

Reflection from +Jack

I have had the privilege of being a priest for over fifty years. I have never doubted that this life is my vocation and within that vocation the most precious gift is the call to preside at the Eucharist in all circumstances of life. I have been aware of the Real Presence of Our Lord in a back kitchen in Salford with newspaper for an altar cloth and a bottle of sour milk where a candle might have stood and with one old lady present just as much as in a great Cathedral with many hundreds. It is the same sacrament; it is the thinnest spot on earth.

I remind myself at each Eucharist of the words above the vestment chest in a Manchester church:

*“Celebrate this Eucharist as though it were your first.
Celebrate this Eucharist as though it were your last.
Celebrate this Eucharist as though it were the only Eucharist you would celebrate.”*

The priest does not have the right to celebrate but he/she is given the privilege to do so when invited by the people of God, the Church. After each communion the words of P.T. Forsyth might come to mind:

“When you reflect after communion, ‘What have I done this day?’ say to yourself, ‘I have done more than on any busiest day of the week. I have yielded myself to take part with the Church in Christ’s finished Act of Redemption, which is greater than the making of the world.’”

P.T. Forsyth was a Congregational minister!

What a privilege! What a joy!

However, there have been numerous occasions when the privilege has not been given to me. I spend several weeks each year in Roman Catholic convents where I receive my communion spiritually though not physically. There have been occasions in my own diocese of Sheffield when I have not been asked to preside because I ordain women (including our Bishop!). Yet the Presence is still there, and I am richly blessed.

In these difficult times we priests are not able to fulfil this aspect of our calling in the way we would wish. We might remember those throughout the world for whom the reception of communion is rare. We might also remember our own people deprived as they are from regular communion. We may preside ourselves within the boundaries of our present disciplines with the people on our hearts. Most of all we must assure ourselves and our people of the Real Presence of Christ in each of our hearts.

I have been fortunate in knowing +Desmond Tutu for many years. When I last saw him in Cape Town he bowed deeply before giving me a great hug. He went on to explain that as a Catholic Anglican he believes in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and genuflects before the sacrament in Church. It follows for him that as each of us is made in the image of God, He is every bit as present in each human being which He has created. Desmond bows to everyone he greets to remind him of this great truth.

The Eucharist is the focus of this universal truth that there is nowhere where Christ is not. The hospitals and homes of our world are filled with His Real Presence. We pray that all may be given the Grace to recognise Him there when he cannot make Himself known in the breaking of bread.

+Jack