

Forward in Faith National Assembly 2009

A Future Promise

A sermon preached
for the National Assembly of Forward in Faith
at Christ the King, Gordon Square, London
at a Votive Mass of Our Lady
on Saturday, 24th October 2009
by Fr William Davage SSC

AT the heart of its distinguished contribution to the Catholic Revival over the past 150 years, the Church Union has been committed to defend and to maintain the Catholic Faith as the Church of England has received it. It does so now; as do we who gather here this morning.

A little younger, Pusey House, where I am privileged to live, work and have my being, has for the past 125 years had at the centre of its witness to Oxford University and to the wider Church the urgent call to holiness of living, to the living and breathing of the sacramental life; and has endeavoured, as clearly as possible, to articulate the terrible candour of insistent orthodoxy.

The recent past of Pusey House was uneasy and uncertain. Behind the formidable walls a twenty-year battle for survival was fought. That the House is open today and able to celebrate its quasesquicentenary (we know words like that in Oxford: or at least, we look them up), that it is open is due in great measure to Father Philip Ursell. He was (how shall I put this?) robust, yes, ruthlessly and persistently robust in his defence of the House to secure its institutional survival so that his successor, Father Jonathan Baker, has been able to re-animate and re-define the House's engagement in this last and crucial battle for the Catholic Faith in the Church. The independence of the House allows him to make his invaluable and outstanding contribution to our Catholic cause. I say that not because I want to keep my job, but because it is true. How fortunate to have the two great Anglo-Catholic institutions in the home of the Movement, Pusey House and S. Stephen's House in such capable and determined hands. Father Jonathan and the debonairly erudite Father Ward were among the men of promise when we were seminarians together.

Their promise has been fulfilled. And promises ought to be fulfilled and it is important that promises should be kept. God's promise to Mary and Our Lady's promise to God, her brave and even reckless promise to God, her abandonment to his will: "Be it unto me according to your word" were rewarded: "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled." That cosmic collision of God's promise to his people and Our Lady's promise to God brought about our salvation in the Incarnation: that central doctrinal tenet of Tractarianism, the unique salvific revelation in Jesus Christ, our incarnate God, the God of all knowledge, wisdom, power and truth.

His Holy Mother's "fiat" is echoed in his own submission to the will of God. Neither would allow the cup to pass from their lips and both kept their promise. And they keep their divinely-infused promises still. Our Lord's promise that we would not be left comfortless, that he would be with us until the end of time is eternally renewed in his sacramental presence, those elements that become for us his Body and his Blood on this and on thousands upon thousands of altars as the Mass is offered, the Sacrifice pleaded: an eternal promise, everlastingly fulfilled.

Our Lady's promise that we would ever have recourse to her protection and intercession; that those who fly to her would not be left forsaken, is eminently demonstrated in those holy places of her appearing, among them Fatima, Lourdes, and our ever-beloved Walsingham. Here are promises we can rely on, promises divinely inspired, divinely guaranteed. Our promises one to another should be invested with that same sense of divine authority. They should not be something lightly entered into, not capricious, not mere conversational tics. They cannot be other than solemn obligations, unbreakable contracts, given in a divinely ordained society that is the Church.

So what of the promises made to us by our own Church? Is a binding and lasting undertaking and promise to last a mere seventeen years: a blink in the eye of God? But when doctrinal and ecclesiological self-indulgence has reduced an institution to the shape of the Church of England, confidence in the General Synod requires no more than a sense of the ridiculous. The General Synod is the HBOS of the Church of England; willing to mortgage its future on toxic doctrine. You cannot re-write the Faith once delivered to the Apostles. You cannot dilute the Faith as would the liberal catholic: that suppurant oxymoron.

But, I fear, that the sermon is teetering on the edge of the polemical and I do not wish to be controversial: that is the Bishop of Fulham's job. The crisis through which we are passing, fundamental to our understanding of the nature of the Church and its sacramental authenticity, has meant that we have become enmeshed in a ludicrous, bureaucratically-driven legislative process which has only engendered despondency and debilitating fatalism, lightened by the occasional false dawn, and a forlorn nostalgia for more certain times. They did not exist. Look at the history of Anglo-Catholicism. Nostalgia is one of the legitimate and certainly one of the most enduring of human emotions: but the ecclesiastical politics of nostalgia is at best distracting and at worst pernicious.¹ We cannot live in the past, however refulgent and glorious.

We are battling for the future, not the despondent present. I spend most of my days in the company of bright, intelligent, committed young people, committed to the Catholic Faith. It is their future in the Church that matters. We owe them a Catholic future and we can only do that by keeping a promise to them. We must have "the courage to dare"² not supinely to acquiesce or to accept the scraps thrown at us. As we commit ourselves with fresh determination and resolve to secure our Catholic future, we must be conscious that we are part of something greater. Our Catholic unity here this morning is but a small part, a microcosm, of that wider unity to which Christ summons all his faithful. There is a Catholic future open for us: new light shines, hope and promise of a new dawn. The future is ours, if we seize the day and the hour. We can do so because we commit our cause to Our Lady, whose promise never fails. Confident that we have a merciful God, for with the Psalmist we can say: "under the shadow of thy wings shall be my refuge, until this tyranny be over-past."³ Determined that "All is not lost," we possess an "unconquerable will / And courage never to submit or yield / ... what is else not to be overcome."⁴

¹ See Irving Kristol quoted in *The Spectator* 26 September 2009

² Feodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*

³ Psalm 57: 1

⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* I. 1. 105