

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, Visits Rome to Celebrate the “Gregorian Mission” and the 1000th Anniversary of the Founding of the Camaldolese Monastic Community

In 595, Pope St. Gregory the Great asked his fellow monk, Augustine, to lead a group of 40 fellow Roman Benedictine monks “to the ends of the earth” to evangelize Britain. Within a few years, that “Gregorian Mission” had established the See of Canterbury, with Augustine, later St. Augustine of Canterbury, its first bishop. Augustine left on his mission from the monastery in Rome that Gregory had founded on the grounds of his family villa, across from the Palatine hill. On March 10th, the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and Pope Benedict XVI met in the same place, now known as S. Gregorio Magno al Celio, for Solemn Vespers to commemorate the death of Pope St. Gregory in 604 and to celebrate the 1000th anniversary of the founding of the Camaldolese monastic community, part of which now makes S. Gregorio Magno its home.

In his homily, the Archbishop highlighted the continuity of the monastic tradition in that place and its importance for seeing through and moving beyond the “unreal and disproportionate desires” fostered by our modern society. He spoke of the importance for Christians of that “association of humility and prophecy [that] lies at the heart of Gregory's monastic vision, the vision which the brothers and sisters of Camaldoli ... still seek to live out”, and which is mirrored in the monastic balance of “solitude and common work and worship.” Particularly in our modern culture, penetrating beyond the “sophisticated system of unreality, created and sustained by acquisitiveness,” the Archbishop said, requires a habit of discernment that comes through the daily “discipline of silence and patience” – a discipline that “purges our vision and restores to us some sense of the truth of our world.”

Recalling previous meetings at S. Gregorio Magno between the heads of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion in 1989 and 1996, Archbishop Williams cited Pope John Paul II's and Archbishop Robert Runcie's characterization of the communion shared by the two churches as “certain yet imperfect.” This imperfection, due to “the limit of our vision, a deficit in the depth of our hope and patience,” ultimately keeps us from the freedom “to share the transforming power of the Gospel in Church and world.” Archbishop Williams closed with a prayer for “the grace of contemplative discipline and prophetic clarity ... so the glory of Christ's cross will shine forth in our world...”

On March 11th, the two Anglican communities in Rome, All Saints' Anglican Church and St. Paul's Episcopal Church, gathered at St. Paul's for a joint mass, at which Archbishop Williams presided. The Archbishop was assisted by the Right Reverend Pierre Whalon, Bishop of the Congregation of Episcopal Churches in Europe, the Right Reverend David Hamid, Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of Europe of the Church of England, the Very Reverend Canon David Richardson, Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Representative to the Holy See, the newly-arrived Rector of St. Paul's, the Reverend Austin Rios, and the Venerable Jonathan Boardman, Chaplain of All Saints' Church and Archdeacon of All Italy and Malta. Members of the Roman Catholic and Methodist clergy, as well as the American and British Ambassadors to the Holy See, were also present.

In his sermon, taking as his text John's account of Jesus driving the merchants and traders from the temple, Archbishop Williams reminded us of the dangers of being caught up in the trappings of religion – those traders were in the temple to supply the animals required for sacrifice – at the expense of its essence. The first of the Ten Commandments, the Archbishop noted, warns us against putting any “idol” in place of the true God, yet “we can so easily fill up the space in our minds ... with the picture of God that keeps us happy, drawn from our own preferences....” During Lent we veil the images of the cross in our churches, and Archbishop Williams suggested that Lent is a particularly appropriate time to put away our comfortable

images of the cross to be surprised by it again, “to get that little bit further beyond the idolatry, that keeps us prisoner and draws us back to the old world,” to see in the cross “the mystery, the terror, the beauty and the freedom of the true God.” Jesus clears the temple of those items, religious or worldly, that distract us from a contemplation of the true God. In doing so, he clears “a space large enough for all to come because this is where God lives....

Here we stand – not busy, not anxious, not obsessed with what we are producing and how we are succeeding, but here we stand – still, listening, receiving. And we put out our hands, not to lay hold of something and manipulate it and squeeze it into our shapes. We put out our hands empty, to receive the gift of life and love, the body and blood of the Lord in the sacrament.”

That temple is the true temple, and the Archbishop closed with a prayer that we all might be able to find our way there, open-handed, listening, still.

The sermons preached by the Archbishop on his visit to Rome are available on his website at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/>