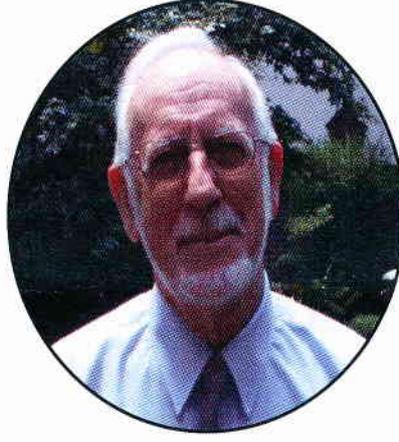




AN ANNIVERSARY FOR THREE VOICES A Special Edition



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For a brief period after the Second Vatican Council there were experiments in dialogue homilies. It must be said they didn't get off the ground. One main reason, of course, is that the clergy resisted any invasion of what they regarded as a unique prerogative. Certainly, the thought that women might break open the Word of God for the benefit of the entire assembly was resisted at the highest level of church authority. So what was familiar, namely the male voice of the presider, became the accepted norm.

It is significant then, that when our female counterparts (once known as the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament) came to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of their foundation, they should choose to speak along with the presider after the proclamation of the Gospel. In a way, none of us, considering the changes the Sisters have instigated over the past forty years or so, should have been surprised. From an enclosed life of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament to concern for an effective celebration of the Eucharist and thus to practical concern for the poor, they have shown us what "to live the mystery of the Eucharist fully" really means. Only they could tell the story of the pain that the changes in their life have caused. Only they could speak of the joys their efforts have brought. But for us who have watched from the sidelines, their successful negotiation of loss and the inevitability of change in the modern world is an object lesson for us all.

What follows in this special edition of *The Vineyard* is the homily presented by Vianney Hattan, Marian McClelland and Tony McSweeney at the celebration of the Eucharist on the anniversary of their foundation. At the conclusion of this special edition I have included St Peter Julian's own description of the Society's early apostolate. It is clear the Sisters have imbibed his spirit. We honour the achievement of the Sisters and wish them well as they continue their "Liturgy of the neighbour".

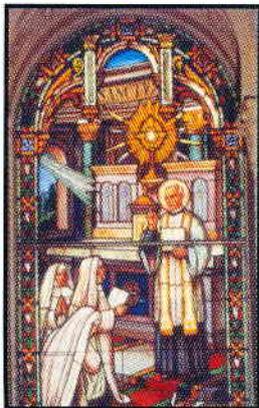
Pat Negri, S.S.S

SERVANTS OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT 150 Years

Homily

Tony

Celebrating 150 years of history we celebrate change as much as continuity. In fact, these 150 years have seen the most massive process of change in the whole of the world's history. Science has even reached into the very structure of life itself with the genome project, identifying all the approximately 20,000-25,000 genes in the human DNA, and determining the sequences of the 3 billion chemical base pairs that make it up.



That was not how things felt when many of the Sisters entered the community of the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament. They had little inkling at the time of the changes that were to come. No one could guess that we were on the verge of the most massive transformation of the church, and of its central rite, the eucharist, in all of its two thousand years of history.

The Servants of the Blessed Sacrament were born in the latter years of the 1850s when Queen Victoria was gloriously reigning over an expanding empire.

Our God too was a bit like a stern Victorian father – aloof, severe and demanding, enforcing conformity to the law by threats of appalling punishment.

The Mass (we were told) was Calvary all over again. It reminded us of God's righteous anger at sin, a wrath appeased by the death of his Son. It was a sacred event, remote and (as we called it) august. We assisted while the priest interceded for us. He used an ancient tongue that by its strangeness seemed timeless. We worshipped according to rites that we believed had remained unchanged from time immemorial and would remain so till the end of the ages. Approaching the communion rails, we did so with a deep sense of unworthiness.

Mother Church was a rather Victorian figure as well: strait-laced, buttons all done up to the neck, insisting on propriety and good behaviour. She loved us, of course, above all, when we were good, but we were left in little doubt that we were never good enough. Shame played a big part in her disciplinary repertoire. Important aspects of life figured on her list of unmentionables and we were to be careful too not to let the neighbours know about the family's darker secrets.



