

Festival of Our Lady of Walsingham

Westminster Abbey, 4 May 2019

The sermon preached at Evensong by Archbishop Rino Fisichella - a member of the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Dean Hall, Reverend Canons of this venerable Abbey, Right Reverend Bishops, my dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ all:

It is with particular joy that, following the gracious invitation of the Dean and Chapter, I have come here today from Rome to share in this act of worship. It is indeed a high honour to be invited to preach in this magnificent church which occupies such an important place not only in the history of this great country, but also in the hearts of Christians throughout the world. My sharing in today's prayer renders manifest not just how much unites us, but also the working of the Holy Spirit which guides the footsteps of Christ's disciples even in directions as yet unexplored. This common act of prayer is a proof that we do not journey alone, but are, in the words of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, always driven and accompanied by the force which comes from on high.

Today we find ourselves re-enacting what the *Acts of the Apostles* says about the first Christian community: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" (*Acts* 1:14). And it is with Mary that we need to join in constant prayer if we, as disciples, are to announce faithfully the Gospel, delivered once and for all to the saints, to the world of today.

Thinking of Our Lady of Walsingham, it is suggestive for our faith to imagine what the house of Mary would have been like. In this house there must have been room for all the disciples, no-one-excluded. The Mother of the Lord opens wide the doors of her house in order to welcome those who deep in their hearts feel the need to see Jesus. But, as paradoxical as it may seem, while we are striving to see, we are also, in our turn, seen. Yes, just so! Thus we repeat the experience of Nathaniel to whom Philip says, 'Come and see the Messiah we have found!' To the seemingly lazy and perhaps skeptical Nathaniel who gets up to go and see, Jesus says: 'Before Philip called you, while you were under the fig tree, I saw you' (*John* 1:48). It was the same for Zacchaeus. He burned with desire to see the Master from Galilea and, at the risk of making himself ridiculous, climbed up a sycamore tree. Just when Zacchaeus could see him, it is Jesus who raises his eyes and sees Zacchaeus. Thus, we enter into the house of Walsingham with the desire to see, but also to experience being seen. This means being aware that we can hide nothing before the holy face. Our life, our secrets, our sentiments, so often jealously safeguarded in the name of a right to privacy which increasingly envelopes everything, leaving us alone and vulnerable, become at once transparent. The maternal eyes of Mary pierce the barriers we have constructed to defend ourselves and touch our hearts. Here the words of Saint-Exupery come to mind: 'We see well only with the heart; the essential is invisible to our eyes.' This is something which the Blessed John Henry Newman understood very

well when he placed his very existence under the motto *Cor ad cor loquitur*, 'heart speaks to heart.' And as soon as we enter the house of Walsingham, we have the feeling that we have always been known there; that we are not guests but members of the family.

In this house we can very easily recognize the identity of a people which, down through the centuries, has sought to express its faith. This was first done informally in ways untrammelled by the rigours of 'competent authorities', giving rise to expressions of piety and spirituality which are as spontaneous as they are unmistakably popular. Journeying to the 'house of Walsingham as pilgrims seeking the sense of human existence; looking with trust into the eyes of the Mother of God in the certain hope of being understood and one's prayers answered; praying to her with words which transcend any formula because they come from the heart; lighting a candle and reaching out to kiss and touch the image ... these are all signs which, far from being forms of ignorance, testify to our ability to know what is essential because we have in our hearts discovered the simplicity of the Gospel.

Our presence in the sanctuary of Walsingham recalls the curiosity of the disciples when they asked of the risen Christ: 'Is this the time in which you will rebuild the Kingdom of Israel?' We always desire to know what is reserved to God. We desire to know if our prayers will be granted; we long for certainties and we presume to impose our will on God and determine his very interventions. But between the walls of this house we are told: 'It is not given to you to know the times and ages which the Father has reserved to his own power.' Here we must learn to respect God's time in our lives. We meet and see him not when we want, but when he so decides. In the meantime, we are called to trust in him. We must make our own Mary's words which echo the more ancient words of Hannah: 'The Lord is a God who knows all ... the weak are made strong ... he raises the weak from the dust ... to the Lord belongs everything'.

The faithful who go to the Virgin of Walsingham are people who love, but who also know that they are loved. They see the walls of Mary's home as the walls of their own, within which they are made welcome, feel safe, and are protected. Before the face of the Mother of God we understand better the words of Jesus when he taught his disciples: 'But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (*Matthew 6:6-8*).

In the light of Easter, and while we await the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, let us return, at least with our hearts, to live within the walls of this holy house. Here we are called to live fully the community dimension of our faith in that spirit of communion which is such an essential part of what we believe. May no one among us be needy. Let us share our bread in such a way that we all feel part of something which is greater than us, but yet does not oppress us. Let us praise God and live our lives with joy and simplicity. In this way the Gospel, through our personal witness, will become a provocation to discover the true sense of human existence through encountering the risen Lord, repeating the profession of faith of the apostle who doubted: 'My Lord and my God'.