

*‘Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?’*

1] In the ancient Roman world pagan temples consisted of an enclosure with an inner sanctuary, often surrounded by columns. People did not gather as congregations inside the sanctuary: that was reserved for the statue of the god or goddess. People gathered outside where sacrifices were offered. The word in Greek for the most sacred part of the temple, the inner sanctuary, is *naos*; in Latin it is *fanum*. So the area in front was *pro-fanum*, from which, incidentally, we get the English word, *profane*; quite the opposite of holy.

2] We see something of the same lay-out among the ancient Jews and the Temple of the Lord at Jerusalem. No one went into the Qodesh Ha-qadashim, the Holy of Holies; only the High Priest and that but once a year. The Altar of Sacrifice, as directed in the Torah, was a large platform in the outer courtyard; then came the Holy Place with the altar of incense: you will remember that Zachariah served there when an angel told him that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, John the Forerunner. And finally, came the Holy of Holies.

3] In addressing his teaching to the Church at Corinth, as we heard this morning, St Paul, using the analogy of building, reminds them that it was he who laid the foundations and others are now building on those foundations. But, he warns those workmen, those labourers, to be very careful how they build and what they build. Those pastors, teachers, ministers and administrators of the Corinthian Church will have their work tested; they will be judged on it. Those whom later on, in the same epistle, he calls, *‘Stewards of the mysteries of God,’* (1Cor.4:1) are to be faithful, be careful over their own conduct and abide by the apostolic traditions that they have received. We know that from the earliest days, as now, the devil has always used heresy, moral corruption, as well as personal choices and judgements, to try and tear down the building.

4] But then Paul says something quite remarkable: *‘The temple of God is holy, which temple you are.’* A better translation would, in fact,

be *inner sanctum* or *the holy of holies*, rather than just, *temple*. No wonder the pastors must handle God's Church, his sanctuary on earth, so carefully. Yes, indeed! A warning to all, like myself, who share in the sacred ministry; a warning to bishops who must divide the word of truth from false teaching (2Tim.2:15); a warning to us all who must tread with trepidation, with circumspection, these sacred courts, for they symbolise what we are as the Body of Christ.

5] Perhaps, most of all, it is a warning against hypocrisy, outwardly sharing in the piety of angles whilst here, yet forgetting that, and conducting ourselves otherwise when engaging with the world outside.

6] Bearing this in mind, there is something even more remarkable in what St Paul implies in all this. Indeed, as Christ says, individually, the kingdom of God can be found within (Lk.17:21) but when we come together to serve the Liturgy, we are God's sanctuary. And as we know, the Divine Liturgy is the holy sacrifice, the offering of the same eternal sacrifice of Christ, who ever lives to make intercession for us. (Heb.7:25) But this sacrifice is not offered in the profane place, this is not in the outer court: the blood of the eternal sacrifice, the offering of Christ is actually brought into the Holy of Holies itself. And since the Ascension of Our Lord, not into an earthly copy or antitype, but into heaven itself.

7] It is, therefore, important for Christian people to have some understanding, at least, of these holy mysteries and the sacrifice that we offer. Pope St Gregory the Great, the Diologist as we call him, wrote that, *'At that hour of the Sacrifice, at the words of the Priests, the heavens are opened, and in that mystery of Jesus Christ, the choirs of angels are present, and things below are joined with things on high, earthly things to heavenly, and the service is both a visible and invisible event.'* This is what we are sharing in, this very morning, we who together form the place where God dwells among men on earth.