Though we didn't realize it at the time, the seeds of the changes to come had been sending down their roots into the soil of history for some time – indeed, already from those distant 1850s, when Eymard, together with Marguerite Guillot, was founding the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament. That very year, in fact – 1858 – the first transatlantic cable was laid, making instant communication possible between the United States and Europe. Charles Darwin also published an important paper on evolution in the same year. Meanwhile in France, Saint Bernadette Soubirous had her series of meetings with the mysterious Lady at Lourdes.

Saint Peter Julian Eymard founded his Congregations to spread a spirituality of love in place of the prevailing climate of severity and fear. He wanted people to find that love in the Eucharist, but there was little he could do to bring the Mass nearer to the people. Virtually the only avenue open to him was to encourage them – and he did it in the face of bitter opposition – to receive communion more often.

He brought them to the Eucharist by another path, namely, by gathering them around the throne of the Blessed Sacrament, surrounding it with exquisite swathes of flowers and the flickering flames of

innumerable candles. Perpetual Eucharistic adoration in such a setting made us feel that God was not so remote after all. Christ was palpably near to us. Through this form of piety, people all around the world discovered a spirituality of tenderness rather than terror. Together with other devotional movements, it brought the humanity of Jesus Christ into the centre of their lives.

Then with Vatican II the unthinkable happened. The rites of the Mass, considered for so long to be unalterable, were changed! The greatest reform of the church's rites ever undertaken was set in motion.

Amazed, we began to pray the Mass in our own language. We discovered the Scriptures. We were no longer devout onlookers but celebrants: we all said the responses and lay persons were given parts to play.

We learnt too that the Mass was very much about becoming a community, God's covenant people. We learnt that it was meant to give shape to our lives together, on the pattern of Jesus' dying and rising. We no longer focused on Calvary alone, but on Christ's paschal mystery, his passing over from death into a new and transformed existence. For that reason we preferred to call it "eucharist" – celebration of thanksgiving and praise.

That great shift had enormous consequences for our daily lives. It took time for us to grasp their implications. Over the course of the last fifty years, that shift had a marked impact on your lives as Servants of the Blessed Sacrament, did it not, Vian?

Vianney

Yes Tony. Our life has changed remarkably. The sisters came to Melbourne from French-speaking Canada in 1950. Once they were established the rules of Episcopal enclosure, (more like papal enclosure) were applied and our life was lived wholly within the confines of our convent in Hampden Road Armadale. Melbourne. I came to that Convent in 1957 and the daily routine of our life was centred on the Person of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. This took the form of a 24 hour rotating service of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament enshrined in the monstrance on a golden throne. We also chanted the seven hours of the Divine Office in Latin and had other community prayers. When we weren't at prayer we worked in the altar bread making factory... and that is a whole story on its own!



The recommendations of Vatican II invited religious groups to look at their lives in the light of the Gospel as it was enshrined in the insights of their Founders and in view of the needs of the world today.

Two new emphases in the Church itself greatly influenced our reflection: the understanding of the Church as the People of God and the recognition that the Eucharist was not so much a static reality to be adored as a gathering of the people to celebrate the Paschal Mystery.

We were greatly helped by some excellent educators. Father Marius Garail came from Paris at the instigation of our then Mother General and of course we had wonderful teachers in people like Greg Manley and the theologians who conducted Formation Programs in Melbourne.

Gradually we ourselves sponsored and lead liturgical and prayer courses at our Convent in Armadale. Some Sisters gained their degrees in Theology in Melbourne and others had the opportunity to study overseas. In our Convent Chapel we lived and prayed through a very inspiring and exciting period of liturgical renewal.

Many lay people were involved with us in the various liturgical ministries. In addition we served on Renewal Teams for congregations of religious priests brothers and sisters and also offered courses and seminars in liturgy and prayer in many parishes. For many years Sister Peter Julian conducted sacramental preparation programs for the young people of our area many of whom were not at Catholic schools.

