

**MASS OF THANKSGIVING
FOR THE REOPENING
OF THE RESTORED COLLEGE CHURCH**

VENERABLE ENGLISH COLLEGE, ROME

18TH OCTOBER 2009

We celebrate Mass today in the glorious setting of this restored chapel. No wonder this Mass is, above all else, a Mass of Thanksgiving.

Today we give thanks for so much:

- for the generosity of those who have supported this work and made it possible
- for the skill and patient endeavours of all who have worked on this project and managed it so carefully.
- for the history of this College, which is so significantly reflected in this chapel
- especially for the gift of faith, which underpins all of this enterprise and which gives birth to our sure and certain hope that the glory of heaven, which this chapel is designed to reflect, will one day be ours, and in such a great company”!

There is so much to encompass at this moment. Indeed a week may well be not long enough. But I know you will give it a good try. But time is needed to appreciate this work, and all that it stands for, and the historical legacy of both the hospice and the seminary. This heritage – like every heritage of faith – is ours not to be preserved or protected – as some today would make their priority. Rather, it is given to us that through it we may give a richer voice to our faith. Through our faith, this heritage is enlivened. And this heritage supports and strengthens us. When we find our voice of faith, then the beauty of our heritage – be it in music, art, or in this chapel itself – is truly understood. Only when we find our voice, will the summons of this beauty, which is always a call to God, be properly heard.

For my part I must concentrate on one aspect of that faith which can find a fresh voice at this moment and in this chapel.

It is by providence that we celebrate this Mass on the Sunday which the universal Church holds as Mission Sunday. What better moment could there be! Why the picture behind me itself is a hymn of praise to the mission of faith: the mission of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – expressed here and in the original title of the picture, the Holy Trinity with Saints; the picture also points to the first mission of this place – to be a hospice for weary pilgrims, entering through the arched gateway featured in the painting; and of course, it proclaims the powerful mission of the priests formed in this College who made the opposite journey, leaving through that gateway on their journey to their mission in England. Because of their courageous faith the picture acquired its more familiar title: the Martyrs Picture.

Today’s Gospel reading takes us to the heart of this mission. Just before this passage, Jesus has been speaking for the third time about the passion which lies ahead of him. And at this point in the narrative of Mark, Jesus and his companions have completed the long journey down the length of the Jordan valley and are now turning to start

their ascent to Jerusalem. Their hard slog is now beginning, and it is a premonition of the suffering that lies ahead.

The companions to whom Jesus speaks in this dialogue, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are of course, brothers. They have been with him at moments of triumph – at the raising of Jairus' daughter and at the Transfiguration. So they have caught a glimpse of his glory, and they now want it for themselves.

It is this band of brothers who have to be tutored in the true meaning of their mission. And we stand in their stead: a band of brothers indeed, resolved to follow and serve the Lord.

So the question addressed to them is also addressed to us. Jesus says:
Can you drink the cup of which I am to drink?

'Yes we can' is their answer. And it is an answer that has resounded round this place, before this picture, over the centuries. Today, in our turn, we echo and repeat that willingness. Yes we can!

And we can add: 'Yes we do drink of this cup', for every time we celebrate Mass and receive the Body broken for us and the Blood poured out for us we do indeed drink of this cup.

And again we reply: 'Yes we shall drink of this cup'. This is most certainly our fate if we remain faithful to the mission we are given.

The second part of the Gospel passage spells out something of the way in which this will come about. We are summoned to be servants. Once we make ourselves a servant then we no longer have control over our own destiny. This is so fundamental to the life of a priest – his obedience is the first and abiding practical expression of his readiness to drink of this cup. He is a servant of the Church and of his people. In this obedience practised day by day lie the seeds of every martyrdom.

But the words of the Lord take us further. Not only are we to accept the status of servant, and wait on the needs of others, summoned at the authority of others; but we are also to be a slave, totally subject to the will of the Father.

How can this be? Surely being a slave is degrading - offending my rights as we would say today? How can this accord with our dignity?

Only by this truth: that the will of the Father is nothing other than our ultimate good; that the will of the Father is pure love, which flows from no other source and which alone is the well-spring of life in its fullness. Only in this truth can I happily, readily hand myself over as servant and slave. Without such a truth, this pathway would indeed be one of pointless self-abnegation. It would be grotesque. It is not. This pathway of discipleship in mission is the pathway of truth and of life.

Let us turn again to the picture, which in so many ways, in this chapel, is the continuity in the long history of the College. What generosity of spirit it has witnessed! What heroism for the faith. Its testimony, as you all understand, is

complemented by the frescos in the tribune, also so finely restored. This painting acts as a point of contact for us with the martyr priests who have given it its abiding title. Remember that the relics of those martyrs were quickly brought to Rome where they became a focal point of prayer, just as the relics of St Therese have been for the 95,000 people who have come to Westminster Cathedral in 3 days last week.

These are moments of enormous encouragement for us. They prompt me to look again at the quotation from St Luke's Gospel, so favoured by St Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits, that it found its central place in this picture.

'Ignem veni mittere in terram.' Fire indeed, fire of that love of God which alone can burn away our dross and make us capable of bearing a shining witness in our time.

This fire of love, to which Jesus refers in terms of the baptism he brings, and the fruit it bears, has echoes back to the Song of Songs, in words that resonate often in my heart:

This love is as strong as death.
The flash of it is a flash of fire
A flame of God himself.
A love no flood can quench
No torrents drown (8.6)

Floods indeed may rise: a flood of seeping indifference and weariness to all things religious as people struggle simply to survive amid hardship and cynicism; torrents may pour down, a torrent of hostile secularism which takes delight in mocking faith. But the fire of this love, expressed in the lives of so many saints and heroes, inspiring faith in so many people, will not be extinguished. For this enduring faith, this chapel is fine and wonderful testimony. We are to fill it with our faith, our love and our hope, in the same mission as those who have gone before us. To our loving God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who pours out such love in the blood of Christ, this chapel is a glorious hymn of praise. In it we gladly raise our voices of faith today. To him be glory and honour and praise for ever and ever. Amen.

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