

The Society of St. Catherine of Siena

A registered charity working for the restoration of a Catholic intellectual apostolate in higher education in this country will celebrate its tenth anniversary with the launch of a unique journal

In recent years there has been an increasing number of young people undertaking courses in higher education. For Catholic students and those interested in the Catholic faith, universities usually provide chaplaincies for their spiritual needs. There are also publications such as the 'Catholic Students Guide' (Peter Kahn/Family Press) with an introduction by Archbishop Vincent Nichols. But what about the tutors, the lecturers, professors and researchers at the universities who are Catholics themselves or identify with the Church's teachings? What of the relevance of the Catholic faith in the day-to-day work and intellectual inquiry of these academics?

Perhaps appropriately it was at the beginning of the third millennium that a group of people, concerned with this matter, decided to set up the charitable trust of The St. Catherine of Siena Society. It was a response to the new situation of being in a postmodern world with the possibilities and potential threats it poses not only to Christianity but to the very ethical base of coexistence in society. Central to this new situation are the notion of relativism and the insidious grip of secularism, these being two major issues among many that Catholics face in institutions of higher education in particular. Discussion of this among some Catholic academics at the time led to Dr. Susan Parsons and Rev. Dr. Laurence Hemming discovering they had a common devotion to St. Catherine of Siena. They admired the bold and uncompromising way she addressed the difficulties of the Church and the world in her day, and inspired by her example decided to set up a Society in her name.

The connection with this great Dominican saint led them to approach Fra Malcolm McMahon, Prior of the Oxford Dominicans who had just completed two four-year terms as the Prior Provincial of the Order of Preachers of the English Province. The Prior, who would later that year become Bishop of Nottingham, readily agreed to Blackfriars Hall, Oxford, being used for the founding reception of the Society on 29 October 2000; Archbishop Nichols celebrating the inaugural Mass in its distinctive chapel, exactly six months after the Feast-Day of St. Catherine, when the Society was begun.

Bishop Malcolm was not just being generous, this clearly was something in which he was and remains greatly interested, becoming part of the first working group formed which met at Cambridge, the regular meeting place for the group for a number of years. The working group became formally established under the chairmanship of Bishop Malcolm McMahon in November 2001. Its two-year study findings on *The Vocation and Formation of Theologians and the Teaching Office of the Bishop in the British Context* were discussed at the 2003 AGM of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.

The previous year, on the feast of The Assumption, the Society initiated its formal connection with the body of Dominicans in England, the English Province of the Order of Preachers, as a consequence of which it has its spiritual home with the Dominicans. This spiritual inspiration is linked strongly to the *raison d'être* of the Society of St. Catherine, for a prime aim is "to nurture the intimate connection between the worship of the Church and her teaching of Sacred Doctrine". As a body of registered charity status run by trustees, and with Bp. Malcolm as its Chairman, it is committed in and through its activities to the development of the Church's theological voice in the midst of a postmodern culture. It emphasises the sacred traditions of

the Church so that future generations of Catholics understand and experience those traditions that are at the very foundation of the Catholic Church. Indeed Bp. Malcolm suggested to the Society that Fr. Andrew Wadsworth, Catholic chaplain at Harrow School, polyglot and academic, become the Society's Chaplain. He accepted the post and has been exemplary in his duties for nearly ten years, and is continuing in this role even though he has recently been appointed by Pope Benedict to soon be General Secretary in the USA of the International Commission on English in the Liturgy. In point of fact it is truly a mission (in a time when all sorts of organisations and groups jump on the bandwagon of having a 'mission statement'), recognised and promoted as such by the Patrons of the Society, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor and Archbishop Vincent Nichols.

