

The Priest at Mass

It's odd what one remembers from theological college, isn't it. For me, those memories go back over 20 years now, but one thing I have never forgotten, perhaps because it shocked my pious young mind, is something Fr George Guiver spoke about in a liturgy class. Apparently an opinion poll had asked people what they thought about their experience of Mass and the most boring bit of the Mass, according to this poll, was the Eucharistic Prayer. How interesting that people find that most important of prayers the most boring part of the Mass. Sometimes, though, one can hardly blame them. I wonder if you have had the experience of being at a Masses when priests saying the Eucharistic Prayer gives the impression that they have not given a thought to what it is they are saying, never mind whether or not they actually mean what they say or are moved by their prayer. And so I want to think in this first talk about the way the celebration of the Eucharist is a blessing to a priest and also to reflect on how priests are a blessing to the Church and to the world because we celebrate the Eucharist.

Monsignor Quixote

I want to start this by reading you a passage from one of my favourite novels, *Monsignor Quixote* by Graham Greene. If you haven't read it before you absolutely must. It is the story of a simple, old priest in a village in Spain, Monsignor Quixote, who manages to fall foul of his irascible bishop and is ordered to take a period of extended leave. He sets off on a tour around Spain with a surprising companion, the atheist, communist, former Mayor of the village, who has just been voted out of office by the forces of reaction. Their adventures are a wonderful read in and of themselves, but the story also operates as a modern-day re-telling of Don Quixote and as an exploration of the similarities and differences between Christianity and Socialism. I think Graham Greene is too soft on Socialism, as many twentieth

century thinkers were, but that's probably because I am temperamentally more like the irascible bishop than the saintly Father Quixote. Leaving that to one side though, I'd like to take you to the very end of the tale, when Monsignor Quixote is on his death-bed. His journeys have brought him to the old Trappist monastery of Osera in Galicia. Keeping vigil at the bedside are the ex-mayor, known as Sancho; the superior of the monastery, Fr Leopoldo, and a visiting academic, Professor Pilbeam. Monsignor Quixote has been muttering in semi-delerium about his adventures and about his faith, when suddenly, though still asleep, he sits up, puts his feet to the ground and sets off in his pyjamas.

Father Quixote walked slowly and carefully out into the passage and moved towards the great staircase, but perhaps some memory of the route by which they had carried him from the Church made him pause. He addressed one of the wooded painted figures – pope or knight?- and asked quite lucidly, 'Is this the way to your Church?' He seemed to receive an answer, for he turned on his heel and passed Sancho without a word, going this time in the right direction for the private stair. They followed him cautiously so as not to disturb him.

'Suppose he falls on the stairs,' the mayor whispered.

'To wake him would be more dangerous.'

Father Quixote led them down into the shadows of the great church, lit only by the half moon which shone through the east window. He walked firmly to the altar and began to say the the words of the old Latin Mass, but it was in an oddly truncated form. He began with the response, 'Et introibo ad altare Dei, qui laetificat juventutem meam.'

'Is he conscious of what he is doing?' Professor Pilbeam whispered.

‘God knows,’ Father Leopoldo answered.

The Mass went quickly on – no epistle, no gospel: it was as though Father Quixote was racing towards the consecration... Even the long list of saints from Peter to Damien was omitted.

‘When he finds no paten and no chalice, surely he will wake,’ Father Leopoldo said. The Mayor moved a few steps nearer to the altar. He was afraid that, when the moment of waking came, Father Quixote might fall, and he wanted to be near enough to catch him in his arms.

‘Who the day before he suffered took bread...’ Father Quixote seemed totally unaware that there was no Host, no paten waiting on the altar. He raised his empty hands ‘Hoc est enim corpus meum,’ and afterwards he went steadily on without hesitation to the consecration of the non-existent wine in the non-existent chalice.

Father Leopoldo and the professor had knelt from custom at the words of consecration: the Mayor remained standing. He wanted to be prepared if Father Quixote faltered.

‘Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei.’ The empty hands seemed to be fashioning a chalice in the air.

