

HOLY THURSDAY 2023

In February Bishop Robert Barron, an American Bishop and founder of Word on Fire ministries was in the UK speaking at a variety of venues, in more than one he used two illustrations that I unashamedly borrow this evening. The first concerns Peter Maurin, a French Catholic theologian who was very influential along with Dorothy Day for the founding of the Catholic Workers Movement in 1933. In an essay called 'Blowing the Dynamite' he wrote about the power of the Christian message and said that the Catholic Church would need to use some of the dynamite of her inherent message to make that message dynamic. He went on to say:

“Catholic scholars have taken the dynamite of the church; they have wrapped it up in nice phraseology, have placed it in a hermetically sealed container, placed the lid over the container, and sat on the lid. It is about time to take the lid off and to make the Catholic dynamite dynamic.”

Hold on to that thought of the dynamite of the Christian truth that needs to be released.

The second example Bishop Barron used was that of Mahatma Gandhi who came to England in 1888 to study law. While here Gandhi made friends with a group of young people who were Christian. This caused him to read the New Testament and he was particularly struck by Matthew 5-7. Returning to his young friends Gandhi said he was blown over by the power of the Gospel. His young Christians friends smiled and said “Yes, the teaching of Jesus is very interesting, but we don't live it...it's impossible, Jesus is offering us an idle, but we probably will never achieve it”. This caused Gandhi to later remark, “I like your Christ, but I don't like you Christians because you are most unlike him.”

Here we have in these two examples the thought I would like to offer you this evening: *the dynamite we hide and the power we fail to live*. I would like to suggest that this is the deepest meaning of this celebration of the liturgy this evening. We have a power in this sacrament, as in every sacrament, a power that is all too often undervalued and largely unrecognised, we have dynamite that is taken for granted. This day reminds us of the institution of the Eucharist but also the institution of the priesthood. Sacraments that are intrinsically entwined. So before turning to the Eucharist could I please pause to ask you this evening, as you spend time with Jesus after Mass before the blessed sacrament, to pray for priests.

Pray for the holiness of the priesthood, for pastors that will bring you to into a living encounter with Christ because they mirror Christ for you, they encourage you to walk with Him and to experience His hope. Brothers and sisters, please pray for priests. It has been the greatest tactic of the devil to discredit the priesthood and to discourage them in their ministry. We need today holy priests, men of courageous faith, men who live the sacraments they celebrate. We need priests who embody Jesus and bring us into communion with Him so that we might be confident in our mission. Pray for priests.

St John Henry Newman said: *Man is not sufficient for his own happiness. He is not happy unless the presence of God be with him.*” Gods greatest desire is to share His life with us, to meet us in time and space

in our own personal history to draw us in a holy communion with himself. This is why we need priests who genuinely are windows into the heart of God, who, as Pope Francis rightly said, who know the smell of the sheep. But we also need shepherds who know the smell of Jesus! As Paul says, we are to be the ‘aroma of Christ’. If the priesthood is a sacrament of God’s presence among us, then the Eucharist is the sacrament par excellence. It is our greatest treasure on earth and our greatest hope for heaven. St John Paul II wrote:

“The Church received the Eucharist from Christ her Lord not as one gift – however precious – among so many others, but as the gift par excellence, for it is a gift of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as we as the gift of his saving work” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 11)

As St Paul reminded us in the second reading: *“This is what I received from the Lord and in turn pass on to you...”* The Eucharist is a summons, a call to encounter the real and living presence of Jesus. He is silent. He is hidden. But he is here!

St Thomas Aquinas says that in all the other sacraments the ‘virtus Christi’ - the power Christ is on display, but in the Eucharist, ‘ipse Christus’ – Christ himself is present. This is exactly why the Second Vatican Council taught that the Eucharist is *“the source and summit of the Christian life.”* The Eucharist is where our life comes from and where it is going! I recall being in Rome in November 2013, I was just about to finish giving a retreat, and the sisters had arranged, by foul means or fair, that I receive a ticket to Concelebrate the Mass for the closing of the Year of Faith in St Peter’s Square. Receiving a ‘Blue Ticket’ meant that I would also administer Holy Communion.

When it came time for all the priests who were to distribute Holy Communion to receive the ciborium, I asked: “Dove vado?” Where do I go. The M.C., who was not as claim and kind as our own Fr Kieran, looked at me and waved his arms: “Go, go, go”. Going into the vast crowd people they were pushing forward in typical Italian organised chaos. As I began to give communion. I became aware of people shouting to me: “Padre, padre per favore, padre per favore.” Reaching out their hands. Not the usual disinterested response that one comes across in English people when giving Holy Communion! The crisis really came when I ran out of the Blessed Sacrament – I thought I was going to be massacred. Yet I was impressed by the eagerness of those who wanted to receive Jesus: “Padre, per favore!”

Could I suggest that as you spend time with Jesus in adoration you turn to John 6 – this great teaching that he gave in the synagogue in Capernaum. *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live for ever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* It was horrific teaching. Inviting people to chew, gnaw on his flesh, this was utterly objectionable. But Jesus did not back down when he saw the distress his teaching was causing, saying “No, really what I actually meant was that this is a symbol of my flesh.” No, he became more emphatic, and the result was, they left him. The Eucharist has in a sense always been divisive, it has always been a test of truth faith. *“To whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life?”* Hard teaching? Absolutely. Divisive, certainly. But we stand with Peter and boldly and confidently proclaim that in the Eucharist we have the Word of eternal life., the source and summit of our Christian life. We do not believe in a symbol, but in His living presence.

In China in 1948 communist soldiers invaded many Catholic parishes. In one they broke all the statues and shot open the tabernacle door scattering and desecrating the Blessed Sacrament. The priest, who was a missionary, was placed in a cage inside the desecrated Church and left as a warning. To his astonishment at the dead of night one of his youngest parishioners, an 11-year-old girl, climbed in through the window came to the sanctuary and began to consume the hosts that had been scattered by the soldiers. As she was doing this a soldier came in shouted at the little girl to stop. She continued. He fired a warning shot. She continued and then he shot her in the back. She fell slowly to the floor, after a moment she summoned her remaining strength and took more hosts. The soldier was so angry he stood over her screaming. The little girl reached out one more time and the soldier shot her in the head and she fell silent.

Then the priest saw the soldier come towards him, thinking that he too would be shot he was overwhelmed when the soldier opened the cage door and said: “You are free, if every place had such a little girl of faith, there wouldn’t be a single soldier fight for the communist side!” Here we have it: *the dynamite we hide and the power we fail to live.*

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

6 April 2023