

CELEBRATION OF PRIESTHOOD

7 June 2011

All Saints Pastoral Centre

The Gospel of our Mass today takes us into the heart of the relationship of Father and Son. This is the wonder of our calling, the wonder of the mystery we minister: that we human beings are welcomed into the intimacy and love of Father and Son, which is the life of the Holy Spirit.

This mystery we enter most powerfully through our celebration of the Mass. Here all is the gift of the Father. Here all is to the glory of the Father and the Son. Here is our sharing in that glory, conscious that it is expressed in and through the self-sacrificing love of the cross.

In the light and depth of this great mystery I would like to reflect on our priestly part in the celebration of the Mass. I want to do so with a directness and immediacy for, when it comes to Liturgy, we are living in a sensitive and creative time. This is a time in which the Church is asking us to recover some of the richness and depth of our liturgical heritage and, at the same time, always to ensure that the Liturgy is the sign and source of peace and unity within the Church. We are not necessarily good at that. Among us priests Liturgy easily becomes a point of contention. It should not be so.

Today we use the text of the new English translation. It symbolises so much. We are sharply aware of the newness of the words we are using. We need to concentrate on them. We need a fresh approach in contrast to long-formed habits and familiarity.

I would like to reflect on our part in all this and offer you my convictions. Thereby I hope I might help to shape your responses. I can but try.

There are four key points that shape my reflection, all in the context of the Gospel truth we have heard. They are, fundamentally, matters of the heart, of our disposition. As such they can shape what we do. We do well to examine what lies in our hearts.

1. My first conviction is this: Liturgy is never my own possession, or my creation. It is something we are given, from the Father. Therefore my own tastes, my own preferences, my own personality, my own view of ecclesiology, are marginal, of little importance, when it comes to the

celebration of the Mass. We don vestments to minimise our personal preferences, not to express or emphasise them. Liturgy is not ours. It is never to be used as a form of self-expression. Indeed the opposite is the truth. Within the diocese, when the priests of a parish change there should be clear continuity in the manner in which Mass is celebrated. The Mass is the action of the Church. That's what matters, not my opinion. I once heard that Blessed Pope John Paul never commented on a Mass he had celebrated. It's the Mass. My task is to be faithful.

2. My second point flows from this: the Liturgy forms us, not us the Liturgy. The words of the Mass form our faith and our prayer. They are better than my spontaneous creativity. At Mass my place is very clear: I am an instrument in the hand of the Lord. I am not a conductor, still less a composer. Ordained into the person of Christ the Head, I am just an instrumental cause of this great mystery. This is so important. My celebration of the Mass each morning shapes my heart for the day ahead. At Mass I am the Lord's instrument just as I hope to be in the day that follows. In all the events of the day, in the decisions I make, the words I speak, my greatest, safest hope is that the Lord will use me and that I, personally, will not get in His way. We are servants of the Liturgy through which God opens to us His saving life.

3. My third conviction is this: our part is to offer the Mass as a service to the people. In doing so we make choices and judgements about how aspects of the Mass are to be done. In doing this we must always have upper most in our minds that the heart of Liturgy is the people's encounter with the Lord. Everything about the Liturgy is to serve this purpose. So in the choices we make, which give a particular tone to the Liturgy, our positive criterion should be: will this serve the encounter of the people with the Lord? Of course, things old and new can serve. Our choices though are shaped both by the instruction of the Church in its norms and guidance and by our duty to serve our people.

It seems to me that one thing above all is needed for this precious, transforming encounter with the Lord to take place in: space, space which allows for the movement of the heart to the Lord and of Him to us. At Mass we need space – spaces of silence, spaces for the quiet recollection of the people, both before and during Mass. So, the fashion of our celebration of the Mass should never be dominating or overpowering of those taking part. It should be well judged, respectful of its congregation, sensitive to their spiritual needs.

In my view one quality enhances this sense of divinely filled space in which we worship God: it is the beauty of the Liturgy and its reverence. A beautiful, cared for church is the best preparation we can provide. I was recently reminded of the words of Cardinal Hume: that our churches are not simply buildings in which we worship the Lord, but buildings with which we worship Him. I thank you for all your efforts in this important regard. The church as an arena of beauty for the Lord is, it seems to me, always a springboard of a vibrant parish.

4. My fourth and final point follows: whenever the Liturgy of the Church, the celebration of the Mass, truly enters our heart and soul, then the result is a vibrant sense of mission. When we meet the Lord in all His love for us, then we are ready to respond, especially in the care we give to the poorest and those most in need, those closest to the Heart of our Saviour. Our Diocesan 'Conversation in Caritas', about the social outreach of our parishes, has a Eucharistic centre. I thank you for your participation in it. A profound celebration of the Mass inexorably gives rise to a practical expression of compassion and willing service. It just is so.

My brothers, I am conscious of the length of these words and their strained character as a homily. But these are important matters, now, in the months ahead, in our hearts.

In the Mass all that we receive is a gift of the Father. It is never ours to use or shape as we please. In the Mass all is to the glory of the Son. In this we are no more than instruments, humble and delighted to play our part. In the Mass all is for the sake of our people: that they may encounter the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. In the Mass we who know Him also know that we are in this world to serve its humanity in His name, until He comes again. These are the hallmarks of our Liturgy, the measures against which we can test our hearts, our intentions and our actions.

Among us let there be a humble, joyful service of the Lord. Let us accept with joy the search for a renewal in our celebration of the Mass guided solely by the Church and let our own faith and prayer be tutored daily by what is asked of us. Amen.

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster