Bishop Thomson offered his resignation in September 1981, but this was not accepted until 14th December 1982 when he was appointed apostolic administrator of the diocese. On the translation of Bishop Devine, 13th May 1983, Bishop Thomson moved to Biggar as a parish priest and became Bishop Emeritus of Motherwell Diocese. He died in Glasgow on 6th December 1987, and is buried in the precincts of his Cathedral in Motherwell.

**The Right Reverend Francis Thomson M.A. S.T.L.
Bishop Emeritus of Motherwell – 4th December 1987.**

*The Right Reverend Francis Alexander Thomson Bishop of Motherwell from 1965 to 1982, died in the Bon Secours Hospital Glasgow on Sunday 6th December 1987. At the funeral Mass in the Cathedral Church of Our Lady of Good Aid, Motherwell on Friday 11th December following, prior to the interment in the Cathedral Precincts, the following homily was delivered by the **Right Reverend Joseph Devine, Bishop of Motherwell.***

"His Eminence springs readily to mind, the Cardinal in whose former Archdiocese the Bishop was a priest for eighteen years, and for whom the Cardinal was his Ordinary for fourteen of them. From Lanarkshire there are Archbishop Winning for whom Bishop Thomson was the Ordinary for six years or Bishop Taylor for seven years. Others too from the Bishop's Conference like Bishop McGill or Bishop McPherson who worked with him and knew him well for quarter of a century. And then there are the priests, men like John Rogerson, a friend for almost half a century, as well as men from here who go back to days in Blairs with him.

Conscious of all that and still more besides, I offer what I can, in appreciation, admiration and affection, for those were the ways in which I came to know him. Each of us will remember him best, according to circumstances and opportunity, for he was a shy man, not easily given to small talk and even less readily given to that kind of big talk which seeks to make an impression for impression's sake. Francis Thomson was a big man physically but also in the important sense of the word.

He also had a big heart and a great love for the Church, for the priesthood and for people. But he never wore his heart on his sleeve or sought to win popularity by subterfuge. Those were utterly foreign to his personality. Instead his was the kind of sincerity of approach and direct straightforwardness which could be mistaken for aloofness, even the kind of cool detachment which we associate with the intellectual. He assuredly had a powerful intelligence, a sharpness of mind which went directly to the heart of issues, more readily than to the vagaries of human nature. His then was a remarkable simplicity of approach in regard to issues which he saw with a ready case. But he knew that people, especially priests, were not issues. Hence his diffidence in human relationships. That is why he found the worst day of his working year to be the day when he needed to change the pastoral assignments of some priests. He dreaded that day, agonised over it in ways which were never obvious to the clergy. It was his greatest cross as a Bishop, made still more difficult by the fact that he suspected that he never managed to convey to the priests that he was acting out of an equal respect for their need as well as the pastoral needs of the diocese as a whole. Almost in proof of what I am saying, I suspect that I have expressed that agony for him more clearly than he would if he were here today. But I know it to be true since it was the subject which arose most frequently in quiet conversations over the past four years.

That is why I have dwelt upon it today, I do so in the form of an *apologia* to the priests of this diocese in the meaning of Cardinal Newman's *apologia pro vita sua* – but in the name of Francis Thomson.

He was born in Edinburgh on the 15th May 1917. After his early education in the city, on the death of his parents, he was entrusted to the care of two aunts who sent him to George Watson's from where he went to Edinburgh University graduating M.A in 1938. At that point the Lord's call was already clear to him, but Archbishop McDonald required of him a period of further studies at Cambridge University from which he graduated B.A. in 1940. He proceeded to St Edmund's College Ware being ordained for the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh in the city on the 15th June 1946.

His first assignment was in **St Patrick's Kilsyth** from 1946 to 1948. As a primary school boy in Kirkintilloch at that time, and those who knew the geography will recognise that the two towns are not that far apart, I recall hearing of the fine new curate, 'big Francis Thomson', from married relatives in Kilsyth. In 1948 he was sent to Rome for further studies in Theology at the Pontifical University of St Thomas, from which he returned in the following year with the degree *S.T.L magna cum laude*. It was then to Fife, where else but St Andrews, for the next three years. After a short stay at St Cuthbert's in the city for about a year, a decisive appointment was made. The Cardinal opened a new Seminary at Drygrange in 1953 and Francis Thomson was appointed as a founder member of staff, first to teach philosophy to the new student community before continuing with them into the theological disciplines.

