

There's a great deal more kissing going on nowadays than when I was a lad. Of course I blame the French, but as an Englishman that's inevitable, and the Italians and you Americans - you're all to blame. Such public displays of affection, kissing, touching, as soon as you meet someone - well it takes a lot of getting used to! Fortunately it hasn't affected my family and though I can now kiss with the best of them I've never yet kissed my father and I can't imagine doing so - no, a firm handshake suffices for a greeting.

It took a long time for our congregations to be comfortable with sharing the peace. Church Councils were hugely resistant to this new fangled notion of actually touching people in church. It would never do for such intimacy to take place in an act of worship, far too personal, far too invasive. But now, in an effort to assist in the control of swine flu, people are being encouraged not to shake hands at the peace - and the reaction - well, congregations are complaining about not being able to touch, to shake hands, to embrace, even to kiss!

Paul, in his Second Letter to Timothy, asks him to remember what it was like when hands were laid upon him and in saying that to him, Paul says it to us in this Mass. Remember what it was like when you were before your bishop at your ordination as a priest and hands were laid on you by, perhaps, a large number of priests - hands weighing heavy on your head, hands representing a continuous chain of hands laid on the heads of all those whom God has called to priestly ministry within his church, hands stretching back to those wounded hands of Jesus who touched the untouchables with love and embraced his friends.

One of the jobs that I have to do every so often in our cathedral at Southwark is to organise the consecrations of bishops. At the heart of the liturgy is that most impressive sight as the bishops, gathered from all over the country - 50, maybe 60 of them - crowd around the person being ordained, being consecrated. He's lost beneath the crowd, under those hands and the touch confers the grace, the authority of God, to be, to do.

'Rekindle the gift of God that is in you' writes Paul, 'through the laying on of hands'.

In this Mass we celebrate the life and ministry of Pope St Leo the Great an example, I think, of a great bishop and a great priest, someone I have deep respect for. There's a good reason for this

Before I ever got down to studying theology my first degree was in Public Administration. For some reason I had a strange idea that God was calling me to be a Civil Servant. Perhaps it was because I'd always been very neat and ordered about the way I worked - so administration seemed like a good and useful thing to study. God though had other ideas - though amazingly, and this is so often it seems to me the way with God, with the divine sense of humour - I've spent the majority of my ministry administering one thing or another. Anyway, the reason St Leo has a real place in my affections is that he was a great administrator, was really gifted in ordering the life of the church.

But he was also a wonderful preacher and teacher and in one sermon he said this:

'Sharing in this office, my dear brethren, we have solid ground for a common rejoicing; yet there will be more genuine and excellent reason for joy if you do not dwell on the thought of our unworthiness.'

He was speaking about priesthood and as we create together this new province of the Society of Catholic Priests today and as I admit you to its membership, we celebrate the ministry to which we've been called. Because we share in this office we too have 'solid ground for common rejoicing', to use St Leo's phrase. As we remember when hands were laid on us, the touch, the kiss of God upon us at our ordination the gift is rekindled within us, the flames are fanned inside us and we burn brightly again.

I can never quite come to terms in my own mind with the huge privilege of priesthood. It's the most wonderful, humbling calling to receive on behalf of the church - and recalling that does of course raise within us, it certainly raises within me, that extreme sense of my own, our own unworthiness for the task.

But St Leo says to us today 'do not dwell on the thought of our unworthiness.' Yes, of course we are unworthy - but God knew that when he called you, he knew that when he called me, he knows us better than we know ourselves, he knows our strengths and our weaknesses, and for some reason, for some reason that at times we cannot imagine, he wanted us to be his priest, to be a priest to his people.

In the Gospel reading for this Mass Jesus gives to us two wonderful examples of what we should be and what should mark our ministry. As the flames are fanned within us, as that first spark is rekindled, as we commit ourselves together to our common priesthood in this liturgy, it's good to just think about these two things.

Jesus firstly calls us 'salt' - 'the salt of the earth'. Remember how valuable salt was. It was what Roman soldiers were paid in and where we get our word salary from. It's hard to imagine it now when salt costs only a few pennies, a few cents to buy but salt was a high value commodity. So Jesus is saying to you how valuable you are. You are a rich resource, a valuable resource to his church.

And salt of course was used for two things, it was used to preserve and it was used to bring out flavour. Our ministry calls us to do both.

We live in dangerous times and I'm not really thinking about the threat of terrorism, or climate change, or the economic downturn - though all of these things are part and parcel of the danger. The deeper underlying danger is that people lose their sense of who they are and of the God who created them. It sounds old fashioned to say it but people need saving, they need preserving, people need what we have to offer and the gospel we have to preach. And that gospel needs to have flavour, it needs that cutting edge that will recall people to the things that really matter if it's going to be effective.

The church has gone through bland times - and is still in real danger of this. From the conversations yesterday evening I know that this is where your concerns lie. But now is not the time for blandness. Now is the time for a proclamation of the gospel that brings people to Christ and as we commit ourselves to priesthood today we commit ourselves to catholic

evangelism – to the truth that lies at the heart of the catholic faith we have received.

Our evangelism will be catholic when it embraces all people regardless of who or what they are, when it's truly inclusive and when it draws people into that communion with God that we know is found in the sacramental life of the church. Grace is being continually poured out. As St Leo said in that same sermon, our lives overflow 'with abundant riches from the very source of all graces'. The touch of God is grace filled, enriching, seasoning the world and our lives.

And to be that kind of salty priest our lives need to be seasoned, living differently, with joy, making Christ known - confidently.

Jesus then calls us light - the light of the world. Into the darkness in which so many people are living we bring that light.

I remember when I was working in Camden, New Jersey the house in which I was living had an infestation of roaches. Once I came down in the middle of the night to get a glass of water and switched on the kitchen light and the floor was alive but as quickly as the light went on the little monsters scurried away. I knew it was time to get the roach man in!

Light is revealing, light is exposing and searching and simply bringing light into people's lives is not always welcome. It shows up things that they wanted to avoid looking at, brings up things that they'd have preferred to have remained hidden. So being the light bearer for Christ calls on us to be gentle as well. But we know that ultimately living in the light is so much better than living in the darkness. We need to shine with that light for the world.

Salt of the earth, light to the world, priests of God for his people. When hands were laid on you God filled you with his savour, he filled you with his light and deep within you that flame burns.

'Guard the good treasure entrusted to you' says Paul to Timothy. Within the Society that is what we seek to do, to continually encourage and support each other in this most amazing ministry to which we've been called. Together we have 'solid ground for common rejoicing'.

With great affection the hand of God, the kiss of God is upon you, solid ground for common rejoicing.

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