

PANEGYRIC given at the Requiem Mass of Father Frederick S. Thomas, Jr., SSC, at Grace & St Peter's Church, Baltimore, Maryland, Saturday, 4 June 2016, by Father Swain.

✠In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Our dear departed brother was very clear about one point: the preacher at his Requiem Mass must not speak of him but instead, as Miss Crosby's hymn says, "To God be the Glory..." I shall endeavour to obey his instructions.

I should think it hardly needs stating, but it clearly does: the priest must have something vital to offer the world and not just the world, but other Christians particularly or there is no point. Père Lamy said "The Church invests her priests with the Cross. There is no true priest without the sense of sacrifice." Both Father Thomas and I are members of the Society of the Holy Cross, SSC. When I was given my cross in 1989 and Father Thomas his just about ten years ago, The Master of the Society said this, "Receive the sign of the Cross, the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ and the badge of our Society. Follow in the way of the Cross, and in this sign, conquer. Pax tibi!" This tells us a few things. The first is that the sign given to us is the sign of worldly failure, the sign is an ignoble method of capital punishment for the dregs of the Roman world, an instrument of pain, degradation, ineffable grief and suffering. Why does the Christian glory in the Cross? Why did St Paul say, "God forbid that I should glory except in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ"? It is because it is the key to understanding the ways of man, the ways of the world and the ways of God. We can rely on man to do terrible things, we can rely on the world to bring suffering and grief, and what does the Cross tell us we can rely on regarding the ways of God? What we can rely on is that the broken man, the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, is also the King of Life who, although he died, lives and reigns immortal. The criminal on the cross is also our God and our King, and God has glorified, transfigured and made sense of his suffering by one thing and one thing alone: his suffering was offered willingly: it was, and remains, a sacrifice.

If you asked the average person the meaning of the word sacrifice, what would he say? He would suggest it meant giving up something, it would raise a negative connotation of giving away something good, even under duress. Perhaps he would even think of a heathen god in a film being offered a human sacrifice, perhaps a live virgin! Oddly enough, it is the last instance that is closest. Though today sacrifice would be taken to mean renouncing or exchanging something one holds dear, that is a metaphorical, figurative meaning. Its literal meaning is much simpler: its root meaning is simply "to make holy". In the ancient world, all religions made use of sacrifice. Grain or vegetables were offered, water or wine poured out as an offering, or animals were sacrificed. The Greek and Roman gods all received such sacrifices, and the Living God of the Hebrews also received cereal offerings, liquid offerings were poured out as libations in the Old Testament, and of course animal offerings: birds, goats, rams and bullocks were offered every day in the Temple, as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds his recipients. Rivers of blood flowed from the altar of sacrifice through the Temple and out on to the earth. Not only must it have been a terrible sight, *it accomplished nothing*. Such sacrifices, he told the Hebrews, could never atone for sin, and they didn't. God himself made sense of the notion of sacrifice when he came to live among us as one of us, and then willingly offered himself as a living sacrifice. God Incarnate, the Priest of Love, made himself the victim of his own sacrifice. With his own body, wracked with pain and sorrow on the Cross, he made a bridge between God and Man, the two natures which are joined in him in that unique union. With his

blood, he made for us a River Jordan for us to be cleansed of sin and a Red Sea for us to cross to reach the Promised Land. There was suffering, yes, an abundance of suffering, but by embracing it and making a willing offering, he made of suffering a sacrifice to make peace between God and Man, to atone for sin.

This sacrifice, begun at the Last Supper, continued through his agony in the garden, his trial, his passion and his death, all constitute the Holy Sacrifice which we renew upon the altar. In that sacred and unbloody rite, we appropriate again the merits of His Sacrifice on the Cross, and we, joined together in the mystery of the Cross, should have a special affinity with his sacrifice and be willing to make our own sacrifices in union with those of His Sacred Heart. Dom Marmion comments in his *Christ the Ideal of the Priest*, "In the same way that the humility of Christ is expressed all his life through obedience and sacrifice, so it must be for the priest in his very being." The struggle of the priest is to be found faithful in conforming his life as much as possible to the life of the One Great High Priest. This struggle is marked by many and sometimes seemingly constant failures, but it is also adorned by many successes, and these successes instruct the faithful and encourage them to try to live in the same spirit.

Make no mistake, it is not normal human behaviour to seek what we do not wish, to glory in one's shame and to offer suffering as a willing sacrifice. St Paul called it a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. It is no different with our society and culture, which prizes above all things a happy life, owning many things and doing whatever one pleases. That instinct has become so strong that it far outstrips the concept of duty and responsibility that characterised my parents' generation, and it is so much the animating spirit of people today that it often forms a barrier to the reality of living the Catholic Faith. Cardinal Mercier, the great friend of Lord Halifax, and early oecumenist said, "So few men have the courage to address the question of discovering what they are capable of becoming. And even fewer of them have the desire to achieve it." If that was true before the Great War in the old European Catholic culture of 1909 when he wrote that, how much more true is it today. It is difficult to set aside what we wish and embrace hardship and suffering and turn them into gifts of obedience and sacrifice for God, we all know that. But if the priest will not try, who will? The famous Russian Monsignor Ghika imagined Christ speaking to him, "O my priest, how can you dare to make an offering of Me truly and totally complete, if you haven't first made the offering of yourself, totally complete."

Now Father Thomas told me very often that he wanted no eulogy, and quite rightly, as the Catholic Church does not indulge in that particular form of narcissism. As he said to me often, "If some priest stands up and starts telling them how wonderful I was, they'll know it's a lie! And if he tells them the truth, about all the mistakes I made, they'll be scandalised!" Now I know for a fact that that is vintage Father Thomas exaggeration, and that he was never one to put forth his virtues. Though he was not a reticent person, he was not one to put himself forward as a shining example. He was a humble man, and he knew who he was, and that God knew who he was. But the wonderful thing about the Catholic Faith, and not just for priests, but for all of us, is that we do not have to be perfect saints to emerge from Purgatory and be at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, worshipping the Three Persons in One God forever. We simply have to be baptised and to have done our best. We cannot earn our way into heaven, though our good works do have merit. As St John says, "How can you love God, whom you have not seen, when you do not love your brother, whom you have seen?" As the very well known English Roman Catholic prayer that is recited every Sunday evening at Benediction says, "that by **faith** fruitful in **good** works we may all deserve to see and praise God, together with thee, in our heavenly home." So when we stand at a Requiem Mass to pray

for the soul of our dear departed, priest, religious, layman, we need not suggest to ourselves privately or aloud that he or she was perfect, always walking with God. What a relief! All we need do is know that our dead friend's soul was joined to the Body of Christ in Baptism, sealed in Confirmation, in this case renewed daily by pleading the Holy Sacrifice and by receiving Our Lord's Own Body and Blood, by receiving Extreme Unction in sickness and at the hour of his death, and by being ordained a priest forever after the order of Melchizedech. And that we know. All of that stands between Father Thomas and the judgment he deserves, just as the Sacraments and Our Lord's Blood stand between us and the judgment we deserve. Instead of the judgment we deserve, God gives lavishly the mercy we do not deserve. And that is what we ask to-day in this mass, for as we are taught in the second Book of the Maccabees, "It is a good and salutary thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins..." The Universal Church has always taught this, and it is comfort beyond measure. We can DO SOMETHING, not just stand here and reflect that we will not see him again in this life. We can DO SOMETHING, not just weep. We can DO SOMETHING, not just tell funny stories about him. We can DO SOMETHING, not just think of what has been, but will be no more.

As I said earlier, Father Thomas repeatedly said he did not wish anyone to speak of him at this Requiem, and although I did not know I would be the preacher, I now realise that instruction was for me. I am at pains to obey it, for if anyone could possibly leap out of his coffin and begin giving instructions at his own funeral, it is Father Thomas.

Nonetheless, I cannot finish without reflecting on the fact that God called him to take the next step on his journey to him by entering Purgatory, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, the Feast of his own Body. Father Thomas was always a priest of the Mass, and once after a retreat when several of us began a discussion of our "favourite feast", priests had all kinds of answers (priests and musicians have this kind of conversation!), Christmas is mine, but there was also Easter, the Assumption, All Saints, and so on. Father Thomas' was Corpus Christi. The last time I sang High Mass at this altar was in September 2012 during the SSC Synod. When I turned around with the Host to say, "Behold the Lamb of God...", I happened to notice someone. Now the celebrant should never turn around and look at anyone, always at the floor below, but when he turns around at that point, his gaze is of course fixed on God Himself whom he Holds. In my line of vision was Father Thomas – who had the privilege, for a change, of worshipping in his own church with the luxury of doing so without any duties. I remember now the look on his face as he looked up at the Host – the look of Faith and Love that I have so many times seen on the faces of so many of my own lay people, so many priests, so many Sisters.

On Corpus Christi this year, as I sang High Mass in my own church, I had heard in the morning that Father had died. We sang the usual selection of outlandish hymns and as one came to its eighth and last verse, it dawned on me that it described Father Thomas and his last day on earth:

Our hearts leap up, our trembling song,
Grows fainter still, we can no more,
Silence! And let us weep, and die
Of very love, while we adore.
Great Sacrament of love divine!
All, all, we have or are be thine!