

## PREPARATION FOR 40 HOURS ADORATION - Sunday 21 to Tuesday 23 April

**Fr Jock writes:** *'To help us prepare for 40 Hours Adoration (Quarant'ore) – please do read the article below which is the (edited) introduction to a book on Eucharistic Adoration, by a Scottish priest based in Germany, Fr Brian McNeil, published in 1996, called 'The Master is Here' which gives an excellent background to the (fairly) recent history of Adoration and offers much food for thought - and particularly for those of us who struggle to make time to sit quietly, and then actually to sit quietly itself, when we've made time to do so...!'*

**All over the world today, we are experiencing a quiet but very vigorous flowering of eucharistic adoration. Parishes rediscover it, young people discover it for the first time.** Many of the religious communities and which came into existence in the prayer groups years after the Second Vatican Council practise prolonged hours of silent adoration in front of the monstrance. Exposition has been detached from Benediction (which is reserved to priests and deacons), and this means that the Blessed Sacrament can be exposed by women and men religious or by individual eucharistic ministers. An enormous declericalisation has taken place here in recent years, although its herald in the twentieth century was himself a priest: Charles de Foucauld in his Saharan hermitage (d.1916). We have come a long way since the Plenary Council held at Fort Augustus in 1886, which strictly forbade the Scottish parish priests to give eucharistic benediction without the explicit permission of the local bishop.

This development is surprising - to put it mildly! - to those who recall the period immediately after the Second Vatican Council, when various factors contributed in many parishes and religious communities to a diminution or even the disappearance of eucharistic adoration. In part, this was because eucharistic adoration and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament had often functioned as a substitute for the celebration of the Mass, as an opportunity to have an evening act of worship. In the 1950's, evening Masses were still relatively uncommon, and the churches were well-attended for Benediction, which was usually preceded by the Rosary or (especially in Lent) the Stations of the Cross. Increased possibilities of celebrating evening Masses came at the same time as the positive experience of the centrality of the celebration as a dynamic act of worship, in a language everyone could understand.

This meant an immensely significant shift in spirituality from paraliturgy like exposition and Benediction to the Mass itself, which was increasingly expected to satisfy all our religious needs. The renewed liturgical celebrations also involved a shift in emphasis in church architecture, so that the tabernacle very often was removed physically from the centre of the sanctuary – in some churches you have to look rather hard, if you want to know where to genuflect, and in others like the cathedral in Munich) there is no sanctuary lamp to be seen anywhere, since the tabernacle is in a separate chapel behind a closed door. Add to this the importance attached to the ecumenical dimension of worship (which made eucharistic adoration appear a divisive form of prayer), and we have a climate in which many could plausibly assert that the traditional forms of eucharistic piety were dying or dead. Negative factors, such as a dismissal or at least a radical questioning of the value of contemplation in today's world - very typical in the second half of the 1960s – also played an important role here.

There was indeed something of a rekindling of the practice of eucharistic adoration from about the mid-1970s, but this did not lead to any genuinely widespread reflowering, because it was confined to particular groups within the Church who deliberately promoted adoration in a partisan manner, as a badge of doctrinal conservatism. I remember going into the church of St Etienne-du-Mont in Paris in October 1981, and finding it full of people taking part in eucharistic adoration. Three women dressed like the Lourdes Madonna in veils and long white gowns with blue sashes stood at the entrance of the church to hand out leaflets. I took one and learned that their group held that the remedy for all the progressive ills of the Church lay in an emphatic devotion to what they called the three whitenesses', i.e. the Host, Mary and the Pope. This hijacking of eucharistic devotion was also a factor that turned many in the Church away from discovering for themselves the positive spiritual help it could give.

