

DEAR TO MY HEART

Philip was now feeling his age; he had not been able to throw off the cold he had caught last Autumn; indeed, as Spring approached he had seemed to get worse and he had been confined to bed for the past one and half months. He had born this illness well. His body might be weakening but his mind was still active; he had books to read and he still kept in contact with his e-friends on his computer.

Today was Thursday. He looked forward to Thursdays; it was then that he was brought Holy Communion. It had been one of the extraordinary lay ministers who brought the Sacrament, but today it was going to be Fr John himself. Phil's religion was of great comfort to him and the Holy Sacrament especially was very dear to him; he thought of the words of the hymn he had come to know and love so well:

“Sweet Sacrament of peace,
Dear home of every heart,
Where restless yearnings cease,
And sorrows all depart.”

But, he reflected, it had not always been like this. The religion that now was so dear to him, he had once reviled. He had once asserted that the Catholic cult of the Sacrament was blasphemous. He called to mind the troubled, doubting Philip of his teens and early twenties. It was so long ago; it seemed now like another person in another age.

He remembered how he used to go to different churches and chapels, joining in their worship, and dabbled in non-Christian religions. What was he looking for? He supposed that it was “the truth”. But there was one Church he had resolutely refused to try. To the young Philip the Catholic religion was a corrupt amalgam of bits of Christianity and large doses of paganism – he would not find truth there.

Then there was that time at University when he was invited to attend a Catholic Church. He had been brought up always to try to see the other person's point of view as well as his own. Although he had been uneasy at the time, he could find no rational excuse to refuse the invitation.

His first Mass – even after all these years he recalled it well. Of course in those days it was all in Latin. But he knew Latin well enough, having learnt it from the age of eleven and, as a lover of Classical Music, he had become familiar with the Latin liturgy from the Mass settings of composers like Bach and Beethoven. As the liturgy progressed he was disturbed to notice that he felt as though he were, so to speak, “coming home.” Then when, at the consecration, the priest held up the host, the wafer of bread, for the people to adore, he had felt in his heart, in his innermost being, that he was gazing at the Body of Christ and he had said, in the words of Doubting Thomas: “My Lord and my God!”

Why had he been so certain? What had prompted him to say those words? He did not know. But what happened next was to change his life for ever. He heard a voice; he was sure he had heard a voice speaking loudly

and clearly. Never before in his life had he heard a voice like this, nor did he ever again hear such a voice afterwards. He was sure at the time, and he was still sure, as he lay in bed reflecting on the past, that it had been the voice of Christ himself.

He recalled how unsettling and disturbing he had found all this. His mind told him one thing, but his heart had told him another. He had trusted his heart, taken instruction and converted to Catholicism. But it had not been easy. He remembered the opposition of his parents and the ridicule of some of his friends.

This had been the only time in his life that his father had actually written to him (his mother was the letter writer in the family). He had been surprised by this and a little upset. It was a few months later when his aunt, his father's sister, had been speaking to him that he understood some of his father's concern. She had told him that when they were young they had been taught that being a Catholic meant going to hell. Almost certainly his father did not really believe that but it did explain his concern at the time.

His mother had no such notions. Hers was a sort of Erastianism; while it was right and proper for a Frenchman or Italian to be a Catholic, the proper thing for an Englishman was to be a member of the Church of England, just as the proper thing for a Scotsman was to be a Presbyterian and so on. But perhaps even then she had realized that, maybe, things were not really so clear cut. However, what had done most to reconcile herself to Phil's conversion had been a remark made to her by the local vicar: "I would be ashamed if my son became a Roman Catholic." That had hurt her; it was, Phil thought, a most unchristian thing to have done. Whatever the vicar had intended, it had misfired. Phil's mother had always been defensive over her children. Although not adopting Catholicism herself, she had accepted Phil's conversion but, she had added, she expected Phil to be as tolerant with his own children if he had any. Phil had said that he would.

Indeed, Phil had kept his promise; in any case he had been taught at Grammar School that one should try to understand other people and see their point of view even if one could not agree with it. He had, except for a few sorry moments in his late teens, detested prejudice and bigotry from whatever quarter it might come, whether it was in the name of religion, politics, racism or some other ideology.

It saddened Phil, as he looked back over his life, that now, more than half a century after the Holocaust and the horrors of the Second World War, ethnic-cleansing and genocide were still happening. The mass murder of the Twin Towers had sickened him; that anyone should commit such evil in the name of a religion was, he thought, truly blasphemous.

It seemed to Phil that the doctrines of the Trinity, of the Incarnation and other Christian mysteries were as nothing compared with the mystery of how any deity could actually love our wretched human race. There must, he thought, be other intelligent species somewhere out there in our vast universe. He hoped that some, at least, behaved better towards their own kind than we did on this little planet of ours.

He recalled nights when he had looked up at the stars in a clear sky. He knew the myriads of points of light he had seen were only a fraction of the mighty universe. It had seemed to him then that this whole vast universe and, he supposed, all the other universes there might be were pulsating with light and life, sustained by one beating heart, the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Yes, he was certain that all creation was very dear to the heart of its Creator. To Phil the Mass, which had brought him into the Catholic Church and which he had come to love so much, was a mystical participation in a *cosmic* act of reconciliation of creation and Creator.

As his musings over his past life were thus turning to contemplative mysticism, he heard Fr John arrive. Soon a small group assembled in the room; his wife was there, and so was one of his grandsons with his wife; there was a young great-granddaughter there also, he noticed. This comforted him.

Everything was prepared and the liturgy proceeded. He was pleased Fr John had asked his grandson to do the scripture reading. After the Lord's Prayer and everyone had offered each other the sign of peace, Phil began musing again; and when the priest held up the consecrated host, there came into his mind once more words from that hymn he loved:

"Sweet Sacrament divine,
Earth's light and jubilee,
In thy far depth doth shine
Thy Godhead's majesty."

He heard Fr John say: "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper."

As they all said the response, Phil got no further than the word "Lord", for he saw the host shine and grow larger; it was glowing like a sun and its light filled the whole room. As he gazed into its depths the words of the hymn continued in his mind:

"Sweet light, so shine on us, we pray,
That earthly joys may fade away."

And then he heard once again, and as clearly again, that voice he had heard those long years ago: "Come, Philip, dear to my heart."

Those in the room saw nothing of this; they saw no light nor heard any voice. Indeed, they were unaware that Phil had not completed the response with them. It was not until Fr John went to give Communion to Phil, at which instant the clouds parted and a beam of sunlight shone through the window onto his face, that they all realized he had passed quietly away.