

✠ Maundy Thursday: In Cena Domini

April 14, 2022

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Before the festival day of the Pasch, Jesus knowing that his hour was come, that he should pass out of this world to the Father; having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them unto the end.” (Jn 13)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

My very dear sons,

On the occasion of this solemn Mass of Holy Thursday, of Maundy Thursday, as the traditional expression has it, we meditate both on the institution of the Most Holy Eucharist and on Christ’s own commandment, that is to say, on the great business of fraternal charity. It would be impossible ever to say too much or even enough about these two facets of the Christian life.

There is another topic, directly related to both themes of this Mass, that we have at heart, that of the Catholic priesthood. What terrible trials the priesthood has known in our day! How the Church has suffered from the betrayal of certain of Her priests, not to mention the suffering of children and many victims that have paid a high price because of this failure! Each time we think the crisis is over it pops up again, in Ireland not long ago and again more recently in Canada relative to Catholic schools for Native Americans.

Some have been led to think that it would be better to abolish or banish the Catholic clergy altogether. This is a tragic misunderstanding, the error of misguided souls who sadly abandon the logic of the Faith, the logic of the Love of God. The growing tide of *secularism*, following its own ideological agenda and tending to eliminate not only the clergy but the Christian name itself, lends power to that dark conviction.

In reality, the answer to the problem of bad priests is not to have *no* priests at all, but, quite to the contrary, to have *good* priests, many good priests. In a word, the remedy for priestly scandal is priestly holiness. Eliminating the priesthood would only make matters worse in the world—much worse. Saint John Henry Newman documented the fact that every form of civilization the world has known has had its priests. One cannot simply do away with the religious dimension of man. We have a particularly urgent need right now for holy ministers of the altar.

The great wound that has been left in the wake of priestly scandals can only be healed by a renewal of the holiness of the Catholic priesthood. We know that there are even today excellent priests, but there must be a process of renewal among the clergy on a broad scale. The problem of how to do this, one that has been much discussed in our time, belongs to the secular clergy, to the Bishops especially. We monks need not weigh in very much on the question of priestly formation. We may nevertheless have something to offer, coming from our own perspective.

It is simply the experience of centuries—even of millennia—that the priest who leads a serious personal prayer life prospers in his ministry: he becomes the kind of priest that renews the face of the earth. The Venerable Bishop Fulton Sheen claimed that no priest who would make a full Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament each day would ever leave the priesthood. That says a great deal. The biographies of saintly priests teach the same lesson. They are invariably men of intense personal prayer. The holy Curé of Ars was wont to say that “the man who prays, saves himself; the who does not pray damns himself”.

But there is more to the question. More than in private devotions—even the best—it is in a faithful and deep contact with the official prayer of the Church, with the Divine office, that at priestly life is sustained, enriched and made fruitful. The Divine office, especially the prayers of the Holy Sacrifice of Mass, is not only a well-structured prayer: it is the masterpiece of the Holy Spirit. No other prayer can compare with it. If Western civilization as a whole can be compared to a precious ring, the Divine office is the gem, the diamond, or the precious pearl, around which the rest of the ring is built. All of our best literature, art and music, in the end, are but echoes of the sacred reality at the center. The Christian civilization was built around Holy Mass, just as Christendom was built around the cathedral. Despite their monstrous proportions and confusing layouts, our modern cities still bear a trace of this. They always began as urban centers constructed around cathedrals and large churches, where the Divine office used to be sung.

In recent times it is the practice of most monasteries to open wide the doors to guests that wish come to our guest house in order to experience the power of the monastic liturgy. Such an experience is most beneficial to priests, especially to priests who lead very busy lives in their normal routine. Not a few priests, in fact, avail themselves of this opportunity, but they are sadly a minority. Happily, the younger generations of seminarians and newly ordained priests have learned this secret of spiritual renewal! We find, despite the misgivings of some in the Church, that the Traditional Latin Mass is revealing itself to be, not a pathetic return to the past, but a vigorous path of renewal in this effort.

The greatest expression of priestly holiness is no doubt to be found in Our Lord's "High priestly prayer" in chapter 17 of the Gospel according to Saint John. This sublime page of Holy Scripture also touches upon what is at the very heart of our faith, the supreme and unique sacrifice of Christ, who is both Priest and Victim of sacrifice.

Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him. And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. (1-3)

As we follow the Lord through His Passion this evening and tomorrow, we would do well to include the Catholic priesthood, embattled at present, but ever precious to the Church and to the world, in our prayers.

Without the priest, explains the Holy Curé of Ars, Saint John Vianney, the Death and Passion of Our Lord would be of no avail. Look at the heathens: what has it availed them that Our Lord has died? Alas! They can have no share in the blessings of Redemption, while they have no priests to apply His Blood to their souls! ...When people wish to destroy religion, they begin by attacking the priest, because where there is no longer any priest there is no sacrifice, and where there is no longer any sacrifice there is no religion. (*The Little Catechism*, chap. 9)

Our Lady of Sorrows, pray for the Holy Catholic Church, pray for priests and for us.
Amen.