

FORWARD IN FAITH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, 14 NOVEMBER 2015

Sermon by the Venerable Luke Miller

‘The Holy Spirit will lead you into all truth.’ (John 16:13)

Buried in the Church of England Archive Centre in Bermondsey there is a very large scrapbook of mission posters from the end of the 19th century. Some of them look for all the world like the Wanted posters of the Wild West with which they are contemporaneous. Amongst them is a handbill prepared by Father Lowder for a mission at St Peter’s London Docks. It proclaims the purposes of a mission:

- to convert the ungodly
- rouse the careless
- quicken the lukewarm
- confirm the faithful
- prepare all for God and heaven

The new arrangements in the Church of England are an opportunity for a renewal of catholic mission. Thank you for all the work you have done to achieve the opportunity we now have. Thank you for all the prayer and persuasion and explanation. It has brought a moment of opportunity. Or rather it has reminded us of the opportunity and possibility that is always there, if only we will raise our eyes to see it. Because the Holy Spirit is always leading us into all truth and Mission is to cooperate with what He is already doing to lead us into all truth, and others with us. In this moment the duty to mission we always have has been emphasised by the encouragement of others. Because we were helped weren’t we? Many who disagree with us in various degrees said they wanted our Mission and they worked hard with us and for us –at some cost to some of them. We are thankful for those who have shown great graciousness towards us. They have laid a welcome duty on us. A welcome duty to be zealous for the catholic mission they have asked us to bring to the Church of England.

We will need graciousness in our zeal and generosity in our orthodoxy for, whatever we might at times have thought we wanted, we have not been offered a place which is off behind high walls and protected from all contact with others. The church will not be sectarian and separatist, like Neapolitan ice cream – where you can eat one flavour without having to taste the rest. It will be catholic and embracing, like raspberry ripple ice cream; the distinction is there, and at points will be acute, but it’s all mixed up.

But it’s all very well to say we need a renewal of catholic mission. We no longer live in the Wild West days of Fr Lowder. We need mission which is renewed for our days. So it is pretty urgent we know what the practice of our mission is, and how we collaborate with the Holy Spirit so that he may lead us into all truth.

In a way the answer is now what it was a century and more ago, and always has been: the beginning of our mission is prayer. We start with prayer because it is only insofar as we proclaim *Christ* that we are sharing life and truth and not propaganda. And our claim is not that we simply proclaim Christ, but that we *bring* Him, for He has promised that the Holy Spirit is working in us that He might be *with* us, incarnate through prayer, scripture and

sacrament, especially in the Blessed Sacrament which is therefore the fount of mission. *He* will lead you into all truth. *Him*, not the methods. All is predicated on the constant call to personal holiness which is the first and prime method of mission. Not for nothing has the Archbishop in calling for a renewal of mission called for a renewal of the Religious Life. But the methods are important, for faith without works is dead. So what are the methods?

We are becoming more learned in the methods of mission; because let us not pretend, we have allowed ourselves to forget some of what we once knew, and have failed to learn some of what we now need to know. We need to go beyond visiting and school assemblies and the odd funeral. Fr Feeney will speak later; and how good that schools of mission are getting going; we are sharing some of the best practice and studying what works. All I want to say on those practical things now is, don't be afraid of the methods, and be ready to take risks. There is a lot of tosh, but there is also a grammar to mission work: things which can be taught and learned. Let us not be afraid to seek teachers in surprising places. There are some great partnerships where catholic parishes join with others of very different stamp to achieve great things; there are examples from Christianity Explored courses to Night Shelters. There are increasingly well understood mission methods from pop up cafes to alpha groups, through youth and children's work and by effective missional social engagement. There are studies in it all – let's read them, and contribute to them. We have much to learn and we have much to offer. Let us not think that the Holy Spirit stopped leading the church into the truth of how to evangelise in about 1950 or that He does not use the insights of others in the church as much as our own as His tool to teach.

But what is Catholic mission? Muttering along underneath the louder and seemingly more urgent needs of our engagement with questions of Holy Order has been the debate about what it means to be missional. We have worried about how proper it is for those who proclaim an abandoned and crucified Christ incessantly to count numbers. We have asked whether the language of Management is quite right for the living Body of Christ. We hear that Father has been asked what his leadership style is, but we know he knows best, even if he says he is collaborative, and surely he does not need any ministerial development because priesthood is about being, not doing. But then we look around us and see that there is mission going on, that there are churches that are thronged, and that there are people who are keen to come to hear the word of God and even to celebrate the sacraments.

We have sought to do whatever we do in word or deed in the name of the Lord Jesus. Ours has been an incarnational theology from the beginning, starting from the fact that the Word Was Made Flesh and lived among us. These last months I have been studying Fr George Congreve SSJE, a profound teacher of the catholic faith who is now largely forgotten. He taught that our mission begins not with obedience to the great commission to go out and baptise all nations, as a sort of bolt on activity, but with the fact that through the incarnation Christ has made all people One in Him, and continues to unite us to Himself through the sacraments, especially our shared baptism and the union we have with Him in the Eucharist. Mission is necessary for the church, not so that numbers might be extended, but because to reject it is to turn away from Christ whose mission is to draw all people to Himself. So “when a church loses its missionary enthusiasm and allows indifference as to the conversion of others its own Christianity begins to die out.” All baptised Christians in all states of life are therefore called to be missionaries because to be united with Christ is to be called by Him to share His work of evangelism. Congreve said, “To bring the Good News is not a favour that we do for the heathen, but a necessary instinctive action of the new nature of Christ in us.” The evangelist is helped by those evangelised: “we ourselves receive help and grace from

those who are won to Christ.” The church “without them is incomplete, and all the members share in the enrichment of life in virtue which the conversion of each new member brings.”

We love our glorious past: too much sometimes perhaps. Our past was evangelical, characterised by active mission which was intrinsic to catholic life. We have a theology of mission, and we have methods and can and should learn more. In this moment we have been called to the happy duty to evangelise. Our mission begins here at the altar where Christ unites us to Himself; it returns there; but we are sent on the mission journey out from here. Let us again begin that journey. He is leading us into all truth.