

Be worthy of your vocation

A Sermon preached on Sunday, 26th September 2010 (26th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C: Trinity XVII) in S. Mary the Virgin, Bourne Street by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian and Custodian of the Library, Pusey House, Oxford.

Walk worthy of your vocation wherewith ye are called¹

MEN and women are moved and engaged by ritual symbols, by those hallowed by association and by custom, those that express an abiding and continuous tradition. At their most sublime they express in terms we find difficult to articulate the aspirations of conscience and the yearnings of the human soul. *Cor ad cor loquitor*, heart shall speak to heart, was much heard only a few days ago during the visit of Pope Benedict XVI, and Blessed John Henry Newman's motto, adapted from S. Francis de Salle, perfectly sums up Catholic worship and vocation. His Sacred Heart of love speaks to our own hearts in the sacrament of love. The protestants of the sixteenth century pushed the focus of worship from the altar to the pulpit, from the sanctuary, the sanctus sanctorum, and from the chancel, to the nave. It is the abiding glory of the Oxford Movement and the Catholic Revival in the Church of England that we have pushed it back again. William Laud said, in words I quoted here several years ago, "The altar is the greatest place of God's residence upon earth, greater than the pulpit; for there 'tis *Hoc est corpus meum*, This is my Body; but in the other it is at most *Hoc est Verbum meum*, This is my Word."²

The very centre and heartbeat of the Christian life and worship is the perpetual offering of the Passion and Death of the risen and ascended Lord before the throne of God: the offering that will go on until time ends. The altar in heaven is not one of stone and wood: the sacrifice in heaven is not one of carnal, creaturely things, bulls or goats of the old dispensation, rather the altar and the sacrifice alike are the abiding offering of the humanity of Christ which the Son of God, stooping a little lower than the angels, took upon himself for the salvation and redemption of the world and of his people, among whom we are numbered, in the Incarnation and which he effected and consummated in his Passion and Death, and which he sealed forever in his Resurrection and Ascension.

And here we are conjoined, a living, priestly people, with those who have died in Christ, the Church militant, the Church expectant, the Church triumphant, "with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven,"³ undivided and indivisible, joined and gathered in this offering. All the sacrificial elements of the Christian life, the life and vocation to which we are all called, individually and corporately, are gathered and offered: all the glory, all the sorrows, all the pains, all the joys, all the pity, all the works of our hands and the prayers of our heart. We who keep the feast with Jesus will be raised with him, to be with him, to join him in his heavenly work. As Origen has it, "Those who follow Christ ... stand at the divine sacrifices" and "reach to the very altar of God, where is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the High Priest of good things to come."⁴

The Eucharist both expresses and shapes our vocation. The Christian vocation is a sacrificial one: it is one that prizes the virtues of humility and service. The Eucharist is the Church's sacrifice. Here the Church, in our expression of it, presents to the Father the life

¹ Ephesians 4: 2

² William Laud, *Speech at the Trial of Bastwick, Burton and Prynne. June 1637*

³ Book of Common Prayer

⁴ Origen

of Jesus. It is his Body: it is his Blood that is made present on the altar. It is the offering of all that is Him, of all his life and ministry, of the completeness of his perfect vocation, all that he has been, all that he is, all that he can ever be, all brought to its fulfillment in his Passion and Resurrection, and it is that which we plead in this re-presentation, this anamnesis, this bringing into the present of that one, perfect, unrepeatable sacrifice. In this sacrifice we are able to unite ourselves with him and to offer ourselves, our own vocations, our souls and bodies, as the liturgy has it, to the Father.

As we take our several parts in this great offering, we are enabled to pray for our own needs and for the needs of the Church and for the world. All the joys, griefs and desires of humankind are caught up in the stream of the sacrifice. A former Principal of Pusey House has put it like this, "There are the sorrows of Christ's people, the troubles and perils of nations, the sorrowful sighing of prisoners, the miseries of widows and orphans and all that are desolate and bereaved, the necessities of strangers and travelers, the helplessness and sadness of the weak and sickly, the weakness of the aged and of children, the trials and aspirations of young men and maidens. With the body of the Lord we offer all that is our own, our praise and thanksgiving, our supplications for ourselves and our intercessions for others, our confessions of sin and our resolutions of amendment."⁵ Even allowing for the language of an earlier era, I expect that there as few maidens in Sloane Square as there are in Oxford, this reminds us forcibly of the power and the force of what it is that we do this morning.