All in all, then, one could have felt pretty safe in prophesying in 1970 that eucharistic adoration would go the way of other forms of devotion in Church history, and simply disappear. And yet, things turned out very differently. The causes are difficult to identify and quantify, as they lie below the surface of Church life, where the Holy Spirit stirs our depths; we stand too close in time to the profound changes in the years after the Council to be able to analyse them fully. We can, however, see at least some of their fruits. This book is one symptom of the change that has taken place. It is born of the experience of eucharistic adoration in a small monastery in Norway, and its aim is to encourage others in the Church to open themselves to the same kind of experience. **For the Christian life is something to be lived, and the living Christ calls us to find the fullness of life in the experience of his love.**

The emphasis on experience is deliberate, and will in fact be the central theme of this book. It would have been possible to write a completely different book, one that concentrated on the doctrine and the theological justification of eucharistic adoration. But it suffices to quote only one dogmatic text here, which expresses succinctly the theological presupposition of everything that follows in this book. **Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is in the most direct sense of the word of a personal encounter with the living Jesus Christ**, because, in the words of the Council of Trent (1551): *'All who believe in Christ, according to the custom which has always been in force in the Catholic Church, should show this most holy sacrament in their veneration the worship of adoration (latria cultum) which is owed to the true God. [...] For we believe that in it is present the same God whom the eternal Father brought into the world with the words: "And let all the angels of God adore him" (Hb 1:6), before whom the Magi fell down in adoration (Mt 2:11), and who, according to the testimony of scripture, was adored by the apostles in Galilee (Mt 28:17).'*

Historically speaking, it seems to me perfectly arguable that this fundamental theological argument depends on the experience of the presence of Christ in the sacrament. The earliest accounts we have of the Christian liturgy in the second and third centuries tell us that the sacrament was taken by deacons to the sick who were unable to be present at Mass (see *Justin, first Apology, chapter 65*) and that lay people took the sacrament home so that they could receive communion on weekdays, when no Mass was celebrated (see *Tertullian, To his wife, chapter 2*). **This means that the Church has grasped from the very beginning that Christ makes so absolute a gift of himself in the eucharist that his sacramental presence is not limited to the time of the celebration of the liturgy, but endures.** It seems to me an entirely natural instinct, if one believes in this abiding presence of Christ's gift of himself, to turn to him in the sacramental elements and pray to him. Particular forms of prayer such as eucharistic adoration of the Host in a monstrance, and theological reflection on this, took time to develop, but ultimately they are generated, and continuously nourished, by the experience of the living Lord in the sacrament of the altar – an experience which has always existed in the Church, and which remains available today.

Reflections on texts from the Bible play a large part in this book. The amount of scriptural detail may seem unusual and unexpected in a book about eucharistic adoration, but it is absolutely essential for a solid foundation for speaking about this form of prayer. The best way to read this book is to take time to see each scene from the Gospels, perhaps to pause at the end of each quotation, and let the biblical words echo and set up their own network of resonances in us. Let me say briefly how I approach the scriptural texts which are quoted here.

*The Letter to the Hebrews* says not only that Jesus is alive or that he acts today, but that *'he is the same yesterday and today and forever'* (13:8). This means that he is not going to act or speak today in a way that would contradict what the Gospels tell us about him. On the contrary, the stories of scripture provide us with reliable images of how he will act today and in the future. This is true whether or not critical scholarship justifiably calls into question the historicity of particular details in these narratives, because what is involved is the communication to us of significant patterns that help us to discern how the unchanging God relates to us.

Thus, the important point is not whether what these narratives relate really happened. Sometimes we have very good reasons for concluding that an entire biblical narrative is what we call fiction, as with the Books of Tobit and Judith. This does not prevent them from being a valid revelation of how God acts today in our own lives, any more than the parables of Jesus would be somehow disqualified because the stories he tells did not really happen, or his words in the Gospel of John would be disqualified because i(n the judgement of all serious scholars) they are not a literal record of things he really said.

This means that the words of scripture, originally spoken or written down in the quite specific historical situations to which they were directly addressed, take on a universal significance. Without detaching them from their original history, the Holy Spirit breathes life into them so that they can be the living word that speaks to us today in an unending variety of concrete situations.

In the case of eucharistic adoration, the text from the Council of Trent quoted above is an example of the application of a significant scriptural pattern to our own lives: **the adoration of Jesus by the angels, the Magi and the apostles indicates the attitude required of us today in our encounter with him in the sacrament of the altar, since it is the same Jesus who is present.**

The structure of this book is threefold. In the first part, I speak of **the experience of eucharistic adoration and of what 'exposition' ought to mean: namely, our exposure to the healing love of Christ.** In the second, I look at serious objections of a spiritual nature that have been raised to the practice of eucharistic adoration. In the third and final part, **I say something about the deepest fruit of this prayer: namely, a configuration to Jesus that takes the form of a true compassion which offers hope to the suffering world....**