

Old St. Martin's in the Cornmarket, Worcester

Report of the Parish Priest for the APCM April 2010

Introduction

My report comes at a time when many in the Catholic movement are anxious and concerned about the future. Some are seriously considering the Ordinariate and others wonder what their future can possibly be if they have the courage or the temerity to remain in the Church of their Baptism.

The Parish Priest who prepared me for confirmation used to wonder (audibly) why the Roman Catholic Church had a presence in England 'since we are the true Catholic Church of this land.' We would no longer say that so publicly, even if we thought it, and maybe historically there were periods for our Church when it wandered far from a Catholic witness, but nevertheless that vision of Anglican Catholicism was and still remains a vision which has fired and inspired many.

But some are now saying that we are seeing the end of the 'Anglican Experiment'. The only end I can see is (sadly) the death of the parish system, in that we no longer place a priest in every parish so that we can fulfil our ministry to the nation, but that is another issue, for another time and another place.

I have in recent days found strength and encouragement from looking once more at the implications of that vision of Catholic Anglicanism. Let me say first of all that this is not an exercise in nostalgia or a bewailing of lost glories. It is done to remind us just what that vision has given us, and continues to give us today.

The Church as a Eucharistic Community

Now you might say that this is true of any Christian congregation, and to a certain extent I would agree. But a Catholic has extra dimensions. We have a vision of Church as a Eucharistic Community (not just as worshippers with a common purpose and a common Lord). Such a vision of what it means to be Church defines us, feeds us, encourages us, roots us, and gives us purpose.

The Eucharist is actually two meetings with Almighty God. Firstly we meet him in Holy Scripture; secondly we meet him in Holy Communion. Thus we have two encounters with the Word of God, resulting in a spiritual feeding of our souls.

The Eucharist is at the heart of the Church, not just of our worship, and those of us who call it the Mass may need to be reminded that it is the "sending service" (Missa = sent); we receive the Body of Christ in order

that we might become the Body of Christ and be sent out to serve the Body of Christ (think about that!)

But the Mass is more than a mission service. The Mass is offered here daily, and yes, it is offered for the living and the departed. I do wonder sometimes whether people really think on the significance of what they are doing just by being present in church so that the Mass can be offered that day. I shall long remember the words of Bishop Christopher Herbert (of St. Albans) who often attended the early morning Eucharist in St. Albans Abbey. To reach the chapel where the celebration was being held he had to walk along the entire length of that long nave. Those of you who know St. Albans will know there was once an altar in front of each pillar - (the painted altarpieces survive) - where each monk would offer the Mass every day. It struck Bishop Christopher how the monks were 'aware that by the celebration of the Eucharist they were participating in something of cosmic significance.' In other words what they were doing was something powerful and literally world-changing.

Our little group of 3 or 4 people changing the world? Oh yes. Never underestimate the power of God which is unleashed on this world through the Holy Eucharist. It is not just something we attend; it is a God-given opportunity to bring light into the dark places of this world and participate in their redemption.

A deep view of Church

A major Catholic insight is that of the Greater Church. 'So we commend ourselves, and each other, and all those for whom we have prayed, and all God's children living and departed, to the prayers of Our Lady, Saint Martin our Patron-in-prayer and the whole company of heaven.' These are words I often use at the end of the Prayers of Intercession. It reminds us that whenever we pray, we do not pray alone or even into a vacuum. 'Out there', or rather 'around us in here', is that multitude which 'no man can number, whose hope was in the Word-made-Flesh, and with whom in the Lord Jesus we are one for evermore'. Chief among these are Our Lady and our Patron Saint, and important though their prayers are, they most certainly do not pray alone either. Others surround us with their love and their prayers. Think of Bridget Monahan and think of Eddie Prior. Do you consider for one minute that they have ceased to pray for us?

We never ever pray alone, and are surrounded by a praying fellowship of love and prayer which transcends time and space. That is Church. But it takes a Catholic to say that.

Another word is community; I am not living out 'my' faith, but 'our' faith. None of us lives in isolation in a self-centred cocoon. It is always 'us' not 'me' in Catholicism; 'we' believe, and we make 'our' communion.

Spirituality

The Catholic Vision has given the Church a deep spirituality. The word here is discipline. Daily prayer and Bible reading expose us to God's Word in every sense of that word. Self-examination (with or without sacramental confession) keeps us on our toes. Retreats and Quiet Days all ensure periods of quiet and rest and recreation in God's presence. Frequent attendance at Mass - and I am not only talking here of Sundays and Solemnities, but the Monthly Requiem, the Saturday Mass of Our Lady and the First Friday devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus - all these help to build us up as well as fulfilling our obligations to the world in which God has placed us.

Pilgrimages remind us that we are all on a journey of faith, a journey of fellowship and companionship with others who too find life hard and sometimes are tempted to give up. That's why we need that fellowship, that sense we are not on this journey on our own, that as well as the ones we can see there are those we cannot see - but who still constantly help us.

So why be a Catholic?

