

What Is A Catholic Parish ...And How Well Does St. Peter's Measure Up?

A sermon preached by Father Peter Moss at St Peter's, Devizes on 6th September, 2009

'Laying aside the commandments of God, you hold the tradition of men.' (Mk. 7:8)

+In nomine

Even when the preacher has decided to set himself free from the Lectionary, it's tempting to look for connections between the Sunday readings and what he wants to say. (Old habits die hard, or, as is more often the case, just won't lie down!) Hence the text from today's Gospel for a sermon entitled: *'What is a Catholic Parish?'* – with the unavoidable subtext *'...and how well does St. Peter's measure up?'* (I shall leave that bit to you!)

'Laying aside the commandment of God (found in the Bible) for the tradition of men' (found everywhere else) was, of course, the accusation Martin Luther and the other reformers levelled at the Church of their day.

'What is a Catholic parish?' The question doesn't really make sense. 'Catholic' means 'universal – present everywhere'. By definition our parishes have clear boundaries. The small town of Devizes has three of them. You can't get much less 'universal' than that!

The word 'catholic' was first used by Christians with this meaning in the 100's AD. A little later in the Church's history, it took on the added meaning of 'orthodox': that is, 'following the right way of glorifying God, following right teaching'...the teaching 'believed everywhere and by all' (Vincent of Lerins) as distinct from exciting novelties without any secure foundation on God's revealed will. There were plenty of those around in the early centuries, as there are now – often the very same ones in modern dress!

Later still, after the Reformation, Roman Catholics used 'catholic' of themselves and no one else; but the Church of England claimed, too, to be part of the One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic Church, though reformed: and Anglicans like us have always used 'catholic' to mean Christians who claim to have inherited from the Church of the early centuries a historical & unbroken tradition of faith & practice...and, of course, can show that this is so. 'Catholic', then, covers the 'Eastern' Orthodox and (still, but by a rapidly narrowing margin) many Anglican provinces. 'Catholic' is distinguished from 'Protestant' – the name for those churches that find their ultimate standard not in the unbroken, 'universal' tradition of faith but in the Bible...as interpreted by the leaders of the Reformation, or by private judgement.

In the present state of the Church of England, where on grounds of 'justice' to this or that interest (and sometimes of 'prophetic witness') groups within it feel free – even obliged – to depart from that Catholic tradition from day to day, it *does* make a sort of sense to ask, 'What is a Catholic parish?' in today's C. of E.

So...what *is* a Catholic parish?

1) A parish where people have a proper understanding of the nature of the Church – what the Church *is*: not an organisation set up by human beings to achieve goals *we* think are worthwhile, but a gift of God, a ‘divine society’ (Newman’s phrase), an outpost of heaven on earth, or (as Archbishop Vincent of Westminster puts it) ‘the continuing presence of Christ...at work in our world’. In his Church, God’s revealed will is the supreme authority. ‘The rules’ cannot be changed by a show of hands to fit in with ‘what most people think – whether General Synod’s hands, or Parliament’s hands. St. Paul describes the Church as ‘having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone; in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in which you also are being built...for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit’ (Eph. 2:20).

In a Catholic parish that part of the Creed that speaks of the Church as something *to be believed in* – like Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is said with conviction, not rattled through as so much baggage from a dead past!

2) A Catholic parish is one where the sacraments (the ‘sharing of holy things’) are secure, believed in, used and loved – including the Sacrament of Penance (Confession). In a catholic parish God’s People know the Blessed Sacrament for what it is: a visible sign, in which Christ is present ‘body, blood & divinity’...in which Jesus himself, the whole Christ, is our food & drink. In a Catholic parish the faithful approach Him accordingly: with inexpressible gratitude, & sorrow, & love – and with humility, knowing that anyone who eats & drinks in an unworthy manner ‘is guilty of the body & blood of the Lord’ (1 Cor. 11:27). And between Masses the faithful *visit* him and *speak* to him in his sacramental presence.

3) A Catholic parish is one where Holy Scripture is read and studied as inspired – in the hope & expectation that God will speak to us and shape our hearts as we sit under his Word. Catholic Christians know that what really matters is that they should be ‘doers of the Law’ of Christ as the Church understands it...and not allow private judgement to trap them into setting themselves up as the Law’s judges – preferring this bit and setting aside that. We know – because St. Peter has taught us – that ‘no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Pet. 1:20).

4) A Catholic parish is a parish where the people care deeply about the unity of Christ’s Church. The Church Unity Octave - which gave birth to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity - was set up by Catholic-minded Anglicans at the beginning of the 20th century, who saw (or thought they saw) a real prospect for the reunification of the Anglican & Roman Catholic churches. The ARCIC conversations that brought this hope so much nearer may seem (by the C. of E.’s decision unilaterally to ordain women as priests...& other planned changes) to be holed below the waterline. But Catholic parishes need to continue within the Church of England (if at all possible) to recall our church to its Catholic identity...and keep the possibility of Catholic Reunion alive.

5) A Catholic parish is one where the words ‘I think’ are rarely (if ever) heard from the pulpit. The priest does not mount the pulpit steps to give the people the benefit (if it *is* a benefit) of his personal opinions. (That would be impertinence – or worse – on his part.) His duty is to proclaim the teaching of the Church and (as far as he is able) to interpret its riches. When I hear ‘I think...’ from the mouth of a preacher, I shudder inwardly...and prepare for the worst! ‘We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake’ (2 Cor. 4:16).

6) In a Catholic parish the Lord's teaching in Matthew Ch.25 – that we feed & water & clothe *him* in our human brothers & sisters – is taken seriously. Members of God's Family in such a parish trace and honour the image of Christ his Son in the face of every stranger. 'Assuredly I say to you, in so far as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt. 25:40b).

7) Finally – though it would be possible to go on! – we come to what used to be called 'full Catholic privileges'. It is a phrase that makes a double claim: that the Church of England is (as she claims) *truly* part of the One, Holy, Catholic & Apostolic Church *and* that in some of her parishes the Catholic faith is practised in its fullness.

In a Catholic parish the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints are known & loved as invisible & supportive presences *and* as intercessors: brothers and sisters who remember us before God in heaven. No one's salvation *depends* upon the prayers of Mary & the saints, but none who ask for them are refused: all are helped and come to know their power. For 'we are the body of Christ, and members one of another' (1 Cor. 12:27).

In a Catholic parish the dead are prayed for – and Masses offered for them – on a regular basis. This, like the prayers of the saints, is part of the Church's understanding of itself as the Body of Christ – that understanding & awareness of the oneness of the Church Militant ('here on earth') with the Church Triumphant in heaven, which belongs to the God-given security of every Catholic Christian.

'Since he (Judas Maccabaeus) was looking to the reward in splendour laid up for those who rest in godliness, it was a holy and godly purpose (to pray for the dead)...so as to set them free from their transgression'(2 Macc. 12:45).

So to the inevitable questions:

Are we 'laying aside the commandments of God' (like the Pharisees) to 'hold to the traditions of men'?

We hope & pray not! If sometimes we are in danger of wobbling, by the grace of God it will not long before we recover our balance!

How *well* are we doing?

Not as well as we should be; we can be certain of that. But ours is to continue striving: it's best, with St. Paul, to say, 'I judge no one...Judge nothing before the time' – for only God can judge justly.

+In nomine