



An Interview with Bishop Mark O'Toole

Western Rising for the Old Rite

Bishop Mark O'Toole is open minded. This may be a surprise to critics of the Church, who have very strange notions about Catholic bishops. But the 51-year old Londoner is not dogmatic – other than about dogma, of course. Even some inside the Church may be not expecting, though, that the new bishop of Plymouth would be so open to the Traditional Mass.

But the former rector of Allen Hall, the seminary for the Westminster archdiocese, and a former private secretary to Cardinal Cormac, is not only 'open' to learning to celebrate Mass in the Extraordinary Form, he is actively working to ensure good provision of the Old Rite in his diocese.

In an interview with *Mass of Ages*, Bishop Mark, who has been at Plymouth for just over a year, disclosed his plans to 'normalise' attendance at Old Rite Masses; create a new centre for Traditional liturgy in the east of his diocese; encourage traditional orders to take over a parish and provide pastoral support. And he praised the 'fidelity' of those who like to attend Mass in the Extraordinary Form. The bishop, whose family come from the Connemara Gaeltacht, further said that he can envisage that some seminarians may learn to celebrate in the Extraordinary Form, if that is what their bishops wish, and he argued that there is no danger from the plurality of Rites.

With no prompting at all, Bishop Mark said: 'It is very clear to me that there is a significant number of people who

are attached to Mass in the traditional form. One of the things I have seen is quite a number of letters about this. I would like to establish a regularity of provision and systematised provision.'

Plymouth is a very large geographical diocese, encompassing as it does Cornwall, Devon and most of Dorset. But it does not have a Catholic community to match. According to Bishop Mark, between three and four per cent of the population admit to being Catholic. Parishes are far and wide and Plymouth has not been an Old Rite 'hot spot'.

The young (in episcopal terms) bishop is hoping all that will change. Bishop Mark, who is on the Bishops' national committee for evangelisation, would like to see a significant increase in the Catholic population of Plymouth.

'If we could get to 8-10 per cent in the Plymouth diocese who were practising, that would be wonderful. It would triple our numbers.'

But he also wants to see significant improvements in the provision of the Traditional Mass.

'People are travelling vast distances [to attend Old Rite Mass in the Plymouth diocese]. I want to support that desire,' he said.

Bishop Mark revealed that, before Christmas, he 'asked the priests who are saying these Masses to come together'. He said: 'I have asked them to put together a list of what is available, so that we can advertise it...I'd like it to have

a presence on the web – so that people can access it, so people can find out what is already being provided... make it more efficient in terms of meeting peoples' pastoral needs.'

But the bishop's ambitions do not stop there.

'In terms of a more creative venture, I had a very good meeting with Fr Armand de Malleray [of the FSSP]. One of the things I was very interested to hear from him is that there are a significant number of seminarians, who are originally from England, studying in Nebraska. Some are quite well advanced. I was interested in whether they would be interested in manning a parish in the diocese. I would be open to that.'

One of Bishop Mark's concerns is to establish proper provision, though, not just have another EF Mass celebrated.

'It is not just about making provision for the celebration of Mass. There is also a question of how you pastorally accompany the people who come to it – the priestly support in terms of catechesis and support and advice.'

He added: 'I don't like the idea of someone just going round and saying Mass here, there and everywhere. It's much better to have some consistent provision. Which provides people, not just with the celebration of the sacraments, but also with the pastoral side.'

His vision is to create a centre for traditional liturgy. There is currently provision at Lanherne, in the west of the diocese. That is already a hub for some. Bishop Mark said: 'If we had something around Exeter, the east Devon part of the diocese, that would help.'

Would that mean, though, that Traditional Mass-goers would continue to be 'outsiders' – rather than part of their local parish?

'If there is regular provision, then that will become their parish,' he said. 'People travel anyway.'

And Bishop Mark said: 'To have someone [a diocesan priest] say a Mass on a Sunday morning – would mean they would have to be taken out of parish work. I would be very open to what riches groups [such as the FSSP] would bring.'

Having said that, Bishop Mark does not rule out the idea of the Extraordinary Form becoming part of life in an ordinary parish. And he acknowledged that most who attend such Masses in the diocese are not members of the LMS.

'...I'm open to the normalisation, certainly. I think there is some place for that. I think also we need to look... at the whole place of Latin and chant in the liturgy because I think there is a bridge there. When a lot of people talk about their love of the old Mass, it is often their love of the Gregorian chant and what goes with it. Those things should be introduced and a normal part of Catholic celebrations.'

The bishop is aware, however, that there can be problems between Old and New Rite congregations. He described tensions between groups of laity as 'unfortunate'. But, he said, there are also difficulties for a priest trying to minister to both groups. However, Bishop Mark said: 'It could be possible. It might come to that, I'm open to that suggestion.'



Not that like, like this: The very good-natured Bishop Mark in full flow /photos Fergus Atkinson

There was a clear sense of mission in the bishop, as well as a desire to embrace both adherents of the Old Rite and the Traditional Mass itself.

'I am very aware that people feel slightly marginalised,' he said. 'That's unfortunate because it's very clear to me that they have a great love of the Church and the Church's liturgy and great faithfulness. One of the things I have always been impressed by is when you reflect on the nature of Church...many of the saints' experience was of the Tridentine Mass, this is what formed them. So the thing for me is one of integration, and normalisation.'

Bishop Mark said: 'How can you say the people who celebrated it for 1,500 years [were wrong] – you can't ban it or regard it as lesser. It is a matter of recognising that it has a legitimate place.'

And the bishop accepted that the Old Rite has appeal, especially among the young: 'For some, this [the Old Rite] will be the thing that attracts them [to the Church]. This is just part of the Catholic richness. Why should we say that people can't encounter Christ through this? They should have the opportunity.'

But he maintained the openness needs to go both ways: 'As long as people recognise that it is a way of holiness, not the only way...you can't be exclusive. That's the attitude that people object to.'

Pope Benedict envisaged the two forms of the Rite informing each other. And he believes this is a two way street: 'What can the LMS and the FSSP and the others learn? I suspect it's, and I suspect they are trying to do this, is the sense of engagement with pastoral realities, the sense of imminence – the importance of people being accompanied in their faith...and Outreach to the world – The idea that we are fed and nourished and we gather together at the Mass and we need to bring that into the world.'

But the Bishop believes the existence of the two forms does not have to be a problem. He maintained: 'The Catholic genius has always been to find the middle ground – both/and, not either/or. The Church recognises a diversity...the other wonderful insight that Pope Benedict brought is that they are two forms of the one Rite...You can be a Catholic and use a different language or a different form of the Mass and you are no less a Catholic...'

Pope Benedict's wish for the two forms to be mutually enriching is a challenge, says Bishop Mark – to someone who grew up with the Ordinary Form. And it is a challenge the bishop, who is able to say Mass in Irish, is clearly keen personally to take up – by learning to celebrate the Traditional Latin Mass.

'I'm open to it,' he said. 'It's important. For me now the challenge is to learn the EF, give me a year or so – when I've got a bit more space in the diary.'

'...the key thing is attitude...the heart of the celebration is that you don't get in the way. Christ is offering Himself... How do I not get in the way of that? The rubrics and so on really liberate...there is a truth in that. In that sense, even as a scriptural discipline, I can see there is an invitation there for me. It will help me enter more deeply, whenever I celebrate Mass...how can it not?'

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