8] Any sacrifice is only effective if it is accepted by God, and it is those who share in it who reap the benefits. And our eucharistic sacrifice is received by God for it is God's whole initiative to begin

with; because it is the offering of Christ Himself. Within this sanctuary we offer up Christ Himself, who is both priest and victim. As the priest says quietly in *the Prayer of the Cherubic Hymn*, before reciting the Anaphora, *'For Thou Thyself art He that offereth and is offered, that accepteth and is distributed, O Christ our God.'*

9] It is important to know the Old Testament. All those sacrifices recorded there are types, prefiguring this mystery. We might begin with the worship offered by Abel that was received by God; and that of Noah as well. Abraham, in offering his son Isaac, foreshadows God the Father, who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (Jn.3:16). Then there are the priestly sacrifices that Moses, directed by the Lord, commanded from Aaron. The levites had very precise instructions on how the sacrifices were to be offered, in order to purify the worshippers from their sins. You might recall Job, for example, who would send for and sanctify his children, and would offer burnt offerings for them all, saying, 'It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' (Job.1:5)

10] In these types of what was to come in Christ, the offered victim was identified with the sins of the worshippers; they became the sin, which was then consumed by fire in reparation to God. On the Day of Atonement Moses ordered that, after the blood sacrifices, Aaron was to confess the sins of the people over the scapegoat that was to be driven out into the wilderness, bearing away the people's sin. So it was with Christ, crucified outside, what were then, the walls of the holy city. Christ, in fulfilment of this, took our sins upon Himself, for as Paul tells us, God the Father, *'Made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.'* [2Cor.5:21] And as St Peter says, 'Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness.' [1Pet.2:24]

11] How easy it is for the presbyters of the Church to become careless, indifferent to the awesome mystery, too obsessed with their own status. As someone once said, *'None so insensitive as those whose hands have been cauterised by handling holy things.'* So pray for your priests and those who minister in the altar. Think of that prayer that he offers on behalf of us all. After he has recited Our

Lord's own words at the Mystical Supper, authorising the offering, he makes *anemnesis*, a remembrance, of the whole mystery of Christ dispensation: the cross, the grave, the third-day resurrection, his ascension, the sitting at the right hand and the coming again. Then in fear and trembling the priest must beseech the descent of the Holy Spirit, firstly, on us all and then, upon the gifts that have been offered up, sealing, ratifying, fulfilling and completing the consecration of the oblation. This is the mystery once foreshadowed when the great prophet Elijah called down the fire of the Lord upon his sacrifice, confirming the reality and presence of the Lord in his contest against the false prophets of Baal (3 Kings 18:38).

12] And, of course, those who offered those sin offerings of the Old Testament would share in them, a communion sacrifice, eating a portion of what was offered, after the blood, representing the life, had been given to God. In fulfilment of that, we who receive the Holy Gifts in communion participate likewise, not in the shadow but in the reality of Christ's body and blood. So that, whilst we are still in this world, whilst we still contend in the ascetic struggle against sin, we may bear Christ's risen body within and live in the realm of God's grace, not His wrath.

13] Do you see how important it is to receive communion? And how important it is to prepare: to empty ourselves both spiritually and physically, in fasting beforehand, not only with an empty stomach that is ready to receive Him, but also, that openness of the mind, laying aside, as we say, all earthly care when we come together here. How important it is to pray beforehand, that our souls, our minds be fired with a love of Christ with the chamber of the heart ready to receive Him. And most of all to come in repentance, and from time to time or certainly, when necessary, to go first to confession. For the whole purpose of our communion is in acknowledging, and publishing and laying aside our sins, for it is for our sins that we make this offering at all. There are two groups of people who should not receive communion: those who refuse to repent and those who imagine that they have no need of repentance.

14] In the end our whole focus, our whole direction must be on Christ. This is not just church-going; this is no association of the

religiously like-minded or some entertainment aimed at ourselves for our self-fulfilment. Our whole liturgy is offered towards God of whom we must not lose sight. Remember Peter in the gospel today; Peter who is called the Rock of the Church by Christ. And yes, we know what happens to rocks in water! But like Peter, we too are bidden to come to Christ across the water. It was only when he felt the power of the wind that he became afraid; it was only when he became distracted and lost sight of Christ that he sank. And even on the tempestuous waters of this life, in Christ we can stand. For, as the apostle tells us today, *'No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.'*