‘Sleep? Delerium? Madness?’ Professor Pilbeam whispered the question. The Mayor edged a few more steps towards the altar. He was afraid to distract Father Quixote. As long as he was speaking the Latin words he was at least happy in his dream.

In the years which had passed since his youth at Salamanca the Mayor had forgotten most of the Mass. What remained in his head were certain key passages which had appealed to him emotionally at that distant time. Father Quixote seemed to be suffering from the same lapse of memory – perhaps all the years of saying Mass, almost mechanically, by heart, it was only those sentences which, like the night-lights of childhood, had lit the dark-room of habit, that he was recalling now.

So it was he remembered the Our Father, and from there his memory leapt to the Agnus Dei... then he went onto the prayer of the Roman centurion, ‘Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof; say but the word and my soul shall be healed.’

His Communion was approaching. The professor said, ‘Surely when he finds nothing there to take, he will wake up.’

‘I wonder,’ said Father Leopoldo. He added, ‘I wonder if he will ever wake again.’

For a few seconds Father Quixote remained silent. He swayed a little back and forth before the altar. The Mayor took another step forward, ready to catch him, but then he spoke again. ‘Corpus Domini nostri’, and with no hesitation at all he took from the invisible paten the invisible Host and his fingers laid the nothing on his tongue. Then he raised the invisible chalice and seemed to drink from it. The Mayor could see the movement of his throat as he swallowed.

For the first time he appeared to become conscious that he was not alone in the Church. He looked around with a puzzled air. Perhaps he was seeking the communicants. He remarked the Mayor standing a few feet from him

and took the non-existent Host between his fingers; he frowned as though something mystified him and then he smiled. ‘Companero,’ he said, ‘you must kneel, companero.’ He came forward three steps with two fingers extended, and the Mayor knelt. Anything which will give him peace, he thought, anything at all. The fingers came closer. The Mayor opened his mouth and felt the fingers, like a Host, on his tongue. (Father Quixote’s) legs gave way. The Mayor had only just time to catch him and ease him to the ground. ‘Companero,’ the Mayor repeated the word in turn, ‘this is Sancho’ and he flet over and over again without success for the beat of Father Quixote’s heart.¹

Well, leaving to one side all the beautiful and very moving resonances of the supreme moment of sacrifice on Calvary that saturate that piece of prose and the mystical reconciliation that Fr Quixote’s Mass and his death effects between Sancho and the Church, between Communism and Christianity, I want to reflect with you on the way in which the delirious, dying priest demonstrates by his determination and by his actions and words and by his dying the extent to which the Eucharistic Prayer is his prayer and Christ’s prayer and I want to suggest that the same is true for all of us who are priests.

Our Prayer and Christ’s Prayer

Reading that passage from Monsignor Quixote made me go and find the service booklet from my ordination and to savour again the words the Bishop said to me as he anointed my hands: ‘The Father anointed our Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. May Jesus preserve you to sanctify the Christian people and *to offer sacrifice to God.*’ And then as he presented me with the chalice and paten:

¹ Monsignor Quixote, Graham Greene, Penguin, 1983, pp 247-251

‘Accept from the Holy People of God the gifts to be offered to Him. *Know what you are doing and imitate the mystery you celebrate.*’

Know what you are doing and imitate the mystery you celebrate as you offer sacrifice to God, as you pray the Eucharistic Prayer. Don’t let your congregation name the Eucharistic Prayer as the most boring bit of the Mass but by your devoted praying of the prayer, which is Christ’s and yours, let them know that a sacred thing is happening, that this prayer is taking us to the table of the Last Supper and to the altar of the Cross.

Alter Christus

For me, the praying of the Eucharistic Prayer is without any doubt at all the time each day when I feel closest to Jesus Christ, in fact I feel conformed to him during that prayer. For me, it is one of the most wonderful blessings of the priesthood that my words are Christ’s words and my actions are his actions. We have a scheme of Pastoral Assistants in our parish and one of the things they do is serve at Mass and stand next to me during the Eucharistic Prayer to turn the pages of the Missal. At the beginning of each Pastoral Assistant year they invariably comment on the rubrics and the actions of the priest while saying the words of the prayer. It reminds me afresh and strikes them in an immediate way that at the altar the priest has a mysterious yet tangible closeness to Christ.

