

## **Holiness Is Fitting For Your House, O Lord**

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“If anything constant remains in our days of recurring crisis, it is that the certainties have gone out of life, out of the life of the individual and out of the life of society.

It is a heartbreaking realisation.

The feeling of insecurity is bad enough, but much worse, especially for the young, is the feeling that life has no purpose and no direction. Unless life has a worthwhile purpose, and ideals have a meaning in the end, a man finds that he has no heart for great works and hard works.”[1]

The founder of the Faith movement applied these words to people in general. But the realisation that the certainties have gone is particularly heartbreaking if it breaks out in the life of a priest. The difference in the priesthood is that the lack of purpose and direction may afflict those in late middle age and declining years rather than the young. Nevertheless, the loss of great works and hard works among the younger clergy may come about through the diffidence born of being held in suspicion as a “traditionalist” or feared as a threat to the liberties enjoyed since Vatican II.

A priestly rule of life

Nevertheless, there is, in Britain and elsewhere, a clear picture emerging of sound young priests who have “run the gauntlet” of criticism for holding politically incorrect opinions, being too orthodox or belonging to divisive groups such as Faith. They reach ordination as men of solid courage, mature independence of thought and determination to teach the faith and celebrate the liturgy with gravity and devotion.

What is lacking is the authoritative teaching and example of traditional priestly piety. Although the picture is rapidly improving now, for many of the younger generation of clergy a sound spiritual formation – so essential for the priesthood – was lost among competing views, psychologies and experiments. We can manage well enough in theological terms – there we have Denzinger, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the outstanding encyclicals of recent Popes to guide us. But in matters of spiritual and personal formation, the loss of tradition can make it difficult to discern error in ascetical and mystical teaching. Indeed, there would be many in the Church today who would wonder what on earth could count as an “error” in spiritual teaching.

One must enter here a sincerely meant qualification. No criticism is intended of the many excellent spiritual directors who have spent time helping young men in seminaries. Their dedication has surely saved many a vocation. Nevertheless, the sheer multiplicity of approaches to priestly spirituality and the loss of any idea

of a canon of teaching in this area has meant that even what was good was called into question or found its place only as one of many choices of “spiritualities”.

Many will discover a truly life-giving rule of priestly life but often after a considerable time of fruitless experimentation, misguided by seemingly harmless spiritual books that are based on the “insights” of some schools of modern psychology. Often, these insights revolve around acceptance and affirmation of myself as a person, the integration of “my sexuality” and the “need for intimacy”. If we consult the teaching of Christ, and the constant traditional application of this teaching down the ages, we find that we are, on the contrary, to deny ourselves and take up the cross, not so much as look lustfully upon another, and to follow him who “had nowhere on earth to lay his head.”

Responding to the revival of Traditionalism

Among the many phenomena of genuine renewal in the Church, alongside the various “new movements”, we find the extraordinary success of the traditionalist movements. Several seminaries, full to overflowing, train priests exclusively in the traditional scholastic curriculum, using the liturgical books from 1962. One has in mind those who are entirely approved by Rome such as the Institute of Christ the King and the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter but it is undeniable that the Priestly Fraternity of St Pius X has not by any means died out. The recent “regularisation” of Bishop Rifan in Campos is a clear indication that Rome is keen to regularise the SSPX canonically rather than simply suppress it.

In Faith, of course, we have always taken a different course. We have used the Missal of Paul VI conscientiously, fostering a sense of the sacred using English prayers (and trying to compensate for the appalling translations), varied forms of music and the kind of “active participation” that has been usual since 1970. Nevertheless, I believe that in humility, we can learn from the hundreds of young priests now celebrating the “classical” Roman rite, and from the growing popularity of this rite among Catholics who still practice their faith. If it is true that a third of those Catholics in France who actually go to Mass attend the old rite, we need to learn something.

If, as seems likely, Rome decides to permit the use of the old rite much more freely, it could be a great advantage even for priests who use nothing but the new rite. There will undoubtedly be a certain “seepage” of traditional practice into the celebration of Mass by more traditionally minded “new rite” clergy. Indeed, this is a fear among some of the diehard traditionalists. They are concerned that the precious purity of the old rite, preserved by a faithful remnant, will be corrupted by priests experimenting with it, changing parts of it and mixing in elements of the new rite. I would urge them to see the glass as half full, not half empty. By all means, continue with celebrations strictly according to the 1962 calendar, preserve the classical rite in all its purity and splendour. But the problem for the vast majority of Catholics in the Church is the poor celebration of

the new rite. If it were legitimate to strengthen this with elements from the traditional mass, orthodox priests would have a much greater freedom to enhance the sense of the sacred in the liturgy. One sincerely hopes that Rome will encourage this by particular legislation and authoritative responses ad dubia.