There he remained for seven years. In 1960 the Rectorship of Blairs became vacant and the choice of the bishops fell on him. He was a great rector though only there for four years. That was the verdict of the staff at the time, especially one who is with us today, Bishop Renfrew. By a great rector I mean a great educationalist in the setting of the early sixties. Education was his metier and teaching was in his blood. If I call him a great rector, it is particularly, but not exclusively, in the context of the rector/headmaster concept. He instilled, he inspired, and he shone in all of the requirements of that role. It was a role which appealed to his intellectual gifts as well as to his nature. He was thoroughly at ease in that environment and rose with vision and determination to the challenge.

All too soon for him, I suspect, the needs of the Church in Scotland was to require of him a rather different service. On the 8th of December 1964, the anniversary of the dedication of the Cathedral here, he was appointed to the diocese of Motherwell, being consecrated here by Archbishop Scanlan on the 24th February 1965. Many of you will recall that day. Some will be equally vivid in their memory of the reception in the Civic Centre in Hamilton, at which, in his speech, the then Provost of Hamilton, who did not know Bishop Thomson, but knew His Grace of Glasgow, referring to him consistently as Archbishop Scanlan.

The diocese was soon to get to know their new Bishop. In his first 6 months here, he confirmed over 6000 children before leaving for the final session of the Second Vatican Council. Now only His Eminence, Bishop Hart and Bishop McGill remain with that memory. Perhaps, predictably at the first Synod which followed the council in 1968, Bishop Thomson was the representative of the Scottish Bishops. At the Synod which concluded only six weeks ago I was touched by the fact that some of the

oldest of those attending asked me about the very tall Bishop from Scotland whom they had remembered from 20 years ago.

In the wake of the Council Bishop Thomson initiated a whole series of consultations through temporary Commissions, on some of the major themes of Vatican II – the Sacraments of Initiation, Catechetics, Liturgy and Youth. The outcome was less fruitful than he had anticipated – as was to be the case elsewhere. Perhaps it was a case of too much too soon. Whatever the reason there was one area in which he made an abiding commitment – that of the teaching of religious education in schools. Motherwell was one of the first to establish an RE Centre – in the very house where I now live. The work of Father Tom McGurk and Father Paddy Purnell was of a high order and continues to deserve our thanks.

The seventies everywhere were a difficult decade for the Church. Bishop Thomson saw it through better than most. I refer here to the painful loss of priests. He was saddened by that but bore the loss without recrimination. There were of course compensating joys. He opened 13 new parishes and provided 6 replacement churches in others – the bulk of that work being in the seventies.

Throughout much of that same decade he was the founder President of the Catholic Education Commission. Having served for a time on that same commission under Archbishop Winning at a later date, I know its value to us. It is one of the most powerful agencies we have in the defence and development of the separate Catholic school system. I really doubt if that system would be as intact as it is today had we not had the protection of the Commission.

With the dawn of the eighties the rumour of a Papal visit was in the air. This was confirmed in early '81 for the June of the following year. It was to be an immense undertaking. Someone had to be at the centre of all the planning. Really without hesitation the Episcopal conference looked to Bishop Thomson. He put up a brave fight against his selection for that task, pleading that he was aging fast and that it took all his energies to look after a large diocese like Motherwell. It was a very great commitment. Some of us were involved in some way or another and were privileged to be so. Bishop Thomson was involved with everything, endless meetings of the core group which co-ordinated the work of fourteen subgroups. If he were with us today he would point us away to Father Dan and the late John Tully. I am no less sure that they would direct us back to Bishop Thomson. It really was a masterpiece of detailed planning, execution and then disengagement. He found the way to free sub-groups to get the best out of them. All of his strength came to the fore in that great enterprise. Should a future Pope, or dare I even say it the present Holy Father, decide to visit Scotland again, then Bishop Thomson's blue print is there to provide the guideline. That is not the only way which in death, he continues to live on. But more of that in a moment.

Just before the Papal visit was announced, Bishop Thomson moved to Motherwell, assigning the Bothwell House to the work of the Innocents. Shortly thereafter his housekeeper, Miss Nan Mothersole from Kirkintilloch suffered a further setback to her health and retired to Bothwell. I thank her for all her devoted service to him as I

do Mrs Mullen who succeeded her on a daily basis.

