

LIVERPOOL ARCHDIOCESAN CENTRE FOR EVANGELISATION

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‘Eucharist as Viaticum’

The Most Reverend Patrick Kelly, Archbishop of Liverpool at 11.30 am on Friday 15 June 2012 at the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin.

50 years ago I was receiving the beautiful signs in the Gospel according to Saint John. He teaches us such wonderful things that for three weeks we have studied the first three lines of his Gospel:

‘In the beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God;
And the Word was God.’

Then on Monday morning our teacher came in: ‘Open your notes. Cross out all the notes for the last two lectures: for two days I have received again all the signs in all the writings of Saint John and I see this:

‘He uses the Greek sign: P A R A to mean With: he uses the Greek sign: P R O S to sign: Towards.’ So we must receive: ‘In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was towards God; and the Word was God. The Word is always moving towards the Father: the Word is reaching out to the Father; the Word is always a pilgrim.

And the Word became flesh and set up his tent among us: a tent, because he is travelling, not stuck in one place. And that is why Saint John tells us the story of Jesus as seven journeys: to Jerusalem for seven Feasts. And the last journey: Jesus says: ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’

Pope Benedict teaches us that Jesus present among us in the Mass is not just standing there with us standing near him: Jesus is always leading us onward to the Father; whenever we receive him, whenever we come to him, he leads us, sometimes supports us when we are weak always toward God our Father.

That shows us why the most important, most joyful, most complete receiving of Our Lord is not our first but our last. Every other time we receive him is leading us to the last, to the journey home to heaven. And that communion has a special name: Viaticum: it means: with you on the way: with you for the final journey.

60 years ago, Pope Paul VI gave us a new way to accompany people who are unable to get to Mass, or seriously ill, or dying. Many people said: I am glad because anointing is not described as the last Rites, so we do not need to make people afraid as if they are soon to die.

But they should have turned the next page: it said: anyone who really wants to be close to Our Lord, to walk with him, to receive all the life he wants to give to us, will want to be informed when it is time to die: to die at peace; to die praying, as he did: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'; and to receive him knowing this may well be the last time until I sit beside him at this banquet in heaven. And this coming close to us by our Lord is seen as so important that any minister of the Eucharist may bring communion to us when the last time comes. Older people will remember Bing Crosby and the Bells of Saint Mary's and the cry: 'Send for the priest', when someone was dying; it should be: send for anyone who can bring me the Lord.

This is the book given to us by Pope Paul VI. There are three steps for sick people, old people, weak people. The first: when they are unable to come together with their sisters and brothers to receive from the table of the Signs (Words) of the Lord and from the table of the Body and Blood of our Lord, on the Lord's own Day. The Day when God said: let there be light: when Jesus rose from the dead; when the Holy Spirit came. This book says: priests must make it possible for all those who cannot come to be nourished by the Signs and Body and Blood of Our Lord, to receive him at home, in hospital. That is why Eucharistic Ministers are a wonderful blessing for our family, the Body of Christ: many members: all different; all needing each other. One Body, One Spirit in Jesus. And it even insists: during Eastertide, people at home should be able to receive Our Lord every day and always as often as they did when they were well.

The second step: when Our Lord speaks in the heart and shows: 'Now you will serve me and your sisters and brothers in a new way; not by giving, but receiving, not by doing, but being still, not by rushing around but quietly, patiently.' A new way of life: and so a sacrament for a new beginning; the anointing of the sick, the frail, those who are old. And it is just like Baptism, Confirmation, and Ordination: anointing with oil; laying on of hands; a calling down of the Holy Spirit. And there may be many new beginnings and so more than one celebration: first, for example when cancer is diagnosed: that means every day will be touched by that darkness, by fear. Then a day comes when someone cannot work at all any more. A new way of life. And then when they cannot leave their bed. And I know many people have been grateful for these words of the English poet John Milton: he lost his sight; he was angry with God; then he discovered: 'They also serve who only stand and wait', or sit and wait, or lie in bed and wait.

This is the beautiful prayer for them:

'Father in heaven,
Through this holy anointing
Grant our brothers and sisters comfort in their suffering.
When they are afraid, give them courage,
When afflicted, give them patience,
When dejected afford them hope,
And when alone,
Assure them of the support of your holy people.'

And so the third step: when it is clear: Our Lord is saying: 'Come, follow me home, to heaven. Say farewell to all the people you love and let them say farewell to you.' Pope Paul taught us: do whatever is best for this person. But it would be good: to assist them to renew the

promises of baptism: to proclaim one last time: God is my Father, Jesus is my Lord, the Holy Spirit lives in my heart: I am a Catholic.

If a priest can come, he can celebrate Mass at the bedside. The Mass can be very simple. After praying: Lord, have mercy the priest prays:

‘Through the holy mysteries of our redemption,
May almighty God release you from all punishment in this life and in the life to come.
May he open to you the gates of paradise and welcome you to everlasting joy.’

The Reading by the priest or anyone present can be as simple as this:

‘A reading from the holy Gospel according to John.

Jesus says:
If anyone loves me he will keep my word,
And my Father will love him,
And we shall come to him
And make our home with him.’

At communion the priest, and if it is not Mass the minister says:

‘Jesus Christ is the food for our journey; he calls us to the heavenly table.’

Or

‘This is the bread of life.
Taste and see that the Lord is good.’

And immediately after giving communion this prayer:

‘May the Lord Jesus Christ protect you and lead you to eternal life.’

Maura Buckley, who is deaf, of this city, once signed to me: ‘When you sing and sign at the same time your signs are more beautiful.’ I dare to end with a song: it is by Blessed John Henry Newman. The signs are not always given in books. I first received them when Pope Benedict spent an hour of prayer in London on the night before he beatified Blessed John Henry Newman.

Receive them now as I try to sing and sign:

‘Meantime, along the narrow rugged path,
Thyself hast trod,
lead, Saviour, lead me home in childlike faith,
home to my God.
To rest forever after earthly strife
In the calm light of everlasting life.’