It is this freedom that I would advance in answer to those liturgists who look on the traditionalist revival with horror. Over the past thirty years, the new liturgy has built up its own corpus of scruples, accretions and unwritten rubrics that have no formal basis in liturgical law but which are enforced, often rigorously, by liturgical commissions and other official bodies. At the extreme end of the scale is the unbelievable case in which Rome had to intervene to direct a Bishop to correct one of his priests who actually refused Holy Communion to those who chose to kneel down. Here is the inflexible application of the new scruple about uniformity of gesture being essential to the liturgy. There are many less extreme examples that are no less irritating when one's nonconformity is the cause of shock. Without realising just how Lutheran it is, many clergy insist that the cup shall never be denied to the laity. It is commonplace to forbid or discourage hymns to Our Lady during Mass. Sometimes, people are told that they must not genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament when coming up to read. The tabernacle is put at the side even of a small chapel. Choirs are made to abandon the choir loft and sit at the front of the Church. Readers will, I am sure be able to come up with many more examples. A full codification of these unofficial and unsubstantiated rubrics would make Fortescue look simple.

At the same time, we have the absurd situation where a priest can gain permission by return of post for a couple to celebrate marriage in a Methodist Church but not for them to celebrate Marriage in the old rite. A priest needs no permission to use a simplified version of scripture, liturgical dance, ceremonies involving balloons, scented candles and pebbles but cannot substitute the Gallican offertory prayers of the old Mass as an alternative to those composed in 1969.

A universal permission to celebrate the old rite would help many priests by giving official recognition that is more than one way of achieving "active participation" in the liturgy. The authority of the new liturgical inquisition would be fatally undermined. Much more importantly, young orthodox priests would not need to feel pangs of guilt when reviving traditionalist practices that are welcomed by the laity. I realise that anecdotal examples can be adduced to "prove" anything but it is amusing to recall the 12 year old in my Faith Youth Group to whom I was talking about the Mass recently. Discussing the "boredom" felt by her teenage contemporaries, I ventured that it was possible to celebrate Mass in such a way that the priest was facing East and said much of the Mass in silence while people joined in by kneeling quietly and saying their prayers. Her response: "Wow – cool!" I am sure her approval would be echoed by many youngsters who do not want to be self-consciously participating in the style of "everyone has a job". Furthermore, the pressure that would be taken off priests who are required to be

like talk show hosts every day of the year might well assist many to recover a sense of piety and reverent tranquillity at the celebration of Mass.

Priestly spirituality of Trent and the counter-reformation

Albeit important, the revival of the sacred in the liturgy is not the only lesson that we can learn from tradition. There has been a great deal lost with the abandonment of the traditional prayers and practices of priestly spirituality. The missal of St Pius V codified the existing ancient Roman liturgy. It was left to the great saints of the counter-reformation like St Ignatius Loyola, St Charles Borromeo and St Robert Bellarmine to “codify” a priestly spirituality that would reform the Church. So often, reading the lives of the saints, we find that one of their great achievements was the reform of the clergy. The success of these efforts is a token of the willingness of clergy generally to rise to the occasion and to respond to a clear call for holiness. The need for reform so often in the life of the Church is also witness to the way we can let the Church down when left in uncertainty.

Before looking at these reforms in a little detail, it is well to recall one of the defined doctrines of the Council of Trent which underpins them.

If anyone says that the conjugal state is to be placed before the state of virginity or celibacy and that it is not better and more blessed to remain in virginity or celibacy than to be joined in marriage anathema sit.[2] (Council of Trent, Session 24 canon 10)

Many years ago, in my first year at seminary, a few of us used to play a game with Denzinger. Someone would read out a passage and you would have to say whether the proposition was proposed or condemned. (The errors of Baius were a snare for the beginner.) I wonder how the above proposition would fare among many today! Rightly, the Church has in recent years emphasised the holiness of the married vocation. Less soundly, there has been a great deal of popular emphasis on the priest being “only human”. The idea that the priest is in a “higher state” because of his promise of celibacy would seem to many almost heretical rather than defined doctrine. Yet not so very long ago, in his encyclical *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, Pope Pius XI quoted St Thomas Aquinas:

“To fulfill the duties of Holy Orders, common goodness does not suffice; but excelling goodness is required; that they who receive Orders and are thereby higher in rank than the people, may also be higher in holiness.”[3]

This teaching was even laid down as a norm in the 1917 Code of Canon Law:

“Clerics must lead a life, both interior and exterior, more holy than the laity, and be an example to them by excelling in virtue and good works.”[4]

It is instructive to see the way in which this has been subtly altered in the new code:

Clerics have a special obligation to seek holiness in their lives, because they are consecrated to God by a new title through the reception of orders, and are stewards of the mysteries of God in the service of His people. [5]

There is still the emphasis on the special obligation to seek holiness but one almost can sense the embarrassment which precludes any mention of being more holy than the laity. In practical pastoral life, the traditional expression is better. The ordinary daily Mass goer in the pew expects the priest to be holy. They are shocked if he is not. The priest, especially through the ministry of the confessional, will know that many of his people are holier than he is – he would have to be a knave or a fool to be in any doubt of that. Yet the expectation of the devout laity and the shame of the priest combine to help the priest to examine his conscience and make sincere efforts to reform his own life where it is wanting in the highest standards of holiness, penance, resignation and virtue shown by so many good lay people.

