

Homily Advent 1B (2008)

Catholic Devotions I

Eucharistic Devotion

A few years the Catholic historian Eamon Duffy wrote a book called 'Faith of Our Fathers', in which he reminisces a little about his Irish upbringing of the 1950s. Here is an extract.

"Everyone went to mass, and my mother and I sometimes attended rosary, Sermon and Benediction on a weekday evening. Like everyone else, we ate fish on Fridays, we kept the fast days in Lent, we made popular novenas, to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour or St Gerard Majella...and we all had several stabs (in my case uniformly unsuccessful) at keeping the 'Nine First Fridays' - Confession and Communion on which, nine months in a row, guaranteed a holy death...

...the rhythms of the liturgical year, though not much reflected upon, were as absolute a part of the calendar as winter fogs or leaves in autumn - palms and ashes...the smell of incense and the subtler but more pervasive smell of holy water..There were stiff gold vestments at Easter or Christmas, purple in Lent, and an astonishing clapper device like a football rattle in place of bells in Holy Week".

And so he continues. Probably that world is quite familiar to some of you as well. He sums up "Catholicism was like breathing out and breathing in, part of the landscape, a given".

With the reforms of the Second Vatican Council there was a great spirit of optimism. In particular, huge expectations were attached to having the mass in English. This would focus everyone's attention on the fundamental Catholic worship, and so many of the additional devotions would no longer be needed. So, many of them melted away. And yet there is a growing sense, not only for Duffy but also for many others, that something has been lost here. The mass as we celebrate it now does indeed make full, active and conscious participation in the liturgy more easy, but there is now a new problem. For many Catholics, who in past years would have had lives peppered

with prayers and devotions, Sunday mass is now the full extent of their Catholic life. What has happened as a result is that all of their expectations of Catholic faith are piled onto one hour at the weekend, while the rest of the week is left largely untouched. People who in the past might have begun the day with a morning offering, said the angelus at noon, made a visit to the Blessed Sacrament on the way home, said grace before meals and ended with an examination of conscience now do none of that. Whereas in the past every action was filled with religious significance, that is now all left until Sunday morning. And so there is little wonder that our faith seems to become divorced from our daily lives, even irrelevant to them. More and more there is a sense in the Church that, while some of the devotions of the past were no serious loss, the disappearance of others has left us seriously weakened, and paradoxically their departure has left Sunday mass less full of meaning, less relevant to daily life. So there is a real sense that we need to re-examine and in some cases rediscover these traditional Catholic devotions.

Nowhere is this more true than in the case of Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. For some time in the late part of the last century, prayer before the Blessed Sacrament became rather out of fashion. There are probably a number of people here who have never experienced it. But we have come to realise that time spent praying silently in front of the Blessed Sacrament is one of the best ways of enriching our celebration of mass. The mass is a dynamic, moving event: Jesus comes to us in bread and wine, but all too quickly we move on to the next part, and we have no time to take to heart this extraordinary and amazing fact; he is truly here - the inside of the church building is a very different place, because Jesus is with us. If only I had time to let that really sink in before we move on to the prayer after communion, the blessing and dismissal.

So I come to the church, preferably when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed, and I kneel in silent wonder. Of course, I can pray sitting, and for some people kneeling is too difficult, but for those of us who can do it, I think kneeling is a good thing. We sometimes sit and pray, but we also sit to eat, to drink, to drive the car, to watch the telly, to listen to a concert, to read a book: we only kneel to pray, and so when we kneel our mind is helped to realise just what we are doing. While I am kneeling, I have the time to do what I could not do at mass. I stop and reflect on how amazing it

is to know that Jesus is really here, that he has come, and will come again to me in holy communion. The fact that I have time to do this means that what I experienced last time I came to mass seems that bit more real, that bit more a part of my substance, of my daily reality; it also means that next time I come to mass I will be that bit more aware of how out of the ordinary this event really is. So, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament is fed by, but also feeds, our celebration of mass. The world we live in, the culture of modern Britain, seldom looks beyond the surface: what you see is what you get. We need all the help we can to keep at the front of our minds the fact that everything around us has a deeper, spiritual meaning. That is just the message that we take from prayer in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

"The act of adoration outside Mass prolongs and intensifies all that takes place during the liturgical celebration itself."

Pope Benedict XVI *Sacramentum Caritatis* 66

All this probably sounds a bit like Father prattling on again about trying to get us to come to Church more often. But it is demonstrably true that Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament outside of mass deepens our devotion to Christ at mass, and our sense of his presence in our daily lives. If you try and discover what it is that enables some parish communities to really take off and become vibrant and exciting communities, very often what lies behind it is exposition of the Blessed Sacrament that allows people to reflect on the wonder of Christ's presence. When Moses left God's presence, his face was shining with the reflection of God's glory (Exodus 34.29); when we have spent time in the presence of the living God, it cannot leave us unaffected. In the same way, many of the thriving new movements in the Church draw their strength from prayer before the Blessed Sacrament; if any of you have been to a Youth 2000 retreat you will have experienced the wonderful sight of dozens of young Catholics praying together around the Blessed Sacrament.

So, I'd like to encourage you to give some thought to deepening our devotion to Jesus, truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, and I'll end with some simple suggestions.

Fr Peter Newsam - Petworth - West Sussex

Never forget, what looks like bread and wine is God himself. When you come into Church always genuflect, or if you cannot do that bow, to God among us.

Never pass a Catholic Church without going in, even for two or three minutes, kneeling in front of the tabernacle and saying a prayer for family and friends, a prayer for the people who worship there, perhaps an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory be.

Always come to communion with great reverence, never forget what you are about to touch.

Try to come to exposition. Spend at least a few minutes in the presence of Jesus: wonder at this great gift; thank him for your blessings, pray for the needy; just be quiet, and let him work on you; imagine yourself to be like John the Disciple, privileged to rest his head on the Lord's breast at the Last Supper (Jn. 13.25)

"In a world where there is so much noise, so much bewilderment, there is a need for silent adoration of Jesus concealed in the Host."

Pope Benedict told Polish priests in 2006. It is a lesson we would all do well to learn.