It seeks to carry out its mission largely through activities fostering intellectual inquiry grounded in the love of God and the sacred liturgy of the Church, especially the Mass. For example it sponsors research fellows (usually of two years and in liturgical theology, the first in 2005, the second in 2008 in co-operation with the Catholic organisation CIEL) and strives to promote international collaboration in Catholic theology. In universities and colleges it promotes the Catholic faith through working groups and academic conferences as well as in structured or impromptu debate. It also offers help for members of the clergy seeking to deepen their understanding of the Sacred Liturgy in its traditional forms. In connection with this it set up a fund, the 'St. Nicholas Initiative', to help develop ideas to support parishes and clergy who wish to implement aspects of Pope Benedict XVI's *moto proprio Summorum Pontificum*. The St. Nicholas Group is comprised (with flexibility) of six scholars and theologians meeting six times a year to consider theological aspects of the traditional liturgy. This fund also sponsors special retreats for clergy wishing to learn more of the extraordinary forms of the Roman Rite. The first such retreat took place in December 2008 at Belmont Abbey, Herefordshire, led by the Very Rev. Fr. Ignatius Harrison of the London Oratory, the second in May 2009 at another Benedictine house, the Abbey of Sainte-Madeleine du Barroux in southern France.

Fr. Harrison has celebrated several solemn Masses for the Society and another priest who gives his support is Fr. Tim Finigan, well-known to internet users for his devoutly amusing and perceptive Catholic 'Hermeneutic of Continuity' blog; indeed Fr. Finigan will be carrying out some of Fr. Wadsworth's duties when he is on papal duty in the States. The Society sets great store by its commitment to the sacred liturgy and its annual Patronal Masses, on or near the Feast of St. Catherine, are very ceremonious, celebrated by Bp. Malcolm McMahon, assisted by deacon, subdeacon and M.C. For several years until his retirement in 2008 Fr. Kit Cunningham welcomed the Society, allowing them to celebrate these Masses at St. Etheldreda's the famous church in Ely Place, London, where he was for so long the distinguished parish priest. Subsequently through the kind permission of the Grand Prior, Fra F. Crichton Stuart, the Society has held such Masses at the splendid Chapel of the Knights of Malta in St. John's Wood. The Society also holds annual pilgrimages in honour of St. Catherine, the latest in May this year processing to St. Birinius' Church in Dorchester-on-Thames.

Though perhaps not yet well-known in the mainstream Church, it has nevertheless quite a list of distinguished speakers from across Europe, the USA and Canada as contributors to its various seminars over the years. Some of the proceedings have been published in book form, some available on the internet. Professor Eamon Duffy has presented papers at several seminars and in December 2005 there was a presentation by the German author Martin Mosebach of his important book *The Heresy of Formlessness*. In 2008 Dr. Parsons (who also edits the

international quarterly *Studies in Christian Ethics*, and which includes John Battle MP among its contributors) chaired the promotion of Dr. Hemming's latest book, *Worship As A Revelation* (Continuum). It has drawn much praise from such eminent theologians as Fr. Aidan Nichols OP ("a powerful and subtle study") and Rev. Dr Alcuin Reid ("a portal into the privileged immersion of mankind into the Godhead that *is* the Sacred Liturgy").

And now the Society looks forward, approaching its tenth anniversary, to its most ambitious and important publishing venture, that of a new bi-annual journal dedicated to the sacred liturgy, entitled '*Usus Antiquior*' (Maney Publishing). It takes as its guide and scope the words of Pope Benedict XVI: "what earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too...It behoves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church's faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place." Though the first edition will not be available until January 2010, it already has over 600 interested subscribers and a warm endorsement from Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, President of the Pontifical Commission '*Ecclesia Dei*'.

It will be edited By Dr. Laurence Hemming and Dr. Alcuin Reid, author of numerous books including '*The Organic Development of the Liturgy*'. They are supported by a very impressive international Editorial Board and the heavy task of Book Reviews Editor is undertaken by Ben Whitworth, an Oxbridge theologian well known to readers of *Catholic Life*. The editors are at pains to point out that whilst the highest academic standards will be maintained, the journal is also aimed at the general reader, "the best scholarship is always clear and accessible" and they "will be working with our contributors" to achieve that. Very much the journal is intended to make a positive contribution to the discussion of questions pertinent to the liturgical life of the Church in the present day, especially in the light of the Holy Father's instructive advice that the different forms of the Roman Rite "can be mutually enriching."

The Society will also mark its tenth anniversary with the publication of the first book in its new book series entitled *Studies in Fundamental Liturgy*, ed. Dr. S. Parsons & Dr. L. Hemming (T.&T.Clark), a work by Prof. Laszlo Dobszay on 'The Restoration and Organic Development of the Roman Rite'. The formal launch and celebration of '*Usus Antiquior*' will be held, significantly, on the Feast of the Epiphany, 2010.

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