

CHRISM MASS 2010

Westminster Cathedral

The importance of our Mass we celebrate together today is made clear in words which I shall shortly address to all the priests present in the Cathedral:

‘Brothers, today we celebrate the memory of the first Eucharist at which our Lord Jesus Christ shared with His apostles and with us His call to the priestly service of His Church.’

The memories of the first Eucharist and the call to priestly service make this a crucial moment for the life of our diocese, one in which we seek to refresh our entire life in the Lord. Here we come to the well-springs of the life of the Church, the very mysteries which impel us, day by day, to seek above all else to do His will and which enable us to do so.

Today the Church calls on us priests to renew our desire to serve Him, our determination to serve those in our care, our resolve to celebrate the sacraments with reverence, and our daily effort to unite ourselves more closely to Christ.

Today I not only invite all our priests – and bishops – to seek this renewal, but I also ask all present, and all the faithful of our parishes, to pray for us priests. This has been our intention throughout this Year for Priests. But it is never more needed than at this moment of renewal.

Let us be clear. This is not an easy vocation to follow. Indeed the liturgy itself makes that plain. The invitation to the renewal of priestly promises spells out the inevitable cost. It is on this score that we priests must examine ourselves.

Let me quote:

We are to ‘joyfully sacrifice our own pleasure and ambitions’ Do we do so each day?

We are to serve our people ‘without thinking of our own profit’. Do we do so? Or do we sometimes engage in that calculation of personal profit and loss, such that the personal loss begins to seem too demanding and the personal reward too scant?

We priests need the prayers and support of our people. They are so readily given. We need to pray for and support each other, not least when we are in distress or despondency.

Today we are also asked to be precise in the undertakings we renew. We are not simply to be decent individuals, avoiding antagonisms and being generally supportive. Our calling is more specific than that.

Again, let me quote:

We are to act ‘out of love for the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church’. That love needs renewing every day. It is a love which some today mock and belittle. They will say:

‘What’s so lovable about the Catholic Church!’ But we can cope with that.

We are ‘to bring peace and love’ to our brothers and sisters, acting ‘solely for the well-being of the people’ we have been sent to serve. Remember the urging of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the anniversary of whose murder in the chapel we have just kept. He said to his priests: ‘Walk with your people.’ He asked them to keep attentive to the reality of their lives, since before God nothing of our human condition is hidden from his loving gaze.

We are ‘to celebrate the Eucharist and the other liturgical services with sincere devotion’. This is easily said but not so easily sustained over the three or four regular weekend Masses, or the frequently required funerals.

I salute the priests present here today. I thank you, and all the presbyterate, for your service and your best efforts day by day.

We make mistakes and we fail. We let people down, in small ways more often than in large. Today we readily express our sorrow for all our offences. We also express our resolve, for we have joyfully received this ministry from the Lord and, at the end of the day, it still fills our hearts with happiness and satisfaction.

Since this celebration is focussed so much on the Eucharist itself, permit me a few thoughts on that theme. Our faith is clear: that ‘in the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really and substantially contained under the appearances of these perceptible realities’. These words, from the Council of Trent, remind us of the reality we handle. It is the ‘latens Dietas’, the ‘hidden Godhead’ in the phrase of St Thomas Aquinas. This reminds us of the importance of the reverence and sincere devotion which today we promise to maintain.

Pope Benedict draws out one of the consequences of this truth.

He recalls the words of St Augustine: no one eats that flesh without first adoring it. He says: 'Receiving the Eucharist means adoring Him whom we receive... Only in adoration can a profound and genuine reception mature.' (Sacramentum Caritatis 66) This is such an important point for us to ponder and indeed to teach. Only in adoration of the Godhead present in the Eucharist will our reception of Christ come to fruition within us.

This is a truth which we must model. Of course we will seek times when in prayer we adore the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. But this adoration must also find expression in the moments in which we receive him during Mass. Let us not be hasty. There is a time of silent prayer in preparation for our receiving Holy Communion. Let's use it to adore Him whom we receive. And let us encourage our people to do the same.

Of course Holy Communion must be distributed smoothly. But every procession can be conducted with great reverence, and the gestures of adoration, including the bow we make before we receive the Lord, can be carried out with care and devotion. No one eats that flesh without first adoring it. Here is a truth for us to explain and nurture constantly.

Another phrase of Augustine also enriches our Eucharistic faith. Augustine tells his people to ‘see on the altar the sacrament of who you are and of what you are to become.’ The Eucharist shapes the direction of our entire lives. We live, by faith, focussed on the Lord. He is what we are to become. He is the target, the aim, the ambition of every Christian life. We are oriented towards God. We conduct our lives ‘in that direction’ for in that direction alone lies its secret and its true fulfilment.

So we are indeed a Eucharistic people, not simply because we gather around the altar to share in this presence of the Lord in our midst, but also because from Him we receive our whole sense of destiny and purpose.

I heard, recently, of a mother of a very handicapped boy. No doubt pressured towards having an abortion, and pitied for her lot, she declared that her whole sense of joyful purpose was to prepare her son for a life, in eternity, in the presence and love of God. She lived with her face turned towards the Lord. And so should we. In the Eucharist we see the One who calls us to Himself.

During this Mass we have heard, like the rhythmic beating of a drum, the words: 'The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me.' It is a phrase to fill our hearts when we leave this celebration. Accompanying us go the Holy Oils, soon to be blessed or consecrated to take their place among the effective signs of the presence of the Spirit of the Lord in our lives:

at times of initiation, of illness and of dedication and ordination. We priests are the Spirit's privileged ministers. We are anointed for that task. Let that fill our hearts, guide our words and shape our daily living even as we now renew the promises of our priestly ministry.

+ Vincent Nichols

BEFORE THE FINAL BLESSING

Chrism Mass 2010

Just before we end Mass today, I would like to add a few words about the widespread reports of child abuse in the Catholic Church and all the accompanying comment.

First, and most importantly, we think of those who have been damaged by childhood abuse with all its lasting effects. We must readily express our sorrow and apologies. We are properly and shocked and shamed by each and all such acts which are a dreadful breaking of trust. We are also firmly resolved to continue all our work of safeguarding.

Secondly, attempts to implicate Pope Benedict are unworthy. Every time you read that the 2001 document from the Holy See imposed a duty on bishops to keep these things secret and hidden from public authorities, know that this is simply untrue.

There is nothing in that document to deter or hinder a bishop or a victim from reporting cases to the police. In fact since that time, when the Holy See directly called for greater vigilance and scrutiny, bishops have been urged to take that course of action.

Thirdly, please remember that in the last forty years the vast majority of priests in England and Wales – 99.6% to be precise – have never had such allegations made against them. But even one case is too many. Every single case is, and always will be, a sin and a scandal, damaging its victims and shaming us all. All of this we commit to the Lord in this Holy Week. From him alone, through his wounds, can come the healing we need.

There is a vivid phrase to recall: Trust comes on foot but leaves on horseback. It is on foot, through our daily actions, that trust is strengthened. We know that. That is what we do. And there is great trust among us –rightly given and received.

So, before the blessing, let me again thank all our priests here today for their goodness and hard work. I appreciate them and assure them of my love and support. I am sure you all do the same!

+ Vincent Nichols