

A TREASURE WORTH PRESERVING

The guest speaker at this year's [1997] Annual General Meeting, of the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales, in Westminster Cathedral Hall on 21st June was the Rev. Dr. M.P.F. Cullinan, M.A., Ph.D., S.T.B., of the Church of the Holy Trinity, Brook Green, London

To say that his words were well received would be understatement indeed. To those of us who did fight 'for the noble cause in that terrible revolution', who do perhaps feel the 'weariness of the years' and temptation to despair, they bring the inexpressible joy and hope and a renewal of strength and faith. Thanks be to God, our treasure is in safe hands. We reproduce Father Cullinan's moving and inspiring address in full.

OXFORD, or so its enemies say, is the home of lost causes. Next to my Oxford College, at the bottom of the garden of a neighbouring establishment, there is a beautiful garden gate. Welded shut. An ancient monument to a lost but noble cause. Very appropriate perhaps for Oxford.

Once, you see, there was a revolution. The rightful Catholic order was thrown out. New ways came in. Dutchmen and Germans ruled. Heresy triumphed. The defenders of the old ways fought back but were defeated. Crushed completely by force, by progress and by weight of numbers. Within a generation or so it seemed that Catholic England was gone forever. Now merely a picturesque oddity. A reminder of a quaint and primitive past. The preserve of eccentric families and antiquarians. You would have been mad to have predicted it would return. Yet it did. But not exactly as it had been. Things never do. And only as a religion. The Stuarts remain abroad. The garden gate of Trinity College Oxford remains shut.

The Jacobite Fellows of Trinity locked that gate as a silent (and so a safe) protest at the passing of the Stuarts. They may well have imagined it would fairly soon be opened. But they waited in vain. Yet the faith and the Mass King James II knew and loved was to come back again. Not quite as it was, but essentially unchanged.

I think I am the youngest priest ever to be asked to speak at this meeting. It is an honour to follow in the footsteps of Cardinals and prelates. An honour not only for me but for all those of us younger priests who have found great spiritual benefit in

learning, privily and unofficially, to celebrate the immemorial rite of the Holy Catholic Church.

But I am too young to have seen the Revolution, except as a child. I am not a product of preConciliar times. I am not of the generation who came to maturity before or during the Second Vatican Council. I am not one who fought for the new order, exulting in its freedom from the ponderous weight and seemingly crippling rigidities of the past. So I do not easily sympathise with this one generation's apparent passion for destroying forever the inheritance it received. Its passion for rebuilding everything from scratch in the cultural concrete of the sixties.

But neither was I old enough to be a defender of the old ways, the noble cause. To be defeated. Crushed by force, by progress and by weight of numbers. I have grown up into a bit of a Jacobite.

But grown up with the Stuart gate already closed.

It would be easy to get carried away with this. To believe that affection for the Old Rite is like a sort of liturgical Jacobitism. Once deadly and treasonous. Still deeply suspect and sometimes dangerous. But gradually becoming merely a picturesque oddity. A reminder of a quaint and primitive past. The preserve of eccentric families and antiquarians. Gone forever.

Those who fought for the noble cause in that terrible revolution may be forgiven for feeling the weariness of the years. For beginning to despair. Because the fact is that weight of numbers do seem to have won. Of those who still go to Mass, the overwhelming majority know absolutely nothing of the traditional rite. They have been kept from even the vestiges of Latin, plainsong and traditional Catholic prayers and devotions. And sorry though I am to say it, most of the times I say the old Mass outside central London, the congregations seems to be small and mainly elderly.

Oh of course there are young people. Of course there are young priests. Of course there is a terrible emptiness in our world and often in our Church. An emptiness which the Old Rite would certainly help to fill. But I think we have to face the future with honesty. We cannot presume that the gate will be unwelded again in our lifetimes. And we have to accept that the past is never reinstated without variation. Things are never again exactly as they had been.

