

Anniversary of the Dedication of the Monastic Church of Holy Cross Monastery (Rostrevor)
(Ephesians 2:19-22 / John 4:19-24)
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Around the year 600, a Spanish bishop – Isidore of Seville – wrote a book on the liturgy of the Church. And one of the chapters is on ‘Temples’ – in our terms, ‘On the Dedication of Churches’. It’s very short and it says this:

“Moses, the lawgiver, was the first to dedicate a Tabernacle to the Lord. Then Solomon ... established the Temple. After these, in our own times, faith has consecrated buildings for Christ throughout the world.”

The word that jumps out there is the word “faith”. Faith, he says, “has consecrated buildings for Christ throughout the world.” He has mentioned Moses and Solomon. What we’d expect, when he gets to now, is bishops consecrate buildings for Christ. They do, after all. Bishop John dedicated this church on 18 January 2004. And it was the same in St. Isidore’s day. But he goes deeper. He goes to what makes us Christians and come together in community. He goes to the root which makes us build churches in the first place and want them to be consecrated. He goes back to what gathers people round their bishop and to what moves the bishop to celebrate the liturgy for us. He goes back to what brings us here week after week, and the monks five times a day: faith.

“After these – after the Tabernacle and the Temple – in our own times, faith has consecrated buildings for Christ throughout the world.”

This is what it is about!

We’re familiar with chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews. It begins with a famous description of faith: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” And then it evokes the faith of the great figures of the Old Testament from Abel onwards. “By faith Abraham obeyed the call to set out for [another] country ... by faith Sarah, though past the age, was able to conceive ... by faith Moses left Egypt ...” And so on. By faith all these people looked forward to the fulfilment of God’s promises – “to a well-founded city, designed and built by God.”

By faith, some 30 or 40 years ago, a French abbot, Dom Paul Grammont, had a vision of a monastic community living and praying and working for unity in Northern Ireland. The first venture failed. But then, by faith, in the 1990s, Fr. Mark-Ephrem and his companions came to Rostrevor. By faith, they were given a place with the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles. By the faith of so many people here – from the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church and others – they were welcomed and encouraged and supported. It was thanks to his faith and his goodness of heart that a local farmer, Paddy Joe, gave this land for a church and a monastery, and did so on the Feast of Our Lady of Holy Hope. And it was

thanks to the faith and generosity of so many friends and benefactors that it was possible to build this monastery and this church, dedicated to the Holy Cross of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

“After these – after the Tabernacle and the Temple – in our own times, faith has consecrated buildings for Christ throughout the world” – even here in this small island off the north west coast of Europe, even now when we so often think of Christianity not having the presence in once did.

I remember well the dedication. Set at the beginning of the week of Prayer for Christian Unity, eleven years ago. I remember the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, preaching at Vespers and the two unforgettable testimonies: one of the Catholic man who had lost his only son in the Troubles, the other of the Methodist minister who had lost his brother and sister-in-law. And then the day of the dedication itself, with Bishop Harold of the Church of Ireland and Bishop John blessing the porch and the Holy Water stoup given by the Cathedral at Downpatrick. And then the dedication itself by Bishop John: the anointing of the altar and the walls and so forth, and the placing of the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle by Cardinal Daly. It was a faith-filled liturgy.

And so here it is:

- not a parish church, but a monastic church, designed for the Divine Office as well as for the Holy Eucharist.

- not restricted to a territory, but open to all who choose to come.

- not an ecumenical church, but a clearly Catholic one, and therefore one in which all Christians are welcomed and where prayer is made unceasingly for the healing of the wounds in the body of Christ, for the full reconstitution of that unity for which Christ prayed and prays. A house of prayer for the scattered children of God.

Here it is, this church: a place of the *Opus Dei*, a living monument to the *opus fidei*, the work of faith.

“This is the work of God: that you believe in the one he has sent.”

God’s wonders are not all past. They are among us here and now. And the presence and prayer of this community, and the existence of this church, with its altar and choir and consecration crosses and its Blessed Sacrament and icon of Our Lady – all of this is a wonder. Faith is alive. It is a wonder what connections have been made, how hearts have been opened, how attitudes have shifted, conversations have happened, prayer has been offered and the climate has softened.

Forgive me for going on, brothers and sisters, but there is one last question we must put to ourselves. What is the faith that has consecrated this building for Christ? What are the things hoped for, the things unseen?

It's no coincidence that our 1st reading should be from the Letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians. I think if we want to understand why this building is here, what makes this community tick, it's to the Letter to the Ephesians we must look. On the outside of the church there's the text of Ephesians 2,20: Christ Jesus himself is the cornerstone. Every night, after singing the antiphon to Mary, the brethren end their day singing a text from Ephesians 4,5: "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all." And that text is there in the porch.

The vision of the Letter to the Ephesians is a vision of unity re-established through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, by the one God who is Father of all.

"The main theme of this letter – one commentary says – is how the whole body of creation, having been cut off from the Creator by sin, is decomposing, and how its rebirth is effected by Christ's re-uniting all its parts into an organism with himself as the head, so as to re-attach it to God. The human (Jew and Gentile) and angelic worlds are united in the same salvation."

And so Paul says:

"He has let us know the mystery of his purposes ... that he would bring together everything under Christ as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth."

And so he says:

"For he (Christ) is the peace between us (Jew and Gentile), and has made the two into one broken down the barrier which has kept them apart, by destroying the hostility in his own person ... His purpose was, by restoring peace, to create a single New Man out of the two of them, and through the Cross to reconcile them both to God in one Body ... He came to bring the good news of peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. Through him, then, we both in the one Spirit have access to the Father."

So, "support one another in love. Take every care to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together ... So the Body grows until it has built itself up in love."

This is the vision, this is the faith that has consecrated this building for Christ. Faith which has anointed us. Faith in the living plan of the Father to gather everyone and everything under Christ. Faith that there is another way than the nursing of old grievances; another way than hostility and violence; a way rather of patience and understanding and forgiveness and eventual reconciliation.

"There is one Body, one Spirit, just as [we] are called to one hope."

Buildings pass, and we come and go. But how good to spend the time allotted us sowing in faith and hope, sowing for eternity, looking forward to the city built and designed by God. So we thank the brethren, and we say:

"Glory be to him whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen."