

SUNDAY SERMONS SERMON AT ST MICHAEL'S - 23 MAY 1965

On the 23 April this year, our Holy Father crowned the picture of grace from Pompeii in St Peter's after it had been renovated. At the same time, as one might well expect, he gave a warm and meaningful sermon on Our Lady which once again clearly paints the image of Mary for us. He asked the faithful to renovate the picture of Mary in their hearts, to beautify and deepen it, and then to form their lives accordingly.

We, who love Our Lady, are only too pleased to carry out this suggestion of the Holy Father's in our everyday lives. I think we should do this for two reasons:

1 We know how warmly we love Our Lady. The words of the poet are true: 'An image has been engraved into my heart. It is a most beautiful and delicate picture, a symbol of all good gifts - it is the picture of Our Lady.' We have always loved this picture. Our Lady has always had a special place of honour in the hearts of the older members of our congregation. Yet, I think we would do well to repeat the words of our Holy Father: In

the same way as colours fade on paper, so that the picture of grace had to be renovated, so, too, the image of Mary can fade from our hearts. There are enough reasons for this. The world, especially as we have come to know it in America, is so attractive, it presents us with so many pictures which could win our hearts. It is easy to understand that Mary's picture recedes bit by bit into the background. Therefore it is well worth the effort to renovate the image of Mary in our hearts.

Since the Council, we have often painfully realised that the picture of Mary has grown pale in many Catholic circles. For this reason, we gladly answer the Holy Father's petition and listen to a series of sermons on Our Lady.

There is a second reason. We have said that we want to enter Our Lady's school so that she may show us the ideal of the man of Easter from every angle as she embodies it. If one goes to school, one is interested in the teacher. Who is our teacher? We have already said that our teacher is Our Lady. Of course, as is usually the case, one also wants to know what the teacher is like.

Last Sunday we began to consider the position of this teacher in God's plan. We need not repeat the answer, although it might be good to summarise it in view of the following discussion.

In God's plan she is a masterpiece of the Divine Wisdom. Divine Wisdom drew up a plan according to the image God had of Our Lady from all eternity, and as she was to become a reality on earth. Today let us add to this picture slightly, and paint it in more beautiful colours.

Let us recall that we wanted to discuss not only the place of Our Lady in God's plan, but also her place in God's heart. We can give the answer immediately. She is a masterpiece of the infinite Divine Love. God looks with immense love upon the features of Our Lady. From all eternity, Eternal Love planned to draw the heart of Our Lady to himself in an unprecedented way, in order to bring about a perfect union of hearts, a fusion of hearts, an exchange of hearts with her. We have heard similar thoughts on a number of occasions, however, as it usually the case with regard to religious truths, we hear the words but are unable to make anything of them, we cannot do anything with them.

Therefore, it is worth the effort to try and understand these truths better. From all eternity God planned this exchange of hearts with Our Lady. Since we are so dependent on our senses, and have no practise in abstract thinking, let us proceed from the bottom up. Let us first of all try to discover a measure which we can understand, which we have experienced in ourselves. Let us try to describe it more exactly and then apply it to the image of Our Lady and to her exchange of hearts with the Father.

When we hear of an exchange of hearts, our souls respond readily, for in general we all suffer because we cannot surrender and exchange our hearts. Where can we find a person who will treat our love in a noble way? And yet our heart is unhappy as long as it has not surrendered itself completely and been completely accepted.

What is the measure? I think I may say that we are all an original masterpiece of infinite divine Love. Thus, if I know what I am from this point of view, I have found my measure. It is this that I must apply to the Father and to the image of Our Lady. Perhaps, when we begin to go into it, the result will be quite unexpected, even an answer to questions which have puzzled us until now.

Let us first of all find a point of contact in order to make the whole more understandable. It is a theological axiom, a principle, and thus we must take into account that the formulation is very abstract. We reach with our souls into the heart, or if I may put it this way, into the mind of God. There we find that when God the Father spoke his Eternal word, he also thought of us and loved us with the Word in the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we will not be able to understand this at first. Let us climb up to the Blessed Trinity. We learnt in our Catechism lessons that the Father thought the only-begotten Son. Now the axiom tells us that at the same time he thought of us in this Eternal Word. Thus, when the Father thought the Son he also thought of me, just as I am. We can understand this better since the Council has expressed so many of the truths of our faith more clearly, for example, the truth that we are members of the Mystical Body. We were all conceived of as a part of the eternal Son of God. From all eternity I as I am now, and you as you are now, had a place in the mind of God. I was also thought of in the creative thought of God. As members of the Son we exist in God's plan. Now we must proceed, for we have just been discussing a part of this plan. I was loved with the Son in the Holy Spirit. There is an endless movement of love between the Father and the

Son, and between Son and the Father - this stream of love in the bosom of the Triune God is so great that love becomes a person: the Holy Spirit. And I have been loved in the Holy Spirit with the Son. That is to say that from all eternity I was thought of by God, exactly as I am, and drawn with the Son into the infinite stream of love between Father and Son.

I was loved with the Son. Let us first of all try to explain this rather difficult formula. Who am I? An original masterpiece created by God's infinite love. Perfect love and a perfect masterpiece. This statement makes us think. The same applies to what we said about Our Lady. She is a perfect masterpiece of Infinite Love. So am I! Yet there must be a great difference between us. What is the meaning of our lives as human beings? We should be drawn as perfectly as possible into the river flowing between Father and Son. It does not matter whether I have studied or not, whether I am sick or well, whether I may accept an important post or whether I am somewhere in the background: each one of us is a perfect, but original masterpiece of infinite, Divine Love. Perhaps we can understand this better if we compare world events and our life history with the life history of the people around us. We will notice that we are part of a strange drama and that each one of us has a supporting role. When has each supporting actor played his part perfectly? When he has played his role perfectly. In old books we can still read that if I have to play the part of a farmer on the stage, I have only played it well if I have played the part of the farmer, for then I have been a perfect farmer. I am not meant to be a king but a farmer in this great world theatre. Each one of us without exception, has been assigned a role from all eternity. I do not need to go into this at the moment.

But I was also loved. How can we conceive of this? The stream of love between Father and Son is so great that it, so to speak, overflows the banks of the Blessed Trinity. Love simply must be communicated. It is the same in the Blessed Trinity. In order that God might communicate this stream of love, he created another being - us. What is the meaning of our lives as planned by God? He created us that he might love us. What does that mean? We hear, and yet we do not understand the meaning correctly. How great is our mission! What are we? We are God's creatures whom he wishes to love, that through this love he may awaken love for him in our hearts. This applies to each one of us.

In philosophic terms one could say: God does not love us because we exist, but rather the reverse - we are recognised because we exist in God. God first loved us and created us, and for this reason he could recognise us as his creatures - he had created us. This is also the case with regard to love. We love God, or rather, God loves us not primarily because we love him; we love him because he loves us, because he allows us to share in this immeasurable stream of love.

It is God, therefore, who loved us first, who led into our hearts the stream of love powerfully flowing between Father and Son. Shall we meditate on this in detail? St John said so beautifully in his simple way: He loved us first. Why,

then, do we love him? Because he first loved us. How did he love us, how did he show that he loved us? St Paul tells us: He loved me so much that he even sacrificed his life for me. Dilexit me! Another proof that the Father allows the stream of love flowing between himself and the Son to enter our hearts. Why does he do this? He wants to be loved. A strange fact - Almighty God wants to be loved!

It is as though God could not be happy if I did not exist, if I did not love him. He wants to be loved. The ancient Romans said: If you want to be loved - and God wants to be loved - you must first love to excess. Then it naturally follows that the love in the other will be enkindled.

St Francis de Sales spoke of the world's fundamental law of love. By this he meant that the main reason for creating the world, for creating me, is love. God wants to be loved, it is as though he were dependent on love. (Of course this is an incorrect expression, but we know what is meant). He wants to be loved absolutely and completely. What has he done to achieve this end? He has, so to say, exhausted himself with deeds and expressions of love. The Father loved the world so much that he even gave his only-begotten Son for us. Why? 'If you want to be loved' - and he wants to be loved - hence the extreme expressions of his love.

If we meditate on three words we will understand the three stations of his love and his wooing of us: the crib, the cross, the altar. These are all steps in his wooing of us, in proving his love for us. He wants my heart, and he wants it completely. Of course this does not mean that I may not give my heart to other creatures. They are like channels through which my instinct of love is directed to the heart of the Father.

I would now like to add a word that sounds more mysterious, and which is contradicted by our practical, everyday lives. God loves me perfectly. What does that mean? He loves me completely. Now we might be inclined to say: how can that be? If he loves me so completely, yet all around me I see how my brothers, my sisters, my acquaintances enjoy life. Or if I think of the saints, they were so different from what I am. And yet he loves me perfectly, as perfectly as though I were the only one, as though he would like to pour the whole richness of his love into my tiny heart.

Let me first of all give you the law: *opera Dei perfecta*. Whatever God does is perfect. If he wishes to love, then he loves to the end. He also loved me to the end. He wants the entire stream of love to enter my heart, and the heart of my neighbour, of the saint, of the mystic. How is that possible? Perhaps it is better to show what is meant through using a picture. If I have a huge basin of water and want to pour the water into a container, of course it depends on the size of the container whether I manage. If it is a small vessel it will soon be full of water. If it is big it needs more water. What does this mean? It tells us of the mystery of divine election, of divine love. If God, as we think, dispenses his love in different degrees, his action has a double limit. God has made men different. Each one is unique. The limit is twofold. On the one hand the

mission of each person - or if I may return to an earlier image, it is the role that each one has to play in the world drama. We know that he plays his part perfectly who, if he is meant to be a farmer, plays the role of a farmer perfectly, and not that of a king.

The one limit is set by the mission of each individual person. The other limit is set by the receptivity of a person. Both according to God's intention are mutually inter-dependent. Now we say: God gives each person his entire love in a perfect way. What is the gauge? What is my mission which no other has received? The second criterion is receptivity. In how far am I receptive? If we meditate on this I think we cannot again blame God if another seems to receive more love than I. I will not become envious, for even if one apparently receives more love from God than another, each receives his entire love, in so far as he is receptive to it and in relation to his mission. I may never become envious or jealous. I must always say a heartfelt 'Yes, Father'. It is my task, even if, for example, I see another who strives nobly, who sacrifices his entire strength for something, not to copy him, but to say to myself: in the same way as he co-operates with grace in carrying out his mission, so should I in regard to my mission.

Therefore do not copy others. I may not say, for example, that this person, nor that, either a canonised saint, a fellow man or my sister, is the special object of God's love. God seems to love her or my brother more. What is preference? He loves me quite as much, but in relation to my mission, to the role he has given me, and the receptivity which the role demands.

He also loves me completely, but only in so far as the vessel is receptive! We seem to be of the opinion that predilection, apparent predilection, for one means a slight for the others. In the light of faith this is not the case. He does not slight the others. Is it not for him to decide? His mercy decided my role, my receptivity. I have no right to be loved by him. I must be happy that he looks at me at all, and be grateful that he has drawn me into this union of hearts, this fusion of hearts with him. I have absolutely no right to demand anything of him, he may do what he wants with his instrument. He is almighty. It is not as though he loves us because we love him - we love him because he loves us. It is for him to decide the capacity of the vessel which he gives us and the importance of the role we are to play.

Let me repeat: the one is not slighted if the other receives more and is more the object of the Divine Love. Why? There is another reason: the individual choice of love which should become a common one, in that I pass on the Father's love which is poured into my vessel. I receive love not only that I might love God in return, but to pass on this love. Each individual mission, each individual endowment is given for others.

We have only fixed a scale, but when we apply this measure to the life, to the mission of Our Lady, we will be able to understand the implications of our answer to the question. What is Our Lady's mission, and how receptive was she? Now we must apply this measure to the life of Our Lady, and a most

beautiful picture will unfold before our eyes. We will be lost in wonder at the image of Our Lady as planned from all eternity.

The chief result will be that we will feel completely at home in the heart of Our Lady. It is as though God has poured a sea of love into her heart. and if I love her, if the stream of love coursing through her heart draws me into its current, we, who live in the heart of Our Lady, who have made a covenant of love with her, will experience a union of love with her, a fusion of our hearts with hers. Then we modern men who live in a secularised world will be in a consecrated place. How comforting that is if we must live in an atmosphere polluted by every sort of bacillus. If we go from these surroundings into a Church where everything is permeated with the religious spirit, we are in a place which immunises us against the worldly atmosphere which surrounds us. The heart of Our Lady is a consecrated place.

The more my heart beats in the heart of Our Lady, the more and the more deeply it will beat in the heart of Our Lord and the Eternal Father, the Triune God. At the same time my heart will be more completely immunised against the atmosphere that surrounds us in everyday life.

We speak today of a pluralistic order of society, of beings who are entirely enslaved by earthly pleasure. If at the same time I know that my heart beats in the heart of Our Lady, then I know that I live in a sacred place which inwardly immunises me against all the forces which try to drag me down, and to which I am daily exposed.

What follows from this? Let us draw our own conclusions.

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

18 MAY 1967

Your Eminence, Right Reverend Monsignor, dear Fathers,

During the month of May, in which it is traditional to honour Our Lady in a special way, our thoughts turn to her as the Mother of the Church. This is the new Church of the Council in which our ministry plays such an essential role, but which causes us so much headache and heartache. Both Pope John and Pope Paul have repeatedly advised us to do what the Apostles did and gather around Our Lady, the Mother of Jesus, to pray with her and trust in her intercession. We must learn from her the ancient and eternally new mystery of the Church. As we look at the Church and world today, we realise that more than anything else, our time demands youthful courage. Therefore we must open minds and hearts for the movement of the Holy Spirit. As the Mother and Model of the Church, Our Lady has the same task to fulfil today as in the Cenacle, for she is the first and most noble member of the Church. Hers is the apostolate of being.

In our meditation today, let us look at the picture of Our Lady as revealed in the Bible, and try to find out if her spirituality, her inner attitude, has any special significance for our priestly way of life. At the Church of the Annunciation at Nazareth, Pope Paul said that he wished he could re-learn all the truths of Christianity from Our Lady in the way she had taught Our Lord. Let us take the Magnificat and try to discover from it her attitude to God that made her the Mother and Model of the Church.

1 It is a jubilant thanksgiving for her and our vocation;

2 It is a vivid meditation on God's incomprehensible deeds; and

3 Let us see it in the framework of the history of salvation.

1 A jubilant thanksgiving

As we look back on our priestly life and vocation, we cannot but magnify the Lord for his inscrutable love and wisdom in having chosen us. 'My soul magnifies the Lord ...' All the fruitfulness and joy in our lives results from our original calling, from the events that culminated in our yes to God's call. With deep humility we repeat with Our Lady: 'He has looked upon the lowliness of his servant ...' The Annunciation shows that Our Lady always regarded herself as the simple handmaid and servant of the Lord. And yet at the same time she sees and admits that her greatness will be praised by all generations of mankind - 'all generations will call me blessed' - for the Child she bears is the Messiah, and this very fact makes her the greatest of all women. In the same way, the life of Christ we are called to bear within us and bring to life in others will make us truly great before God and man.

Our Lady is conscious of her lowliness, her nothingness before God. Before God we are all but beggars - empty, poor, in need of mercy and help. Such poor, sad and despised people were blest by Our Lord - 'Blessed are the poor in spirit ...' (Mt 5:5). Those who know and who have experienced their own weakness and limitations, and who have also accepted their human condition, are open before God and ready to receive his message.

'The Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name.' The annunciation, and the conception and birth of Christ can be found again in our own calling, conversion and ordination. Our priestly life gives evidence of the great and wonderful deeds of God.

As the Exultet puts it: Nothing is impossible to God and in as far as we truly trust in him.

'Holy is his name'. God is so different to us. His greatness cannot be expressed in human terms, nor can he be understood by the human mind. He is so distant, so holy. Truly he is to be feared and respected. He cannot be made understandable in popular terms, approached in our democratic spirit,

or referred to disrespectfully. A great deal of our modern atheism can be traced back to our having tailored God according to our small minds.

2 Vivid meditation on God's incomprehensible deeds

Our pastoral life daily confronts us with events that are so strange and incomprehensible that superficial talking about God, or an application of our merely earthly concepts of a father's love and care to him, prove to be unsatisfactory. Indeed, God works in very strange ways.

'He has shown the power of his arm, he has routed the proud of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away.' In these words Our Lady shows her faith in God's way of thinking and acting. God's ways by far surpass all human concepts. This is the common experience of all religious people and finds expression in Anna's song for Samuel. God is more powerful than any man - he is always wiser and greater. Christ, too, demanded a faith that could move mountains, a belief that nothing is impossible with God. (Mk 11: 22f; Mt 17: 20ff). When St Paul referred to Abraham receiving a promise of a great posterity in his old age, he wrote: 'Abraham is our father in the eyes of God, in whom he put his faith and who brings the dead to life and calls into being what does not exist' (Rom 4:17). Our Lady praises God's paradoxical way of acting that humbles the mighty and exalts the lowly. God shows his power over earthly power. God protects the poor and simple, he is full of surprises - but he is always loyal to his Covenant.

In our daily meditations we should certainly dwell on these features of God and his activity in our own lives. Bitterness and resignation are inevitable unless we grow with God and into God, inspired and guided by our growing experience of the God of Life. Wherever we find a believing understanding of God's greatness, we also find an eternal and youthful openness to God.

3 Its setting in the history of salvation

Her own election and God's way of dealing with men inspires Our Lady to see her life in the framework of the history of salvation. She knows she is an Israelite, the people elected by God to be his servant. 'He has looked on Israel his servant, remembering his mercy - as he has spoken to our fathers, to Abraham and his posterity forever.' God had 'spoken' of salvation and the blessing arising from the foundation of his Covenant. Although the people had been disloyal to the covenant on many occasions, God was always ready to forgive. 'Be not afraid, because I am with you. Do not look around anxiously, because I am your God' (Is 41:10). The hope and consolation of the people of Israel is realised in Our Lady and her Child. God had fulfilled his promises.

Our Lady had made Holy Scriptures, the liturgy and popular piety so much her own, that all the words quoted from the sacred texts expressed her own attitude. Therefore, let us confidently take up the exhortation of our Holy Father and call upon her as the Mother and Model of the Church. She will teach us how to live every word of Holy Scripture, as well as the decrees and

constitutions of the Council. In this way we will be true fathers of our people, not merely upholding an exterior claim to authority, but being the authors of true life - both sacramental and personal life - in all the people entrusted to us.