

Evelyn Waugh

The Panegyric by Fr Philip Caraman, SJ

The full text of the panegyric preached by Fr Philip Caraman, SJ at the Requiem Mass, celebrated in Latin, in Westminster Cathedral on Thursday 21 April 1966.

This gathering is for prayer. It is also an expression of our regard for a man universally admired for his gifts and deeply loved by many friends.

Christ commanded us to trade with our talents. This Evelyn Waugh did. He sought perfection in his craft and came nearer to achieving it than perhaps any man of his time. But the way he cultivated his gifts was only one manifestation of his fidelity – the virtue marked the whole man.

It is a detail, perhaps, but a significant one, that throughout his career as a writer he remained faithful to the same publisher and to the same literary agent. At the end of his life his closest friends were among those he first met in his youth. It was this fidelity that made them put a special value on his friendship. While he playfully exaggerated their foibles, he was penetrating in his praise. Also he served his friends when they were dead. I mention only Alfred Duggan and Mgr. Knox.

It is not an accident that *A Handful of Dust* is generally reckoned the best of his earlier novels. It was written when he was still wounded by the failure of loyalty. Under the shock he sought a faith that would underpin morals. He found it, assisted by Fr. Martin D'Arcy, to whom he dedicated and gave his book, *Edmond Campion*.

'Conversion,' he wrote, speaking of himself in the third person, 'suggests an event more sudden and emotional than his

calm acceptance of the propositions of his faith – in early manhood when many Englishmen of humane education were falling into Communism.’ Unlike them, he remained steadfast.

Here, in the shrine of English Catholicism, I must speak of his fidelity to the Church in which he lived for thirty-six years until his death. Certainly he would charge me with absurd exaggeration if he heard me say what I believe to be true, that he did equal service to his Church by his example as by his books. It was to be expected of a man who fought with eminent bravery for his Sovereign in the late war that he should remain outstandingly loyal to his Church in the crisis caused by the Vatican Council. He was deeply disturbed by the revolution in the outward forms of worship but accepted it in a spirit of soldierly obedience.

There was no man in England more entitled to give his opinion on the new English liturgy. Yet, when on the first Sunday, Mass was said in English, he was asked about it, he answered instantly: ‘The question does not arise.’ Only when he was outraged beyond Christian endurance by manifest heresy, did he express himself in a letter to the press. The letter, I recall, touched on the Eucharist. He showed the anger Christ had when he cleansed the Temple.

It has been truthfully said by a Catholic friend that the tabernacle and the sanctuary lamp were for him the symbols of an unchanging Church in a crumbling society. There is a futuristic short story of his which describes how, after an atomic explosion on London, a man emerges and wanders about a dead and ruined city till he is drawn by the distant sound of a bell, and, making his way into a cave below Piccadilly Circus, sees a cluster of shawled women huddled round a priest as he offers Mass. When the priest turns round with a gesture and phrase the survivor recognises, he is seen to have a black face.

The Mass mattered for him most in his world. During the greater part of his lifetime it remained as it had done for centuries, the same, and everywhere recognisable, when all else was threatened with change. He was sad when he read of churches in which the old altar was taken down and a table substituted, or of side altars abolished as private Masses were

held to be unliturgical or unnecessary. With all who know something of the pattern of history, he was perturbed.

It was a struggle to accept it all, but he did accept it, and with enviable fidelity. The calmness that was evident in the last weeks of his life was a sign that the struggle had been won. To those who were with him on his final day – his family and a priest (he surely prayed for this) – nothing was more manifest than the way God had arranged his end as a mark of gratitude to a faithful servant.

I should be doing him the greatest disservice if I did not beg you all here to pray for him now: not only his friends who owe him this, but all who would make some return for the pleasure they have derived from his pen.

This perfect craftsman must through your prayers be made the perfect man before he can join the company of Campion and Helena. Only the saints, as he wrote himself, have conformed completely in their lifetime to the will of God. He would expect everyone here, each in his own way and with integrity, to pray for his soul.

The intersection of time and eternity is a mystery. But we know this: that, while those who are nearest to him by natural ties must wait a little before they meet him again, for him the meeting will be as tomorrow.

He would want them to seek their comfort in the faith he so firmly held and be assured that his companionship continues though its character is altered. They can be certain also that God above all others cannot fail in faithfulness to those who have been loyal to him. *Requiescat in pace.*