When interstate and international students came to Melbourne to study at the National Pastoral Institute, Assumption Institute or Yarra Theological Union we opened our residences to them and benefitted, over many years, as they joined us at prayer. Our Sisters have served on the Archdiocesan Liturgical Commissions in both Melbourne and Sydney and functioned as spiritual companions and counsellors in a number of programs. At Redfern our Sisters pioneered Street Retreats and welcomed the aboriginal people to pray in our Chapel, especially at times of tragedy and sorrow.

So as the years unfolded we found ourselves not only living the Eucharistic life but sharing that life through our community service especially in the fields of liturgy and prayer.

Tony

Liturgical change, as you understood very well, Vian, called for a new mentality. It was part of a vast paradigm shift, that your own history has so strikingly illustrated. There we see in a vivid way the shift from seeing the eucharist simply as Christ's presence among us, to seeing it as Christ's transforming *action* operating through our great act of shared worship.

Today's readings highlight the importance of another change of focus that we have already noted: the movement from Calvary to Paschal Mystery. The texts we have heard today are soaked in the imagery of the shedding of sacrificial blood. They evoke for us a primitive world that seems light years from our own. They may well stir us to ask: Why does God seem to want blood? Why does God need to be appeased by blood sacrifice?

Here too a vast change of understanding is taking place. Sacrifice is not about killing. It is about making sacred, as Augustine taught us so long ago. It is about life. Like us, ancient peoples killed animals to eat them, but they took care to offer the blood back to God. It was a way of recognizing that all life comes from God.

When God's servants were killed by human wickedness, their blood was held to be sacred, because it stood for their life. It was a powerful *sign* that faithfulness to God mattered to them more than their very life.

When we call Jesus' death a sacrifice, then, we do not mean that he died to appease an angry Father-God. On the contrary, we affirm that he accepted an unjust death-sentence and made the cruel death inflicted on him by human wickedness into a prayer for us – even for those responsible for his destruction.



He perpetuated his own prayer in a rite, giving us his blood as a gift of life. He wanted to teach us to deal with evil – with lies and hatred and violence – in the only way that can defeat it. His blood becomes the supreme symbol of God's love for us. It recalls not God's vengeance, but the divine forgiveness for humanity's innumerable crimes, including the terrible crime of killing the innocent One, the Lord of life.

Our eucharist is not something that belongs to some special religious sphere, some separate dimension apart from ordinary life. It thrusts us rather into the heart of life, with all its terrors and its beauties, its violence and its tenderness.

The eucharist, moreover, combines worship with transformation. It is God's way of re-shaping our lives, not only as persons but also as communities. It is God's work of remodelling them in the likeness of the life story of Jesus. This is what Saint Peter Julian Eymard wanted to do. He spoke of the eucharist, especially under the aspect of holy communion, as the prolonging of the incarnation in history. This is what he wanted to bring people to understand. He longed for them to discover that they were only half alive, as yet unaware of their potential.

I think this vision of the eucharist as a source of human transformation goes some way to explaining a second development in your history, does it not, Marian?

Marian

Tony, I think we had begun a movement under the influence of the Second Vatican Council, a growth and a change which, had we not developed it, would have atrophied and died.

Our central symbol, the Eucharist, had been given a new and dynamic meaning for us – we now understood Eucharist as the whole celebration, with the reserved host, or the host in the Monstrance, as an extension of the meaning and grace of the Eucharist. We now saw the Eucharist as the sacrament of unity, justice, love and peace. We also realized that it is a central way of developing the life of Christ in the life of the people. So the Eucharist was not only an act of praise and worship of God - it was also a celebration for the life of Christ in the people.

The image that comes to me for what happened among us is that of light-rays coming from a living Monstrance: all the rays come from the one source, but are not identical to one another, and all, for us, return to that source for further gifts of life and love.

The Liturgical apostolate was not suited to everyone, so other gifts among the community were discovered and encouraged, especially through enlightened leadership policy. We were encouraged to find an area of ministry we felt we could pursue, that would fit in with our Eucharistic – centred prayer-life and our own personal attractions. We were never more than 14 Sisters during this period, but we were drawn into many areas of spiritual and human growth and development.

