

DAUGHTERS OF WISDOM

MASS CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY OF THE PROVINCE

ROMSEY ABBEY

26 JUNE 2011.

May I begin by saying how glad I am to be back celebrating Mass again in Romsey Abbey. This is a great privilege and recalls to my mind the first time I did so, in 1991 at the celebrations of the arrival in Romsey of the Sisters of the Congregation of La Sagesse. I appreciated that day in a new way, how much a part of the history of this lovely town these Sisters have been and still are today. That was a splendid celebration of their arrival.

But today is a different centenary.

You will know that in the face of the difficulties confronting religious congregations in France in the late 19th century, Dr Virtue, the Bishop of Portsmouth, offered a welcoming hand to the Sisters of La Sagesse and asked them to open an orphanage for boys. His kindness to the Sisters has been repaid a hundred-fold. This is so not only with the founding here of the boarding school for boys and girls but also with the countless other ways the Sister have brought their loving care to the service of many in need up and down these lands – including Archbishops!

The Anniversary we celebrate today is that of the Sisters in these countries first coming of age. From 1891 until 1911 the activities of the Sisters were governed directly from their headquarters in France. In 1911 the Congregation decided to set on their own feet the Sisters present over here, giving them so much more direct control over their activities. They became a Province of the world-wide Congregation. This allowed them far greater initiative in response to local needs and circumstances.

Over these hundred years that is precisely what these sisters have done. They have continued for as long as possible their involvement in the establishment and running of great schools. Now the needs they meet are different: in nursing, chaplaincy, hospital visiting, with the homeless, those with disability, asylum seekers, refugees and the elderly. This I see for myself, not least in the Diocese of Westminster. Here in Romsey, along with the care of the elderly in the Marie Louise Nursing Home, the Wisdom Centre has been established to help to maintain the spiritual teachers of the founders of the Daughters of Wisdom.

Whatever changes may have occurred, the fundamental inspiration of the Congregation remains the same: that of showing the compassionate face of Jesus to those in need. This is their wonderful charism, the gift of the founders still expressed today.

With this inspiration in mind, it is a marvellous act of providence that we celebrate this anniversary of the day on which the Church in England and Wales celebrates the

Feast of Corpus Christi. For this Feast is the celebration of the mystery at the heart of all that the Sisters of La Sagesse seek to be and to do.

All who seek the Wisdom of God and seek to put it into practice look to Jesus, for the compassionate face of Jesus is the face of God. That is the first mystery we try to receive. 'To have seen me is to have seen the Father' says Jesus.

We see the compassionate face of Jesus most clearly in the gift of himself in his coming in our flesh, in his death and his resurrection. This gift is made constantly present for us in the gift of the Eucharist, the bread and wine which becomes for us his most sacred Body and Blood.

St Louis Marie de Montfort meditated so often and so profoundly on this mystery, as all the sisters know. For example he took the words of the Book of Proverbs in which Wisdom says 'Come eat my bread, drink the wine I have prepared for you' and reflected on them. He elaborated them by adding: 'Come eat the bread which is Jesus. Drink the wine of his love.' (TD 208) His focus was always on the Lord, on his Master, Jesus the Christ, and, of course, on Mary, for he knew that it was from her flesh and blood that Jesus received his body and so it was for her, and for us, that Jesus reversed the gift and gave us his body to be our food, a food that alone is capable of bringing us to eternal life.

In the life of the Church we understand more clearly how the work of compassionate service to those in need is inseparably linked to the mystery of the Eucharist. Indeed the link is there in the very founding words and actions of our Lord in which he took the bread, said the prayer of blessing, broke it and distributed it. In the words of St Paul which we have just heard this is 'the bread which we break.' The breaking of the bread is the sign that all which we receive is never for ourselves to keep. It must be broken open and shared. The compassion of God, the tender Father of all mercies, is the source of our compassion for others. If this is not so, if we try to root our compassion in any other source, if we believe that we are compassionate enough in ourselves, we will fail. Within our own resources we do not have the unending compassion which our broken world – including ourselves – truly need. Only a compassion which never counts the cost is sufficient to meet our needs. And such compassion flows only from the mystery of God, the Father who is its source, the Son who is its eternal and incarnate expression and the Spirit who is its powerful, transforming love.

Today's Feast is a great cry of thanksgiving – O Praise the Lord Jerusalem! It is cry, a plea, that we never forget the source of all goodness – the God who brought us out of slavery, who guides us through every wilderness, who provides us with refreshing water, who feeds us with such loving food that those who do not know him can never imagine. Today's feast is a proclamation of life – the life which flows in its fullness from 'the flesh of the Son of Man', the life which has the endurance to flow right through death into the eternal life. That is the life for which our spirits truly long. That is the life which the compassionate face of Jesus brings to us and which we long to bring to others.

Today we celebrate a centenary of good lives, each and all, in so many ways, trying to bring that compassionate face of Jesus to young boys and girls in their care, to the

elderly in their vulnerability, to the lost and strayed in their puzzlement. We thank God for that history. More importantly we pray that by being centred on this person of Jesus, and on Mary, those who come in their footsteps, wherever that may be, will continue that tradition of love of the Lord, of drawing life from the Father by partaking in this Eucharistic mystery, by contemplating in prayer its immense and by acting with courage and imagination in the cause of those in need.

This will not happen, of course, unless we too take to heart the words of the first reading for we too must learn humility, we too must be tested and we too must be wise enough to know our inner most hearts, ensuring that they are centred on the Lord and on his enduring love and compassion for us all. God alone. God alone is enough. God alone is all. Amen.