I wouldn't be here today if I thought we were like Jacobites. Or if I thought the only reason for preserving the old Mass was nostalgia for the peaceful Masses of childhood. Because that's not how I came to love the Old Rite. It's not how I came to join this Society eighteen years ago. I joined because I was sickened and hurt by so many Masses I had been to. By the banal singing. By the ugly and inadequate translations. And most of all by endless arguments of what fragments of beauty and tradition we might be able to persuade a reluctant clergy to allow in the New Rite. By sacristy politics. By divisive battles over all the details of what should be our supreme symbol of unity and of peace.

I am of the generation that had the new ways forced on me. That saw the end of so much beauty and so much harmony. I can just remember when the Mass was simply above controversy and rancour. It seems a different world.

I find in the Old Rite not complete and uncriticisable perfection. Nor a model to be imposed on everyone else. If we have learned anything from the last thirty years it must be the cruelty and futility of needless compulsion. Of needlessly destroying the fixed landmarks of people's religion. Of trying to produce something that has to be expected to be prayerful and beautiful through the dictat and the horse-trading of ecclesiastical bureaucracy.

Instead I have found a treasure of beauty and peace. A treasure worth preserving at any price.

We are not Jacobites, pining for an old cultural or social or political order lost forever in the stream of progress. But neither are we recusants, believing that we are obliged to resist a new religion as a matter of faith and conscience. Believing God's providence will one day restore the truth.

We are somewhere in between. I believe we are charged with preserving something of inestimable value in the Church. Charged almost as a vocation with handing on something which will one day

be vital to that continual renewal of the Church which is one of its perennial duties and characteristics. Bearers of a priceless treasure in trust for all time. But a difficult treasure to appreciate. Not a jewel-encrusted ring that anyone could see the value of. More the sort of antique that goes out of fashion but later turns out to be worth

far more than people once thought. And to be far more important than people ever once believed.

If we accept that the Old Rite may perhaps never return as the universal Rite of the Latin Church, we have to justify, to ourselves and to others, why we are making such efforts to preserve it. Why the old antique is still worth anything.

Upon reflection, I came up with two reasons why I personally believe it is worth my while taking the risk, and I fear it is still a risk, of defending an unpopular and apparently lost cause. One is theological and intellectual. The other I always knew. You always knew. But it is unfashionable to admit it.

I like the Old Rite because it is beautiful. And I grew angry at wondering why I felt I have to apologise for saying that. Not for saying that is it good and true - although certainly it is. But for saying it is simply quite beautiful.

We live in an age that seems embarrassed about beauty. Most priests, perhaps most men, are uneasy when you use the word. They think it might be rather effete to prefer beauty to ugliness. Beauty seems almost superficial compared with goodness and truth. Compared with efficiency and power. And if they are cleverer, they say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. That it is a waste of time discussing beauty because it is all just a question of personal taste. Which is of course exactly what more and more people think is true of goodness and truth.

But I can just remember my Metaphysics course. Not pleasantly perhaps. But enough to remember a Latin tag. *Omne ens in quantum est est pulchrum*. Everything that exists, insofar as it exists at all, is beautiful. So beauty, like goodness and truth, is one of the essentials of being. So nothing can be true enough, nothing good enough unless it is also beautiful. Everything that lacks beauty lacks truth and goodness too.

Of course all this is dreadfully old-fashioned philosophy. As old-fashioned as our quaint Catholic insistence on good morals and true doctrine. But if not part of our faith, it is at least next door to it. Saint Augustine hailed the God to whom he was converted as Beauty so ancient and so new.

I grew up in a world of increasing ugliness. Of growing noises, fumes and concrete blocks. Of lurid and formless art. Of loud and tuneless music. Of continual

cheapening and denigration of past glory and past quality. I seem to live in a world of coarsening manners and dress. Of growing ignorance, insensitivity and base functionalism.

I hated much of what I saw in Catholic worship because it too was becoming uglier: cheaper, formless and baser.

