

## Maundy Thursday 2019

Tonight we celebrate the central Sacrament of the Church, instituted by Jesus on the evening before his Passion and Death.

We are surely grateful as individuals for the Holy Eucharist in which we can find personal comfort and strength, forgiveness and encouragement down all the days and years of our life. The Lord abides with us here at Mass and at Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. He makes his presence felt in a special way. His love comes to bear upon us and we can know him within our deepest selves. He keeps us going when the road is rough; he keeps us faithful when our lives are tough. He is our best friend - to whom we can come for respite and relief, for refreshment and for reassurance: which we all need from time to time.

But this sacrament is for more than the spiritual revival of individual believers - it is for the regeneration and renewal of the **community** of faith, for the Church itself. The Second Vatican Council described the Eucharist as the 'Source and Summit of the Church's life'. During her long history the Church has had to face many times of crisis but the Lord has, as he promised, been ever present: *Behold, I am with you all days, even to the end of the world.*

The present is certainly such a time of crisis: the Church is being beset from without, and from within. Atheism, humanism, secularism, hedonism - all challenge our beliefs and our way of life, our principles and standards, our customs and practices. Other religious creeds and other world views crowd in upon us battering our convictions, diminishing our sense of security.

But perhaps the greatest disturbance and discomfiture comes from within the Church itself with the wide range of public scandals which have served to undermine the Church's moral authority and have left it exposed and vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, duplicity, mendacity.

For all these reasons numbers of Catholics have abandoned the practice of their faith, their withdrawal evident in our emptying pews. Those who remain faithful can be disheartened, discouraged, dismayed. Brought up, as perhaps many of us were, at a time when the Church was full of confidence, in 'triumphal mode', we might well be experiencing great distress and bewilderment.

As indeed did the disciples of Jesus as they witnessed the arrest, trial, and dreadful death of the Master on Calvary. In previous prophecies and at the Last Supper itself the Lord had warned them of his approaching 'Hour' - his *Krisis*. He also taught them that through that event he would fulfil his destiny, achieve his Mission, and offer New Life to all.

When, after his Resurrection Jesus joined his disciples repeatedly for a meal together - at Emmaus, in the Upper Room, by the Lakeside, and in the infant Church when they gathered together for the 'Breaking of the Bread', they realised over and again that he **was** still with them, all days, even to the end of time.

In his review of an explosive book just published\*, which claims to expose the double standards of the Church at the highest level, Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Dominicans, wonders if the present crisis could be experienced as a 'time of grace'. He writes:

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\* 'In the closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy'. Frederic Martel. Bloomsbury, 2019.

*The story of Israel and of the Church is of one crisis after another. With God's grace they are fruitful. The crisis of the sixth century BC Babylonian exile led the Chosen People from a belief that their God was the greatest of the gods to a true monotheism. The persecution of the newborn Jerusalem Church after Pentecost launched it on its worldwide mission. When Jesus did not return in glory shortly after the Ascension the crisis arguably led to the writing of the Gospels. We should not be afraid of crises.*

We might add that in the course of history the Church has survived Militant Islam, the dreadful disruption and internal strife of the Reformation, the crushing power of atheistic Communism - and endured to this day. Radcliffe continues:

*Our reaction to the present crisis should not be to batten down the hatches and hope that everything will go on as before. The only realistic response is bravely to explore new ways of being Church - already envisaged, in fact, at the Second Vatican Council. However painful this moment is, it can be lived with faith in the Lord who never deserts the church, and so neither should we. A new way of being church is emerging, which will have new strengths, and (of course) new weaknesses, a Church which will, in its turn, one day be superseded.\**

Four years before his death in 1988 Carlo Carletto, one of the greatest spiritual writers of our time wrote a spiritual testament to the institutional Church. In this he cried:

*How much I must criticise you, my Church, and yet how much I love you! You have made me suffer more than anyone, and yet I owe more to you than to anyone. I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me much scandal, and yet you alone have made me understand your holiness. Never in this world have I seen anything more compromised, more false, yet never have I touched anything more pure, more generous, or more beautiful. Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face - and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your arms!*

*No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you. Then too - where would I go? To build another Church? But I could not build one without the same defects, for they are my defects. And again if I were to build another Church, it would be my Church, not Christ's Church. No, I am old enough. I know better.*

Mgr Anthony Figueiredo, who cites these words in a recent article in The Universe\*\*, remarks:

*Carlo Carretto knew himself. He had discovered within himself the same paradox that he had discovered in the Church: a reality flawed and yet divinely made, able to reveal the unending love and mercy of God, and at the same time be able to obscure and destroy it. But he continued to love and serve the Church and the Holy Father to the very end.*

And so should we. That is what tonight is all about.

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\* 'The Carnival is over'. The Tablet, 16.2.19.

\*\* 'The Church: a reality that is flawed but divinely made'. The Universe, 1.3.19.