The Papal visits took a great deal out of Bishop Thomson. Even as the Holy Father left our shores he requested that his resignation should be accepted. I recall how stunned we were to hear of this at the autumn meeting of the Conference. His explanation was very typical of the man. He simply said, "Physically I am slowing down, mentally I am unsure that I have the drive that the diocese now needs." His resignation was accepted on the 14th December, on which same date he was made Apostolic Administrator until a successor would be appointed.

On the 13th May 1983 that took place. I will never forget the simple warmth of his welcome. He was rejuvenated by the lifting of the burden of office. He made a great bonfire of all personal correspondence with the clergy as well as all out of date diocesan files. It was the first thing he told me, not for his sake, but for mine. I recall asking him what he wanted to do. He said that he wanted to offer his services as a priest for another five years. After that I would put him out to grass. You will recognise the authentic voice of Francis Thomson in that statement! When I asked him where he would like to go he said, "*Oh that is not a problem. The clergy have made the appointment for you. Apparently, I am going to Biggar.*", "*I'd love it!*" And love it he did. And love him they did. I hope that I dishonour him in no way by saying that among the happiest of his 70 years were the last four in Biggar and Forth. The rural setting, that pastoral immediacy, the contact with a real parochial community again, gave him such pleasure. They called him Father and he responded with a will and a way. He found it easy to adapt to the simplicity of lifestyle of a country Parish Priest, for Francis Thomson was an utterly simple man at heart, He looked after himself in the main and rejoiced in everything except occasionally the task of cooking rather than washing up.

He continued to play a full part in the Episcopal Conference and was a great support to me with advice in our regular phone calls and more occasional quiet meals together. Nor will the clergy here be surprised to learn that his was always the first parochial return in the annual financial accounts.

Then came 1987. In late '86 he began to allude to a growing discomfort in his leg. Initial investigations showed nothing other than circulation problems, probably due to age. Even before that he had already written to the Chancellor here a most amusing letter, that high point of 1987, in the diocese of Motherwell, would be the 15th May, the feast of St Isidore the Farmer, patron of Biggar, being also the Golden Jubilee of the parish.

Characteristically he concealed the fact that on the same day he would be celebrating his 70th birthday. What an evening in Biggar it was made all the more enjoyable by the presence of the Cardinal. The Bishop was in terrific form, despite that fact that he was due for surgery, the excision of a tumour in the lower bowel, within a few days. Completely in character he drove himself to the Law Hospital within the week. The operation within the general context of his condition at the time was very successful, although it was to leave him with a colostomy to the end. Throughout late July and all of August he recuperated at the Cathedral before returning to Biggar in early

September, more or less four years to the time when he first arrived.

By mid-September he was re-admitted to Law Hospital where major problems in his peripheral vascular system were detected. He was then transferred to the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow and a series of amputations took place. The rest I think you know. The amputations were necessary to sustain his life, as indeed they did. However, the original operation in May, whilst successful could not protect him from secondary cancer. With the developments of this already advancing fast, he was transferred to Bon Secours on Sunday 29th November. There he died, exactly one week later, 6th November, the feast of St Nicholas.

I do not know how you capture the life of 70 years in 20 minutes – except superficially. So finally, I want to concentrate, albeit briefly, on something more substantial. The life and death of each of us has an effect upon the other, so writes St Paul. The life of Francis Thomson affected many people. As a priest it touched with significance people in parishes and students in seminaries. As a Bishop it affected profoundly the church locally and nationally. Francis Thomson was proud of this land, proud of its capital city, proud of Lanarkshire, proud of Biggar and Forth. He was interested neither in possessions or fame. But he was interested in that kind of service of Christ which calls for a total commitment of discipleship. In the end, the Lord took him, literally testing him like gold in a furnace under the refiner's eye. For the Lord demanded everything from him, like the grain of wheat which must die if new life is to be enjoyed in hundredfold measure.

In that process the Lord took his privacy, from this most private of men, in the way that the Bishop had to become dependent increasingly on others, even for the smallest of things. The Lord took his intellect, for in the end he was reduced to using a word or a phrase for a sentence. And the Lord even demanded of him his height as well!

