

HOMILY  
FIRST MASS OF FR MATTHEW NEWMAN

WEDNESDAY 9<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2008

CHURCH OF THE ANNUNCIATION, HECTORVILLE, ADELAIDE



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Bishop Greg O'Kelly SJ,  
Auxiliary Bishop of Adelaide

There are two verses from the Scriptures and the Liturgy that you chose for this, your first Mass of Thanksgiving, Father Matthew.

- “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the Blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the Body of Christ?”
- “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”. A bread for the life of the world.
- From the preface of the Mass of the Holy Eucharist: “We came then to this Sacrament of wonder, to be fed at your table, and grow into the likeness of the Risen Christ. Earth unites with heaven to sing the new song of creation as we adore and praise You forever.”

We come through these words, and through the action of this Eucharist tonight and will all Eucharists, as these quotations attest, into a world of love and mystery that transforms creation.

It is not a well-known story that on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1969, when Neil Armstrong prepared for that first walk of man on the moon, “a small step for man, a great step for mankind”, his fellow astronaut Buzz Aldrin undid a small package of bread and wine and put them on the guidance system computer. In his memoirs he described what he did next:

*I poured the wine into the chalice ... In the one-sixth gravity of the Moon, the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the Moon, and the very first food eaten there were the elements of communion.*

The Eucharist that we celebrate with Father Matthew tonight, in this particular church at Hectorville, is a Eucharist that goes vastly beyond this place, and charges our world with meaning. If you have ever participated in an Orthodox liturgy, the symbolism used there really reflects their understanding that the enactment of the liturgy on Earth is a reflection of the court of heaven, the realm of angels and saints and profound

adoration before the One whom we say, “You alone are the Lord, You alone are the Holy One”.

We have that understanding in our own Roman liturgy when we pray in the Preface, “Earth unites with heaven to sing the new song of creation as we adore and praise You forever, and we sing the song of the angels, Holy, holy, holy.

The American diocesan priest, Father Michael Hehir has written a book entitled “The Lost Art of Walking on Water – Re-imagining the Priesthood”. Looking at some of us here tonight, you might be thinking that the more re-imagination there might be, the better! Michael Hehir talks in his book about priests, saying that despite everything that has assailed us, we still remain “bearers of mystery” to the people we serve.

Just as Buzz Aldrin had a cosmic view of the Earth, and chose to celebrate a form of Eucharist in that context, so you, Matthew, as a priest are to gather all things up in the mystery of the Eucharist, which is a celebration at the heart of the universe. You will speak the Eucharistic Prayer on behalf of God’s people, the common priesthood of believers. In the great moment of the Eucharist, you will gather together the joy and pain of the world, life and death, exaltation and despair, the growth on the one hand, and the decline on the other of all that lives around us.

What we celebrate in the Eucharist is truly an event outside all events, but within all events. It is an act of the universe as we are re-presented to the saving death and resurrection of Him who holds all of creation in the palm of His hand, who act for us is done out of love unfathomable, and shows us that it is love, not evil and destruction, that is at the heart of the cosmos. There is a marvellous Eucharistic reflection given by Teilhard de Chardin in his work, “Mass on the World”, which are reflections he made when he found himself as a priest in China in the 1920’s without bread and wine. In that context he made a Eucharistic Prayer as a Hymn to the Universe:

*All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase (he wrote), all those that will diminish: all those too that will die: all of them, Lord, I try to gather into my arms, so as to hold them out to You in offering. This is the material of my sacrifice; the only material you desire ...over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day, say again the words, This is my Body. And over every death-force, which waits in*

*readiness to corrode, to wither, to cut down, speak again your commanding words which express the supreme mystery of Faith, This is my Blood.*

As you know, the gesture of making a reverence before we receive Communion has recently been introduced. One of the commentaries says, “We bow before the mystery as we participate in the Body and Blood of Christ”.

We do not want the majesty of all of this to get us away from the real world, the practical world of daily cut and thrust, petrol prices, concern about the drought, and the ordinary humanity reflected in the priest himself, and the people he serves. There is a majesty of the Eucharist, and also the ordinariness of our daily living. So there are two sides to this Mass tonight, the call of Matthew, who was an ordinary human being and very much a man of the world, as the priest must be if he is to relate to the people he serves, and there is also this theme of the priest being the “Bearer of Mystery”.

Our faith tells us that in the Eucharist, we are re-presented to the saving act of Christ at Calvary at Easter. Christ died only once on that hill outside Jerusalem and he prefigured the sacrifice at the Last Supper when he uttered the words “This is my Body”, and “This is my Blood”. In a moment outside time, we are re-presented to that saving event. There is a long line of understanding in the Church that when the priest utters the words, “This is my Body, This is my Blood,” it is the moment of Him being *alter Christus*, the person of Christ. So St Paul asks, in the First Reading, “Is it not a sharing in the Blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the Body of Christ?”

You stand as a priest, Matthew, in a church of saints and sinners, but you are entrusted as are all the baptised, with the ministry of Jesus, to preach, to teach, and to heal. The Eucharist is not to rise into the heavens of incomprehension; we are not to get so caught up in the other worldliness of mystery that it becomes irrelevant to our daily lives. It was a very ordinary human activity that Christ chose to send to this saving act, it was a supper with friends. Ordained as priest, your ministry is to go out into the very human world, to move among the crowds as Jesus did. Your ministry may be directed towards those who have not heard the Gospel, those who are at the margins of the church or of society, those who have been denied their dignity; those who are voiceless and powerless; those weak in faith or alienated from it; those whose values

are undermined by contemporary culture; those whose needs are greater than they can bear. And to preach, to teach, and to heal, you must draw your strength from the Christ who said to us that the bread He will give us is his flesh for the life of the world. You are to dedicate yourself to bringing life to the world, as Jesus told us.

As a priest, you are to attempt to find words to speak to the men and women of our age who are no longer moved by the Christian message, to work out how to minister effectively to both the poor and the rich, to discern how to be faithful to the tradition of the Church and at the same time interpret its teaching in secularised cultures, and how best to serve a Church in which there are tensions, and in which the evil actions of some of its shepherds have disillusioned many of our faithful.

St Matthew invited tax collectors and sinners to his table. There came also to his table the Lord himself, and He approved of the gathering. When looking at, and in calling Matthew, the tax collector, Jesus again showed us that what He sees is not simply what a person is, but what a person might become. Jesus at the Last Supper in St Matthew's account, Jesus dipped his hand in the bowl with Judas, mixing the holy and betraying, and then He said, in the context of such human weakness, "This is my Blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins". May the Eucharist you celebrate be its own form of the Gospel, bringing salvation to all those who serve and who present themselves in faith at the Eucharist at which you, however unworthy, as all of us are, will preside.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. J. O'Kelly". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

*Bishop G. J. O'Kelly, SJ*

Auxiliary Bishop of Adelaide