And here we come to why God wants us to do all this. It is not that we want to because we like that sort of thing or that it gives us a spiritual boost. We do these things because God has told us to do them. 'Do this in remembrance of me,' said Our Lord on the same night when he was betrayed. We join the Church by Baptism, that moment when we become children of God; we are baptized into a community of faith and we live out the implications of our Baptism within that community. Thus God looks to his children to be his body in the world, to continue the work begun by his Son. He entrusts us with this responsibility and gives us food for the journey and tools with which to work.

Furthermore we willingly share the vision with others - share it because it is too good and too precious to be kept to ourselves, and it is our Father's wish that it should be shared. Please remember that first of all Catholicism is caught not taught. We are gripped by the vision of God at work in the Sacraments in the Church and his people. The teaching comes later when we begin to try to explain it to ourselves. Of course at a very deep level it cannot be explained, only lived out. Remember too that the Sacraments are there for our earthly beginning and our earthly departing and for everything else in between. So use them. They are there to be used. There are seven Sacraments and some of us have used all seven. By the end of our earthly lives all of us should have used five at the very least.

The major defining points of a Catholic parish

All this builds up into a picture of what a Catholic Parish should be. Briefly speaking it consists of:

- a congregation who meet their Lord and each other at the altar regularly and frequently
- a congregation who are empowered by worship to go out and meet Christ in the service of others (and this is understood in a very broad sense)
- a congregation who build themselves up through prayer, Bible reading, study and fellowship
- a congregation who care for each other because they are inspired by the love of Christ to do so
- a congregation who are open to new people and new members – those who are seeking God but cannot yet articulate it – and who may well need gentle nurturing and encouragement.

Do we recognise ourselves? I hope and pray that we do.

The future of Catholicism within the Church of England

But really, what relevance does it have to us here and now? So let us place ourselves firmly in the first decade on the twenty-first century. In many ways we may find that an uncomfortable place to be; nevertheless it is the time and the place in which God in his wisdom has set us. It could be argued that all this talk of a Catholic vision is so very old-fashioned. This was a vision which used to work once upon a time. But not only has our Society walked away from church attendance out of habit, but there is a general perception that Catholicism in the Church of England has been routed by the forces of 'Liberalism'. There is no place for a true Catholic in the Church of England today, and the Catholic movement is finished.

I am not convinced. Consider this. The Catholic movement has a future, indeed it has only just begun. One of the things which so greatly exercised our fathers in the Faith was the neglect of the Holy Eucharist. Over the past two centuries many (indeed most) of our churches have moved from an occasional Eucharist (maybe monthly) to the Eucharist as their main service on a Sunday. You might think that particular battle has been won. That is not so. We now see a failure of nerve on the part of some clergy who appear to have decided that ordinary folk are somehow put off by a Eucharist, that the Eucharist is fine for the committed and for those who like that sort of thing – but for the great majority of people it is no longer appropriate.

The battle (if you can think of it as such) is just beginning. The movement to place the Eucharist at the heart of the Church's worship was far more than just 'Let's have a Parish Communion at 9.30 on a Sunday morning rather than Mattins'. It was all about building up the People of God as a Eucharistic Community, training them in mission and ministry and prayer, and beginning to realise the vocation of all of us to be Christ in the world. This remains true today, and it will be true for all time.

There is still a great need to remind Church people of this, especially those who ask the question I never thought I would hear: 'Does we have to have a Eucharist on a Sunday?'

Secondly, there is a great need to restore and foster confidence in Catholic parishes particularly in those that see their future, for better or worse, within the Church of England.

So, where does this leave OSM? It leaves OSM with a valuable (and indeed vital) ministry of witness to the rest of the Church in Worcester and beyond of what a Catholic parish ought to be. It is based on a vision which is positive, life-giving and life affirming, since it is firmly based in Christ, in the Sacraments, in Tradition and in Holy Scripture. That is our witness - not just me writing this, but all of us together. Think about what Catholicism really means. And I don't mean incense and vestments, but what it means in our hearts, deep inside us. I'm talking about what happens to us when we meet Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament regularly and frequently. I'm talking of how we meet a life-changing God who changes us all for the better and enables us to be the people he wants us to be. I'm talking of how we become a community that attracts other people to us by the welcome we offer and the hospitality we show. That is grass roots Catholicism, and that is not just our duty but our joy.

The website

Meanwhile, if you were to google the words *Old St. Martin's Worcester* you would find well over a million hits to those words on the internet. We have an important presence out there, and people take notice. We were even quoted recently in the pages of the Church Times. We receive unsolicited testimonials as to the welcome and the content of our website. People come to see us because they have found us on the internet. This ministry in cyberspace is becoming more and more important and we ought to think seriously about recording our services and putting them on the net. The Episcopal Cathedral in Washington does that; in fact you can watch their Sunday Eucharist as it happens and then the services are archived so that you can listen again to the sermon – should you so wish – or that prayer or hymn which really moved you. If you think this is stuff and nonsense, then think again. Already through the website and the internet we have an influence out of all proportion to the size of our congregation. We remain extremely grateful to Paul Bevand for imaginative and sterling work which has given us a website of which we and he can be justifiably proud.

Final words

And when the bells are installed our church will proclaim its witness to the Catholic Vision even more vociferously!

The Reverend Ian Pearson, Parish Priest.