

DEDICATION OF THE ABBEY CHURCH 2023

The more I reflected on the combination of the Solemnity of the Dedication of the Abbey Church and the reception of the oblation of Sarah Oakton, the more I became convinced that it was a most appropriate and fitting combination. In fact, in your oblation, Sarah, you give to us a precious gift - a living example of what we are celebrating in the dedication of this Abbey Church.

What is this Church? In the mind of our Catholic faith, a building that has been dedicated, consecrated, blessed, set apart and hallowed for the worship of God is a physical expression of the very body of Christ Himself. It stands, like all Churches, to remind us of God's presence on earth, a sacramental set-in stone, glass, and wood. An invitation, and a vocation to give him praise and worship *in spirit and in truth*. It is a place of encounter and a place of transformation. How very sad, therefore, that we can come to this sacred place and leave the same.

The anniversary of the dedication is, therefore, an occasion for each one of us to not only to thank God for the gift to us of our physical Church, but also for the Church who has given birth to us through faith, through the waters of baptism. Therefore, today is a fitting day for each of us to recommit ourselves once again to receive this gift as worthily as we can: in resolute fidelity; in holiness of life; in authentic worship, offered here in the power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus himself.

This is why St Benedict reminds his monks that nothing should take precedence over the '*Work of God*' and that '*nothing*' should be stored or take place within the oratory that detracts from its purpose (RB51:1). Prayer has a priority. Hold that truth in mind, for it brings us to what Benedict says in Chapter 57 of the rule. "*The Oratory ought to be what it is called.*" It is a sacred space, a place of prayer, the place of encounter with God, the place where daily we are transformed into the building that God is constructing. Prayer has/is the priority.

Sarah, you are God's building, Paul proclaimed this in the second reading and, in your desire, to be an oblate you are asking to join us in that monastic consecration, that willingness to be set apart to be a space that God can inhabit. When tourists visit Rievaulx, Fountains or Byland Abbeys etc. they can easily be struck by their elegance, and if they have an imagination, they can conjure up what these ruins once stood for. They may even find them strangely peaceful and evocative, but these buildings are dead, they stand corpse like, a skeleton, a fossil, a monument to former times, when long ago men had dedicated their lives to the service of God; when Mass had been daily offered, and the Divine Office sung, by day and by night.

But the faith which these walls had symbolised and protected came to be abandoned, reviled, proscribed. What had previously been held holy was now desecrated. Animals wandered in and out of both sanctuary and cloister; birds

nested in the empty roof spaces; and people came with wheelbarrows and carts to take away dressed stones for their own local buildings. In former times silence had reigned in these Abbeys, which was the full and sacred silence of prayer and adoration. Now there was only the silence of emptiness and absence.

On this day it might be worth reminding ourselves that ruin and desolation can come at any time upon any Church, and upon any individual believer. We too, whether by slow neglect or by sudden revolution, can compromise or renounce our faith and our vital union with Christ, and our status as living stones in the Temple of his Church, and our ability to offer acceptable worship to God in spirit and in truth. It's a horrible thought, but it is possible, living ruins, walking dead.

Today then is an occasion for us to beg once again for the grace to remain faithful until we die. Not just that. We want to grow constantly in grace. We want never to cease being built up ever more towards the stature of Jesus Christ himself. We want to be able to face him on the last day not only as sinners, but also as those who freely and efficaciously cooperated with the grace of God, adorned with virtues and with good works, truly conformed to Jesus.

The waters of baptism that Ezekiel spoke of in the first reading are healing waters, but they anoint us to be living waters for others, to bring life wherever we find ourselves. Sarah, in your oblation and as a living temple of prayer you become a partner with us in the evangelising of our nation about the primacy of God, the transforming of our society by the truth of the Gospel, and the re-energising of your local Church with a spirit of participation and communion. How? Simply by living what you pray and by being moulded by the one to whom you pray.

Why is this important? It's important because today as we are gathered in our Abbey Church Christians in many different parts of the world do not enjoy the freedom that we have. I think of Christians in China and Vietnam, where their Churches are being demolished by Government bulldozers. In Northern Nigeria Churches are being burnt to the ground, sometimes with Christian worshippers inside. In Egypt, if the Church had not been destroyed and worshippers shot, Government permission would be required to fix a leaking roof or repair a broken window; and often that permission would be withheld. In Syria, if any part of a Church were still left standing, it would be daubed with anti-Christian graffiti, and its images would have been smashed or defaced. In North Korea, there would be no Church, and no meeting place of worshippers. Even in Catholic Italy, most likely the Church would be owned not by the monastic community, as at San Gregorio, but by the State with all the restrictions and disadvantages that implies.

So yes, we are fortunate and blessed, and filled surely with gratitude, and we pray today very explicitly in solidarity with our less fortunate brothers and sisters in Christ. We should not take this freedom lightly and we should take

this opportunity of the dedication of our Abbey Church and your oblation to choose not to become ruins, but rather living stones, living temples from which God's healing waters flow freely.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

Ampleforth Abbey

6 September 2023