Basil Hume talks about this in his lovely book, *Searching for God*, which I thoroughly recommend to everyone. Speaking of the words of consecration, this is my body, this is my blood, do this in memory of me, he remarks on ‘the stark realisation that I am using the first person singular; that it is my voice, my hands, my mind that are engaged in this tremendous act which is central to the Eucharist, in which Christ is

manifested through my person. At this moment, which surpasses all others, I am the ikon of Christ, the image of Christ. I am being used by Christ so as to associate myself with all that he was doing at the Last Supper, on Calvary, in his redemptive act.’²

So this time, this prayer, this holy sacrifice of the Mass, in which I am conformed to Christ so closely is a blessing for priests. In the time of quiet prayer after this address I am going to give you a print out of one of the Roman Eucharistic prayers and, if you want, you might like to pray your way quietly through it. Don’t freak out about it being a Roman Prayer. I’m not trying to make any point about that at all. But I want you to have a text with the rubrics that say what the priest does so that you can imagine yourself not just saying Christ’s words but enacting his actions during the Eucharist and to ponder this closeness between yourself and Christ at the altar.

It might be that you feel a sense of unworthiness, or at least, surprise that God has called you to this particular closeness to Christ, not least as it is not just supposed to be a blessing for you but for the Church and for the world as well. What might others make of the fact that you stand at this juncture between them and the Lord and that it is through your ministry, your hands, your voice that Christ is made present? This is the subject of a meditation by Karl Rahner that I’d like to share with you. It comes from a book called *Encounters with Silence*, which is a collection of Rahner’s extended prayers. And the one I am going to quote from is addressed to the God of my Vocation.

You have made me Your priest and have thus chosen me to be an earthly sign of Your grace to others. You have put Your grace into my hands, Your truth into my mouth. And although it doesn’t surprise me that men should

² *Searching for God*, Basil Hume, Ampleforth Abbey Press 1997, p.86

recognise You when You come to meet them in Your only-begotten Son, or in the chaste water of baptism, or in the silent form of the Host, or in the words of Scripture so simple and yet so profound, still I find it all but incredible that You desire to come into Your kingdom in the hearts of men through *me*. How can men possibly recognise You in *me*?...

Your grace remains pure, even when it is dispensed through *my* hands. Your Gospel is still the good tidings of great joy, even when it is not particularly noticeable that *my* soul is exulting in God my Saviour. And Your light continues to shine forth, changing the dark death-shadows of our earth into the brilliant noonday of Your grace, even when this light has to find its way to men through the cracked and dusty panes of my tiny lantern.

I know, Lord, that as a priest of Your true Church, I should not let the sense of my vocation, and the courage to preach your Gospel in season and out of season, depend on the consciousness of my own personal worth. Your priest does not approach men as a revivalist or an enthusiast, not as a purveyor of mystic wisdom or gnostic or Pentecostal prophet, or whatever else such men may call themselves. These men can communicate to others no more of You than they have themselves. But as a priest, I come as your legate, as a messenger sent by Your Son, our Lord. And that is at the same time less and more, a thousand times more than anything else...

O God of my vocation, I am only a poor mask, behind which You have chosen to approach men as the hidden God. Grant me the grace day by day to be ever more free from sin and self-seeking. Even then I shall remain what I cannot help being, Your disguise, Your unprofitable servant. But at least then I shall grow ever more like your Son, who also had to envelop the eternal light of His divinity in the form of a servant, to be found in the garb

and livery of a man... Transubstantiate my servitude – for only you could work such a change, unseen by me and my fellow men – into a somehow sacramental form, under whose poverty You will be bread of life for my brethren.³

³ Encounters with Silence, Karl Rahner, St Augustine's Press, 1999, pp 70 - 77