It is a simple distinction. The priest is in a higher state and so he ought to be more holy. In practice he may not actually be more holy. In which case, he should change. And in fact society recognises this. A priest who commits offences against children is given a harsher sentence because of his abuse of trust. A priest who is caught in an affair (homo or hetero) is judged by the gutter press to be a “hypocrite”. In all the bluster and outrage, we can hear the distant echo of St Thomas and the Council of Trent.

#### Manuals and prayers

The mature fruits of the reform of the clergy after Trent are to be found in the many “Manuals” for clergy provided by seminaries and holy Bishops with beautiful prayers, grave exhortations to virtue and meditations reminding the priest of his obligations and the danger of sacrilege if he does not meet them. One which I found in an old prie-dieu belonged to a priest who inscribed it with his regiment and corps details; he obviously took it with him to the trenches in Flanders.

It is clear from the daily prayers that in addition to the Divine Office the priest was expected to make a meditation each morning, to say the psalms and prayers given in the missal, lasting about a quarter of an hour, both in preparation and thanksgiving for Mass, to spend a quarter of an hour before the Blessed Sacrament sometime during the day, to recite 5 decades of the Rosary, to undertake some spiritual reading and to make a careful examination of conscience before retiring. It is instructive to recall that during the debates on the Liturgy at the second Vatican Council, it was proposed that the Divine Office should be shortened so that the priest would have more time for personal prayers.

Sadly, many of these books are of little use to the majority of priests since the prayers are in Latin. One of the fine new Catholic publishing houses would do a great service for the Church if they were to arrange the translation and publishing of one of these excellent manuals.

One day within your courts...

It will be objected that priests nowadays are so busy. This is partly true. The much vaunted idea of setting the priest free to preach and pray has not been a great success in practice. Priests can become overworked and jaded with regular 15 hour days culminating in "The Meeting". In response, the culture of the "Day Off" has seen an enormous flowering in recent years. At times, it seems to be the only thing that is insisted upon in priestly spirituality, the panacea for all ills. Depression, alcoholism, stress, infidelity in the spiritual life – all these have been laid at the door of the priest failing to take his day off. I can find no evidence that the St Alphonsus or the Curé of Ars went to the shopping mall every Tuesday, yet they seem to have been quite good priests.

My apologies for that outpouring of the spirit but we have to be honest.

Reasonable time for recreation is a perfectly sensible provision, but the Day Off or the Holiday will not cure anything that is wrong in the priest's spiritual life. It will be a cruelly ineffective remedy if there is any element of escape in his desire to be away from the parish. A father cannot take a day off from his family. If he is unhappy, he needs to address whatever is wrong in the balance of his life. Similarly, "Father" cannot take a day off from his priesthood or even, one might suggest, from being "Father" to his parish family. If he is away on the golf course or at his parents', he is still a priest and he is still "Father" to his people. If he is weary and unhappy in his priesthood, this will not be cured by a Day Off but only through prayer and through addressing whatever it is that is wrong in his life.

Most of all, we need to reaffirm the core identity of the Catholic priest. We are obliged to speak many words at meetings, classes and life-changing occasions both joyful and sorrowful. But as a wise priest said to me years ago, of all the words we say, none is more important than the words of consecration and the words of absolution. If we can recover a sense that the priest is indeed chosen and, to a degree "set apart" for his ministry and that it is his privilege to act in union with Christ as mediator between God and his people, it will not be an embarrassment to speak of a "higher state". Rather, it will be a comfort for the people who love their priests, it will be a reassurance to the priest who has dedicated his life in the service of Christ and will bring new heart to those who find it difficult to meet all the demands that are made of them.

To be happy in the priesthood, we must be happy there with Christ; exhausted perhaps at times, but fulfilled in the ministry which we share with our Lord and Master. If he is happy in his daily ministry and life, the priest will find his day off correspondingly more a time of genuine recreation in the sense of being created

anew in the image of Christ the High Priest. He will daily urge the Lord to give him, specifically in his priesthood “a new heart and a new spirit” and sing with confidence and joy that “one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”

[1] Holloway, E. *Catholicism: A New Synthesis*( Faith-Keyway, Wallington, 1976) 1.

[2] Council of Trent, Session 24 canon 10

[3] St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* Supp q35 ad 3

[4] *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1917) c.124

[5] *Codex Iuris Canonici* c. 276.1