

On a drop of wine

I wanted to say Mass this morning, so I prepared the small table I use as an altar and then remembered that the wine was finished. I sat pondering whether to make the hour's round trip to buy some wine but then I remembered the drink's cupboard, which still had some bottles left by the lady from whom I am renting the house, so, I got down on my knees to see what was there. At first, all I could see were bottles of spirits, which cannot be used for Mass, but then, tucked away at the back of the cupboard, I saw a bottle of sherry with something still in it. I took it to the kitchen and poured a little into a cruet, only to discover that it contained a lot of sediment, so I set to, to decant it, but even after that, it was still a little murky and I stood looking at it, wondering whether I could use it for Mass.

Yesterday, I came back from a short trip to Java, the next door island, and also one of the most crowded islands in the world. But, despite the fact that over 120 million people live there, I met two people who knew me from the Sunday evening Mass at Kuta. Both seemed pleased to see me and I was touched, as I often am, by the affection that Catholics have for their priests, especially in this part of the world. Being unmarried, this affection is vital for our spiritual and psychic wellbeing, but it can also have a shadow side, for we can so easily find ourselves trying to live up to expectations which are beyond us. These expectations may be helpful to a young priest, for it can give him ideals to strive for and "stretch him" in the process, but our failures can often lead to disillusionment and we may find ourselves playing a part, which is not real. In our journey as priests, we have to discover that it is the wonder and weakness of our humanity that God uses in our ministry. The expectations of people may teach me how to be Father Burke, but I have to eventually look for the "Terry" hidden under the "Father Burke", for it is the frailty of my humanity, which God uses, in my ministry, to heal.

This affection, which Catholics have for their priests, can also have a shadow side for themselves. If they do not cherish their priests in their frailty, they may well come to consider them "holy men" – and also consider themselves as something less than holy. I have come across this, when I asking people whether they would like to become a Eucharistic Minister. Sometimes, they have answered, "I am not worthy, Father" and my response is always: "Don't do that to me. If you say you are unworthy, that implies that I am worthy – which is an appalling burden to make me carry". Such remarks come from an underlying attitude of "*moralism*", something which continually plagues the Christian People. "*Moralism*" understands the Christian Faith in terms of ethical standards, which Christians accept and them live up to. If a Christian fails in this, they are then considered to be of lesser value - they are thought of as "unworthy". This underlying attitude forgets the fundamental tenet of Christianity - that we are a salvific religion. To be a Christian is to let ourselves be embraced by a Creating/Saving/Sanctifying God, who is transforming us by his grace into something wonderfully new. Our Christian ideals of justice, compassion and rectitude are visions of the Kingdom towards which we are being led by our God – they are our hope for the future, not standards by which we can or should judge the worthiness of ourselves or others now – and yet, we so often do. We try to fit ourselves – and others - into a model of rectitude for which we are not yet ready and which may never fit us - the result is a plastic person, trying all the time to be someone else. This is the greatest danger to an authentic Christian life, for it forgets the teaching of St Ireneaus, that God is glorified when we are fully human – which means when we are fully ourselves!

We seem to miss this teaching even though it is acted out before us each time we celebrate Mass. We know from our catechism classes that there can be no

Mass unless the gratuitous power of God comes down and transforms our bread and wine into the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, BUT..... we so often seem to overlook the fact that this consecration can only take place because you and I have first brought the bread and wine to the altar. There can be no Mass unless there is bread and wine – and these are the symbols and signs of ourselves. The bread need not be perfect, but it must be bread, the wine need not be of the finest, but it must be wine. I cannot be changed into a son of God, unless what I give to God at Mass that which is really me - and not a plastic imitation of what I imagine I would like to be. I give myself into the hands of the consecrating God because I need to be changed and what is required of me is not that I am “worthy”, but that I am real. That which I give into the Lord’s hands may be mouldy, may be sour, but it must be me – for it is the real “me”, in all my humanity, that the Lord gives thanks for (*1 Cor. 11:23-24*) as he begins the consecration.

And so, as I stood in my kitchen, looking at my drop of murky wine, I realised that I was looking at myself. Of course, I could use it for Mass, and especially today, a “down” day, when I am particularly feeling my shortcomings and the frailty of my humanity. So I carried it to my small altar table, but as I sat and readied myself to begin, I was stopped in my tracks once more and given pause for thought. A question came to me - on what grounds was I condemning this drop of wine as being inferior – and so condemning myself also, into the bargain. I began to see that I was only looking at what was wrong with the wine and completely overlooking what was right. There I sat, looking at one of the miracles of nature, a miracle which has given joy to human hearts for generations. A drop of grape juice had been wonderfully transformed into wine. It may be a touch murky, but it still was wine and so a cause for rejoicing. The words of Evelyn Waugh came to mind, when he was once asked how he could claim to be a Catholic, seeing how unpleasant a person he was. His reply was, “You should see what I would be like if I were not a Catholic!”

I have no right to come to the altar with thoughts only of my lacks and failings. I need also to come with Mary’s magnificat on my lips, “My soul glorifies the Lord”, for the Almighty has done and is doing great things for me – and so Holy is his name. I am on a journey with my Lord and it does not matter how far down the path I am; all that matters is that I have presented my bread and my wine and with him have begun my journey. I did not get this far along the path, irrespective of how little that “far” may be, by myself. I have become who I am by the power and grace of God and I know that the One in whom I place my trust will not fail me; I know that that which he has started he will complete – even though today, I have only a drop of murky wine to offer.

Diary

Since the Fall of Soeharto, there has been an attempt to return democracy to the people, here in Indonesia, and a certain amount of regional autonomy has been given to the provinces. This has led, in some predominantly Muslim areas, to the introduction of sharia-inspired bye-laws concerning dress etc and the Central Government has done nothing about it, hoping, I presume, not to antagonise the political Islamist groups. However, local politicians, in the predominantly Christian West Papuan region of Manokwari, have begun drafting local ordinances based on the Bible, including one which would ban non-Christian religious clothing. This has provoked anger from Muslim religious authorities in the area, which is “interesting”, as one local commentator puts it, because sharia-inspired bye-laws, in predominantly Muslim areas, tacitly require non-muslims to wear muslim dress for the sake of mutual respect.

There have been protests from all directions at this proposed legislation, including the Catholic Bishops' conference and the Communion of Indonesian Churches, but the local politicians of Papua are not listening and the Central Government is not saying anything – but then what can they say? What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!

On my way to Kuta, which is where the Church is, I pass through an area of padi fields. They are just beginning a new planting season: the terraces have been cleaned and cut, the fields filled with water and ploughed and the new padi planted. It looks really beautiful and riding through on my motorbike (my nephew Terence irreverently refers to me as “the kamikaze priest!”) gives me a wonderful view of the terraces. This is the third planting since I have been here. The people get three harvests a year – but they work very hard for them.

God bless,

Terry