Bishop Thomson never crouched. Did you ever notice that? He once told me how he saw that exceptionally tall people sometime tried to make themselves look smaller by a kind of stoop. Francis Thomson stood tall. In that, as in everything else, he was as straight as a die.

Today we bid farewell to his mortal terms. For at least a month in a variety of ways, to those who called to see him, he said his goodbyes. In our last meeting on the day before he died, it was clear that death was nigh. I invited him to recognise this by saying to him, that though he felt very weak, he was alright where it mattered. He nodded and said, "*in every important way.*" There was nothing else to say. What do you need to say after that?

I am delighted that all the members of the Episcopal Conference are here. No less are we delighted that such a great number of priests have joined us from this diocese and elsewhere, joined by many community representatives from many other sister churches, from diocesan agencies and organisations, as well as from civic life in the Region of Strathclyde and the local districts in Lanarkshire. That will be a happy memory, on this sad day, for his few remaining relatives, to whom I offer, in the name of all, our sincerest condolences.

As Bishop here in Motherwell for over eighteen years his motto was "*Sperans in Domino*". In that surest of hopes, do we now commend him to the Lord!

Eternal rest grant unto him O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him.
May he rest in peace. Amen."

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This picture shows [Fr James Brennan](#) and Fr Francis Thomson as young priests in Kilsyth. It is likely dates to 1947/48 as that is the period when both priests were stationed in St Patrick's Kilsyth.



Consecration
of
Bishop Thomson
of Motherwell



The Cathedral of Our Lady of Good Aid, Motherwell, was crowded on Wednesday, 24th February, 1965, for the consecration of the Right Rev. Francis Thomson, S.T.L., M.A., as Bishop of Motherwell, the third bishop to hold the new see which, with its 160,000 Catholics, is the second largest diocese in Scotland.

The consecrating prelate was Archbishop Scanlan of Glasgow and the assistant bishops were Bishop Black of Paisley and Bishop McGill of Argyll and the Isles. Archbishop Gordon Gray of St. Andrews and Edinburgh was the preacher for the occasion. For the first time in an episcopal consecration in Scotland, English was used for the introductory part of the liturgy.

The congregation was fully representative of the Catholic life of the Diocese of Motherwell and of the whole country. All of the diocesan bishops of Scotland were present, including Bishop Michael Foylan, Bishop-elect of Aberdeen. Prelates and canons of the Diocese of Motherwell and from every other diocese in Scotland were prominent. Practically all the clergy of Motherwell Diocese were there together with representative layfolk from each parish and the Motherwell ecclesiastical students from seminaries in Scotland.

Three Protestant clergymen were in the congregation, the Rev. M. Steel, Moderator of the Hamilton Presbytery of the Church of Scotland; the Rev. Mr. Hodgkinson of the Motherwell Episcopal Church;

and the Rev. Mr. J. G. Balls of the Ministers' Fraternal in Motherwell.

Lord Clydesmuir, Lord Lieutenant of Lanarkshire, was present as was also the Vice-Lieutenant, Colonel Robert C. M. Monteith. The five Members of Parliament of the county were there, Miss Herbison, Mr. Lawson, Mr. Dempsey, Mr. Hamilton and Mr. McKenzie. The Convener and Vice-Convener of the County of Lanark, the entire Town Council of Motherwell and Wishaw were present as were the provosts of the burghs within the County of Lanark: Provost White of Lanark; Provost Mackay of Rutherglen; Provost Gordon of East Kilbride; Provost

Marshall of Hamilton; Provost Telfer of Biggar; Provost Lawson of Motherwell and Wishaw; Provost Mullen of Coatbridge; and Provost Connor of Airdrie.

Following the Consecration in Motherwell Cathedral, some five hundred guests travelled to Hamilton, where lunch was served in the banqueting hall of the new County Buildings, here Archbishop Scanlan of Glasgow proposed the toast of the new Bishop of Motherwell and declared "The future of this diocese is in the hands of an energetic, well-trained, perfectly equipped man, who will see that Motherwell occupies a prominent position."



Above an extract from St Andrew's Annual 1965



**Bishop Thompson at his Episcopal Ordination in Motherwell
Glasgow Evening Citizen of Wed 17th March 1965 No. 31453**