

Talk delivered by Fr Ed Tomlinson at Tunbridge Wells Ordinariate Group's Called To Be One day 6 September 2014

People picture the Catholic Church as rigid. Yet in reality it is incredibly diverse; it has different Rites, Antiochean and Armenian, and even variety within the Latin Rite, Dominicans differ from Jesuits. And historically there has been diversity between local Churches in different countries. Because the Catholic church isn't ONE church so much as MANY united by the papacy. Each having developed unique charisms- cultural and spiritual gifts to be treasured- that it might speak at a local as well as universal level. Which is why it's dumb when they label us *Roman* Catholics. We are not, they live in Italy. We are English Catholics. And tonight I want to consider what that means...

But this isn't an easy task because English Catholicism lost so much of its cultural identity during the reformation. Prior to that the Catholic faith had defined what it meant to be English. The great Cathedrals and Norman and Saxon churches were built. Oxford and Cambridge founded. Schools and Hospitals built and art, music and architecture of the highest standard produced. Many things people now assume were ever Anglican were, in truth, Catholic in origin and inspiration.

To be English was to be Catholic. And English Catholicism had a fine reputation the world over. Consider our patron St Anselm's contribution to philosophy from his seat in Canterbury. Or the architecture of the fine English Cathedrals. History tells us then – authentic English Catholicism was imbued with high culture. A thirst for liturgical, academic, cultural and spiritual excellence.

But then comes the reformation and the "English Way" was decimated. What was distinct about English Catholicism, from say French or Spanish Catholicism, was smashed to pieces by Henry VIII-like a vase thrown to the ground. A helpful image that suggests any quest to rediscover English Catholicism is a task in relocating those separated pieces and bringing them back to the whole. A work of unity- in other words.

When gluing a pot back together you need the base. If that is lost it spells disaster. And the base of the "English Way" was held together at great cost by the recusants- those who remained faithful throughout. These brave souls delivered to us the corner stone for they looked forward to a day when restoration might be possible. A day when sectarianism began to die out. Our day? Are we the ones they looked to in their hope for restored unity?

But despite handing us the base much went missing. A persecuted church could not maintain its life or culture. And outward looking zeal became, for reasons of self preservation, inward looking. Priests who once spoke for all England becoming chaplains of gathered congregations. A ghetto mentality grew up which can still inhabit Catholics today. But that is not reflective of

the historic “English Catholicism” which existed to evangelise this nation and not just a subset within it.

And alongside loss of outward looking mindsets came loss of customs. Things that defined English Catholics could not be sustained once resources were taken. Catholicism was pushed to the very margins -remember this remains the longest single persecution of any one religious group in history. And it stayed on the margins therefore right up until the 19th Century.

So Catholicism survived -just- but the English way did not fare so well. And when revival came in the 19th Century, the English way continued to suffer, because, during this period of greater freedom, Catholics came to rely heavily on support from overseas.

We reach a point in history when immigration brings large numbers of Catholics to our shores. They deliver much needed strength for Catholicism in general, on the global level, but could not restore the English Way for they had their own history and culture. We might say a new handle for the broken vase was created. One of huge value which must remain forever but one that doesn't reflect- how could it- that authentic English way.

Does that really matter? YES Because wherever the Gospel has truly flourished- it has learnt to reflect the culture it impacts. Something still missing in England where Catholicism is still often viewed as foreign. There is a reformation hangover. Consider how cheeky Anglicans jokingly refer to Catholicism as “The Italian Mission to the Irish”.

To the man in the street Catholicism is ‘other’ a view the establishment encourages. Why else do Cathedral guide books claim the Archbishop of Canterbury the 104th successor of Augustine not the 37th of Cramner? And in Liverpool “Paddy’s wigwam” tells us the Catholic Cathedral is just not English in the way crumpets and Marmite are! So without losing our global and multicultural flavour we must eradicate this xenophobic view of Catholicism.

We must find a better way of speaking to the English in their own language and culture. Not to gather those who wish to remain Anglican but to those interested in lived out unity. And to the very many non Church goers who, despite lacking faith, have a cultural and English memory.

England needs reminding that Catholicism is not foreign. So where to find aspects of English Spirituality lost at the reformation? Where to locate those things the English associate with God? Harvest festivals. Choral Evensong. Village pews filled with hassocks. The answer is, of course, the Church of England. For the heirs of the reformers kept hold of so many of our Catholic customs.

Anglicanism absorbed, within her broken body, fragments of the rock from which she was hewn. The recusants retained their Catholicism but lost the English Way – whilst Anglicans retained aspects of the English Way but lost their Catholicism. If you doubt that recall the splendour of the Royal Wedding. So many aspects of the liturgy were manifestly Catholic in origin. Yet it was so quintessentially English! And until people believe a Catholic could officiate such weddings we have work to do for it would suggest we remain marginalised and not at the centre.

At the reformation the majority of English, being good natured cowards like myself, became victims of circumstance. Sucked into a Church rejecting the Pope but carrying on regardless. Pope Benedict understood this, hence he established the Ordinariate. Choosing very English patrons for it. Our Lady of Walsingham- whose Shrine had been the jewel of pre reformation England. And Blessed John Henry Newman, an Oxford scholar who came to see the need for unity. “To be steeped in history”, said Newman, “is to cease to be Protestant.” The message England still needs.

By establishing the Ordinariate Pope Benedict gave a shot in the arm to the rebuilding of authentic English Catholicism. He reached out to Anglicans who retained aspects of the pre-reformation way. That is he picked up a broken fragment of what Henry once smashed in the hope of restoring it to its rightful base.

His hope that the Catholic church in England might be helped in its mission because the Ordinariate can deliver a very English flavour. We speak to those raised on Mattins culturally. Building a door into the Catholic church so much easier for Englishmen to open. Hence the CDF proclaimed us ‘on the front row of ecumenism’. We can help recall a nation to its historic faith using its own rites and language. At least that is the hope.

It was for the evangelisation of England then that the Ordinariate was established. At present a fragile shoot -it needs support- but it with huge potential for the future. Many Catholics have long been about the conversion of England. We come to do our bit. For we are another part of the broken vase- the first wave of reformers coming home as groups together- that we might be One.

So at Saint Anselm’s much has changed in three years. We remain a normative parish because we were called to be one and not two. We are not a subset within the church or a ghetto on its margin. We are a church like any other in the deanery to which all are welcome and wanted no matter their own culture or story. All in England can work for its conversion. But we are also about the building up of an English Catholic Way. Quite deliberately.

The introduction of altar rails, carved altar, big six candles, a fine choir and choral tradition; these things would be at home in any English Cathedral. Because the Ordinariate is the next step in the ecumenical journey. We exist to witness to English spirituality with confidence. The England formed by Catholic faith. Our purpose to point people behind and beyond the reformation. To that very point of realisation, where Newman noted, one must cease to be protestant. For how can there be authentic lived out unity unless we undo the separation which the reformation caused?

The Ordinariate can challenge people. Hence Pope Benedict when he came to England to establish it warned us of the need to be prophetic. Stones may well be hurled by those not really wanting an end to division, or else wanting it on protestant terms. They may come from those not wanting to see Catholicism reflect the English way because they are so wed to their own way of doing things or favoured political agenda. But I ask you to support it and work with it and to be patient with us. For it is robustly Catholic body concerned, at its heart, about the needs of 'those out there' not "those in here". Our very purpose being a "Call to be One"