Let me give a few examples, relating to the Sisters who are here today:

Sr Carol, from Melbourne, has just done an outline of our early history for us in this Eucharist. Carol attended theological college for a Bachelor of Theology degree then carved out a role for herself with students at Melbourne University. She was in fact a chaplain but could not bear the official title because she was not a priest. Carol worked among university students – both Australian and overseas students – for 25 years; and among many other things Carol has gone on to complete a PhD which explores the Eucharistic charism from a feminist perspective. Presently Carol is highly involved in the issue of the trafficking of peoples.

Sr Charito, who is a member of this parish, has had a flourishing spiritual ministry among the Filipino Community for over 30 years. Charito has also directed retreats, been a spiritual director, an advisor to the Australian bishops for Philippine Brides, a researcher into justice and catechetical issues and programmes, the Secretary for ACLRI and, among other roles, has been a teacher of ESL to new migrants.

Sr Monica, who joins us from Adelaide, is a master organiser of all areas of home-making as well as having worked for many years for her then local community in Melbourne, encouraging residents to beautify their area and make it safer, with the co-operation and assistance of the local police. Monica has also worked among AA members, and in Pentridge gaol with prisoners, over many years. Presently she lives a quiet contemplative life, while also making a regular contribution to the local "Men's Shed" group of elderly hostel residents.

Sr Vianney, a long-standing member of this parish, is known here for her many contributions to the parish, especially her liturgical skills. Some of you will know Vianney for one of her other skills, which could be summed up as the healing aspect of Eucharist. This has taken the form of physiotherapy and a great interest in the concept of wellness rather than illness and pathology. Vianney pioneered the SAGE movement here in Australia: a movement designed to help older Australians explore wellness on many levels, including the spiritual level. Vianney also gained a Masters Degree in health, and won a Churchill scholarship to go abroad and further study her interest in wellness.

For myself, briefly: from my liturgical base, when I moved to Newtown from Melbourne, we needed to find new ways of earning our living (which, incidentally, is why Vianney took up her pre-convent physio skills) and I moved gradually - aware of Eucharist as the sacrament of unity, justice, love and peace, - into study and education relating to world peace, then into spirituality and holistic human-spiritual seminars and retreats. More recently my ministry has been my original liturgical one: as liturgical co-ordinator in parish and school.

Let me finish by saying that in all we have done, we have been motivated by our enlarged understanding of Eucharist. Eucharist remains our central symbol and the centre of our lives.

Tony

All that Vianney and Marian have told us has wonderfully illustrated how much this 150th celebration has been about change as well as continuity. It has been a story of challenge and invention, as these consecrated women have sought generously and courageously to re-interpret their tradition to bring it into harmony with our changing times. They have broken free of set ways and have faced situations for which their past experience gave them little help, especially in turning to the poorest and most needy of God's children.

What will the future bring? It seems that, in some parts of the world, the end of a cycle of life is in sight. That too is a normal part of life, and of the life of the church. We live for a time and we pass on. The divine work continues and we can leave the future to God's provident love.

For us, joy and dedication and faithfulness to the end are what matter.



So it is fitting that the last word of this shared homily be one of thanksgiving and praise.

- We thank God for the Lord's covenant love, unwavering in its faithfulness, that has guided our Sisters in these years and held them faithful in their turn.
- We give thanks for their lives lived in service to God and God's people. They have truly been, with all their human limitations, his faithful and loving *Servants*.
- If we have been remembering especially their deeds, we do not forget the great hidden part of their lives. We have no way of recounting that story, which is known only to God – the long hours of silent prayer, with its whispered praise and love, its ardent intercession for the rest of us, its struggles and its pain, its times of testing and purification.
- All we can do today is to rejoice in its fruits.

So let us now move on to offer the great sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving that we call *eucharist*, our hearts warm with joy and filled with appreciation for what God has done in the lives of these, our beloved Sisters in the Lord, his true and faithful *Servants*.