And alas I often still see the same ugliness at Masses. Trite, self-indulgent music. Words that sometimes celebrate the congregation more than Almighty God. Nonsense words about our omniscient God having faith and dreams for me. Cheerfully sung by those who have grown up with nothing better.

As a priest, I am coming to dread noisy, cramped concelebrations that become ever more like ceremonies and less like the awesome rites of sacrifice and prayer we Catholics believe them to be. They seem to be becoming occasions where peer group pressure and the exigencies of that way we do things today make Catholics priests embarrassed or unable in any external way to prepare quietly for Mass or to give thanks peacefully afterwards. Nobody wants to be thought over-pious or to get in the way. Not even a priest.

We do not live in a world with great instinct for beauty, so it is not surprising, nor even necessarily something to blame anyone completely for, that a wholesale rebuilding of our liturgy should not escape the brutalization of European culture. But earlier ages with more instinct for beauty produced a liturgy that reaches parts of the soul unreached by the new; and the preservation of a deliberately glorious and beautiful High Mass and a deliberately peaceful and prayerful Low Mass will allow later generations to see clearly just what they are missing.

A world which loses the beautiful will ipso facto lose the good and the true too. It needs the beautiful if it is to have anything at all. So does the Church. A liturgy that does not speak to the parts of the soul rubbed raw by the ugliness of the world will fail to give either hope or comfort, because it will fail to point away from our atheistic secular world to our Father who is in heaven.

The Old Rite is worth a life's dedication simply because it is beautiful.

But I think I know what the opposition is thinking now. He's just a young fogey. An aesthete trapped in the romance of the old and the past. With no place in the new, modern, Blairite Britain.

But I know I'm not. I have a Doctorate in mathematics, not history of art. I worked in the mathematics of computation, one of the newest of all subjects. I programmed and used computers. And I prefer the newest computers. Because they're the best. I have nothing against technology, against newer things. I am not opposed to change.

But neither do I worship it. Notice a strange thing. How many articles have you read passionately arguing the need for bigger computers, for mobile phones, for food processors and anti-lock brakes?

None. Because they are obviously better. Obviously improvements.

Any change if either for the better or not. If it is for the better it will show. Soon. Clearly. There may be initial resistance but it soon disappears.

But if it is actually for the worse or just the same it has to be defended. Justified. Argued for. Advocated. Or often, simply imposed by force.

We live in a world which worships change. Instead of accepting that change has a price, and so we should only change if it's worth it, we rush like lemmings in a mad stampede to embrace anything that's new just because it is new. Behind this pattern of behaviour, of course, is a philosophy of cultural Darwinism that says that because animals have evolved into higher forms over a period of millions of years, then every single social change always makes humanity higher and better. In this case of course, Christ came at the wrong time. Into a primitive and hopelessly ignorant society. So nothing that he did or said could be of permanent value.

So our Church has to reject the worship of change. Or it would cease to be a historical, apostolic religion. Yet at the same time it has to be in this world that is rushing blindly into the future. So it has updated itself. But at the cost of cutting much of itself off from the past. Our Catholic, Apostolic past.

Our religion is not fundamentally one of catechisms and theology books that update and improve. It is one of sacraments and scripture. We are united to our past, and so to Christ himself, through sacraments and scripture. There cannot be a New Mass

any more than a New Bible. Changes in the form of the Mass, as in the accepted text and translations of Scripture are often necessary and right.

But a reform that begins again from scratch is very dangerous. And without clear sight of the landmark of the old, the process of reform may easily lose its way.

By celebrating the Old Rite, with all its historical accretions, peculiarities and complexities, I am securely part of an organic link with the beginning of the church, a link to Christ himself. And at a time when most people believe the past is there to be junked, the Church needs this link more than ever.

One day, you see, the new revolutionary order will change again. And by God's grace another spring will come from the Church in our country and in the wider world. If we have helped that spring to be beautiful and fertile by husbanding a previous resource through even part of the long winter, we shall not have worked in vain and we shall not lose our reward. And, who knows, one day even the Stuart gate may be opened again!

© M.P. Cullinan 1997