But that power presents us with a challenge. Every time we celebrate this sacrifice, every time we make our communion, every time we pray before the Blessed Sacrament, we are faced with a challenge. It is the challenge of Our Lord himself who recalls to our minds what he is and what he has done. We are challenged by the stainlessness of his purity and how we soil his image within us by our failings, the completeness of his holiness and the incompleteness of our endeavours to live holy lives, the greatness of his self-sacrifice and our timid and partial offering of ourselves, the totality of his offering and his love, and too often our lack of love. In this Eucharist as in every Eucharist we become, literally, Christ-bearers, filled with the power and the possibilities of his life, able, if we accept the challenge, if we take it seriously, able to use that power, to reproduce its splendour in the working out of our own vocations.

As the visit of Pope Benedict illustrated, we have to live out our vocations within an unsympathetic and hostile environment, but it has been ever thus. The state's identification with the values of liberal humanism, of moral relativism, of secular impulses and the aggressive atheism identified by the Pope and witnessed by us in its strident rhetoric, its arguments based on ignorance and willful distortion, seeks to marginalize, if not yet extirpate, the Christian religion from the public square and from public discourse. Only the true liberal and egalitarian can promote the most illiberal and elitist doctrine with that lack of self-awareness and blindness to its hypocrisy that is truly astonishing. Truth and morality now seem to be what Stephen Fry says they are. Blessed John Henry Newman identified it when he said: "Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as true. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not

⁵ Darwell Stone, *The Eucharistic Sacrifice* Wipf and Stock Publishers [2006] pp 24 – 26

miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy."⁶ Prescient words, now coming into the full light of day.

We are faced with the persistent dilemma of what is properly owed to Caesar and what is owed to God. As S. Thomas More said, "I am the King's good servant but God's first." This country's democratic principles of freedom of speech, the rule of law, equality before the law, a commonality of national interest are congruent with the Catholic social principles that we would espouse: the innate dignity of every human person created in the image and likeness of God and of equal worth before Him; the belief in the duty of civil authorities to pursue that which is for the common good, to protect the weak and vulnerable, to ameliorate social deprivation and poverty. But as Pope Benedict pointed in his speech in Westminster Hall, "if the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are ... determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident - herein lies the real challenge for democracy."⁷ We have seen evidence enough in the past few years of the inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex social and ethical problems that bear on the freedom of individual conscience.

The Pope's challenge is no more than the challenge of the Gospel, the challenge of the Mass. Our vocation is to be a voice in the public square articulating truths and insights, revelations and ethical norms that have underpinned law and society for generations, and also, and not least, to bring, in Dr Pusey's words, "to the vivid consciousness of members of the Church of England, Catholic truths taught of old within her." Ours should be the candid voice of insistent orthodoxy, the call to walk humbly with God, to live a life of service and selflessness. If that is not our vocation then all this, all this beauty of holiness, attired in glorious raiment, the music of angels is little more than an incestuous indulgence, self-referential and self-regarding, salvation by haberdashery. What saves it from that, what prevents it from being a mere dumb show, is that at its heart is the cross: the cross upon which hung the Saviour of the world. It is the still point of our turning world and our turning humanity, the sign of the ideal of active, generous love, of that perfect humility which allows a total abandonment to the will of God and complete reliance on God the Father in his infinite love and mercy. The humility of the cross, the humiliation of the cross, becomes the exaltation of the cross: "whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." Defeat becomes victory: dereliction is transfigured into glory: death is transcended by the risen life. That is a gospel of life, life affirming, life saving, life enhancing and it is that which allows us and propels me and you to "walk worthy of [our] vocation wherewith [we] are called."

S. Mary the Virgin, Bourne Street 2010

⁶ Biglietto Speech 1879 on being given a Cardinal's Hat

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI in a speech given in Westminster Hall, Friday, 17 September 2010. Text taken from BBC Website.