

REDISCOVERING THE SACRED

This leaflet is the text of a talk given by Fr Andrew Wadsworth on 4th May 1996, at the Faith of Our Fathers Conference in London. Fr Wadsworth is a priest of the Archdiocese of Westminster.

INTRODUCTION

'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light' (1 Peter: 2,9)

One of the most persuasive reasons for our great gathering today is that we wish to celebrate with gratitude to Almighty God the fact that we have been called to be part of the *One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church*. By Baptism we became part of that priestly nation whose dignity and duty it is to offer fitting worship and praise to the Blessed Trinity, the only true God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that if we fulfil this responsibility in love *'we will be faithful to the deepest vocation of the Church'*. Put simply, as Catholics, we are all called to be those who will worship and love God. When God created us, he invested into our human nature a desire which only He can fulfil and it is from this depth of our humanity that we worship Him. God has given to the Church a form of worship by which He is perfectly honoured and the dignity of God and mankind is respected. This most perfect worship we recognize to be the holy sacrifice of the Mass, which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council described as the *'source and summit of the Christian life'*. They also reminded us that *'the other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Blessed Eucharist and are orientated towards it. For in the Blessed Sacrament is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ Himself, who is our Passover'*.

HOLY GROUND; HOLY ACTIONS

When we come to consider the Mass, in company with Moses of old, we should have a profound sense that we are standing on holy ground and that the holy actions in which we partake are a participation in the very events which brought salvation, made present to us through this most powerful mystery of the Mass. Perhaps the most widely voiced regret in the Church today is that many, many seem to have lost sight of the dignity and reverence which the Church has always expected will accompany the celebration of the Mass and the worship of the Blessed Sacrament reserved in our churches. It would be quite straightforward at this point to embark upon a catalogue of criticisms of the present practice of the Church in many places - not only straightforward but, in many ways, unanswerable. That the last thirty years have been marked by carelessness or, in some cases, wilfulness in this respect is nothing more than a fact evident to all. But what lies beyond the criticisms, justly and unjustly made? What transcends the polemics which make us so unhappy about the present state of the Church? Where do we find ourselves in a sea of dissatisfaction becoming increasingly turbulent with every passing year? These are the serious questions which must concern us today and for the foreseeable future, for they are questions which we must be prepared to answer if we are to be true to our baptismal promise - renewed at the Easter Vigil - when we rejected Satan and his works, and promised to serve God faithfully in His Holy Catholic Church.

Needless to say, this responsibility is shared by each member of the Church although, because of our different functions in the Mystical Body of Christ, some must necessarily bear a greater burden than others. In relation to the celebration of Holy Mass, the greatest responsibility lies with the priest, for his is the irreducible contribution without which there can be no Mass. That awesome responsibility is reflected in the seriousness of the questions every priest must answer at his ordination when the Bishop says: *'Are you resolved to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously as the Church has handed them down to us for the glory of God and the sanctification of Christ's people?'*. Every priest must live with that question each day when he goes to the altar, aware of the mandate he has received from God to offer the Sacred Mysteries for the salvation of his brethren. As priests, the Church expects this of us, in season and out of season, independent of our own dispositions or preferences, and conscious that as custodians of the Church's greatest treasure, the Mass, we have the corresponding duty to *'know what we are doing and to imitate the mystery we celebrate'*. The widespread liturgical anarchy that has wrought havoc during the last years often makes it difficult for priests to clearly hold these principles in mind.

The consequent change in the way the priesthood is perceived and esteemed by many nowadays, frequently undermines the deep instinct that we have that things should be other than they are. Often it takes a strong personality merely to affirm things that the Church had taken for granted, for in many people's minds personal opinion and approval have gained authority over the clearly stated laws of the Church.

LEX ORANDI; LEX CREDENDI

In relation to the Sacred Liturgy this situation has been further exacerbated by the authorisation of practices which were formerly an abuse, and we think particularly of the permission for the reception of Holy Communion in the hand; the re-siting of the tabernacle away from the centre of the sanctuary; the multiplication of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist beyond the provision of the law; and much more recently the concession to female servers. Whatever we think of these practises themselves, the fact that they have been legitimised by way of a concession to disobedience reinforces in many minds the notion that resistance is the most effective way to bring about change. Opportunists who seek a dismantling of the Church's Tradition, have been eager to interpret any relaxation of discipline as an indication of a complete change of direction, giving rise to further innovation beyond the scope of the initial permission. This unhappy formulation now means that there are many Catholics who have never experienced the beauty, the dignity and the solemnity of the worship of the Catholic Church in a way freely accessible to previous generations.

Those who have persistently expressed this concern in our time have seen the self-evident truth of the old adage: 'lex orandi; lex credendi' - the way we worship is ultimately expressive of what we believe. We should finally be prepared to accept the deductions of others who have seen in the superficiality and reduced respect now commonplace, a diminishing of faith. How shall we continue to communicate the essential truths of the sacrificial nature of the Mass, the doctrine of transubstantiation and the reverence and respect due to Our Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament, if these beliefs are not clearly evidenced in the way we worship? As a priest I am continually amazed to encounter Catholics of all ages, and particular those under the age of forty, whose knowledge and understanding of these matters is seriously deficient. How can we expect them to understand and love something they have never known?

A CRISIS OF HOLINESS

It is clearly now time for a Catholic restoration, a reflowering of Catholic faith and life in such a way that the fullness of the Faith, as it is expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, is unambiguously evident in our Sacramental life and pre-eminently in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. If this is to become a reality then all of us have the task and responsibility of shaping our lives in accordance with the truth. The crisis we face is not a crisis of liturgy but a crisis of holiness. We are called to be a sign to the world of God's love and wisdom in the Incarnation of His Son and His work of salvation now continued in the Church which He founded. In undertaking this immense work of restoration, our indispensable guide will be the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and we should take the opportunity today and every day to give thanks to God for the great gift of the Catechism as a trusty and accessible compendium of the Church's teaching, bringing clarity in many issues where there is still widespread confusion. The sections which deal extensively with the Blessed Eucharist contain some of the finest passages in the entire Catechism and it is here that we should expect to find our greatest inspiration.

The Catechism speaks of the various names which we use when speaking of the Blessed Eucharist, reminding us that 'the inexhaustible richness of this Sacrament is depressed in the different names we give it'. Perhaps I could just take this opportunity to draw to your attention some of these thoughts. The Catechism speaks of the term THE HOLY SACRIFICE, a term that has long expressed our Catholic understanding that the Mass is a sacrifice 'because it makes present the one sacrifice of Christ and includes the Church's offering'. It continues by reminding us that: 'The terms Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, sacrifice of praise, spiritual sacrifice, pure and holy sacrifice are also used since it completes and surpasses all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant'.

Because the words we use are of great importance in conveying the truths that we hold, the Catechism describes the Mass as THE HOLY AND DIVINE LITURGY 'because the Church's whole liturgy finds its centre and most intense expression in the celebration of this sacrament; in the same sense we also call its celebration the SACRED MYSTERIES. We speak of the MOST BLESSED SACRAMENT because it is the Sacrament of sacraments. The Eucharistic species reserved in the tabernacle are designated by the same name'.

SACRED CHARACTER OF THE MASS

Interestingly, the Catechism reminds us why the most widespread term, HOLY COMMUNION has such a deep significance: 'because by this sacrament we unite ourselves to Christ who makes us sharers in His Body and Blood to form a single body.' A thought perhaps for those liturgists and catechists who insist on referring to 'First Eucharist' instead of First Holy Communion. Thankfully the Catechism upholds the term HOLY MASS, giving its Latin derivation 'Missa' and explaining that we use this term 'because the liturgy in which the mystery of salvation is accomplished concludes with the sending forth (missio) of the faithful, so that they may fulfil God's will in their daily lives'. It should be clear by now that this most authoritative document bears witness to the enduring faith of the Catholic Church in the sacred character of the Mass. In demanding that the Mass be celebrated with due dignity and reverence we are doing no more than the Church asks of us and God's holiness requires of us. Here in the Diocese of Westminster we have been greatly encouraged over the past year by the words of His Eminence the Cardinal in his homilies at the Chrism Mass last year and again this year. Last year we were exhorted to 'restore the genuflection' as the usual gesture of reverence to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

This year we were directed to celebrate Mass in a manner faithful to the liturgical norms laid down by the Church and to teach the Catechism. There is much work to be done and it is clear that we are merely at the beginning of a long process that will bring about the re-invigoration of the Church's life of worship, but we must be encouraged by the many signs of hope we see around us, not least in the many men and women, who are still coming to recognize in the Catholic Church the reality that Cardinal Newman described as '.....the one sheepfold of the Redeemer'. Newman himself, had been greatly attracted to the Church by the external beauty and solemnity of her worship. He writes in his Apologia: '(In) the Catholic Church .. I recognised at once a reality which was quite a new thing with me...I gazed at her almost passively as a great objective fact. I looked at her; at her rites, her ceremonial, and her precepts; and I said: This is a religion'.

Inspired by the example of our Holy Father who never fails to commend the Church to the intercession of Our Blessed Lady, I wish to conclude these reflection by invoking her aid and protection:

Immaculate Mary, Mother of our Redeemer and Mother of the Church, look kindly upon the priestly nation of your Son who seek a greater understanding and experience of the Holy Mysteries He left us as an everlasting memorial. We invoke your protection on our Holy Father, the Pope. Guide and sustain him in his ministry as pastor of the Universal Church. Protect all Bishops in communion with him -especially our own Bishops, the hierarchies of England, Scotland and Wales. You, whose privilege it was to stand at the foot of the Cross and to be a first witness to the wonder of the Resurrection, stand by all priests as they minister at the altar. Help them to be worthy servants of the Mysteries they celebrate. Help us all, priests and people, to effectively proclaim with our lives the awesome truths we profess with our lips; and to give worthy honour and worship in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and in our adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament, making of our lives an offering of love to the Most Holy Trinity to Whom be all honour and glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

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