

**Homily for The First Mass Celebrated with the LGBT Community at
Warwick Street 4th March 2007
London, UK**

Fr. Shaun Middleton

How good it is to be here, in fact the words of psalm 133 come to mind. *Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum. How good and pleasant it is when brothers, and sisters live together in unity!*

This is a moment of blessing, a moment when we stand together in this beautiful church dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, here in the heart of London's Soho. The reality of the Assumption is also our hope and our reality. That one day we shall enjoy the delights of the heavenly Jerusalem.

However, this is also a moment of sadness. Sadness at leaving the welcoming environment of the Anglican Church of St Anne, a church dedicated to Our Lady's Mother. We are grateful for the maternal care and affection of the community of St Anne and of its Rector, Clare Herbert; *we were strangers and you made us welcome.*

I find it quite moving that this old embassy chapel, which provided a place of safety for Catholic people to worship at a time when Catholicism was despised, fulfils once again its ancient function. As this community gathers this evening we stand alongside those who have hallowed this place with their prayers, with those who have felt safe and accepted here.

Since 1720 catholic people have come here to worship. First the Portuguese then the Bavarians and finally the indigenous population of this part of London. This building, just like its sister church of St Anne has, as one of its functions, the ministry of welcoming the stranger. I think it is significant that this community, which gathers together so many different people, also takes very seriously the call to minister to those who sometimes feel estranged from the Church, which they love.

Over these past months I have been fortunate to be part of the discussions that have taken place between representatives of the Diocese of Westminster and the Soho Masses Pastoral Council. It is fair to say that the discussions were characterized by a sincere theological and pastoral reflection. By honesty, by a willingness to listen and by a desire to be heard.

Those discussions resulted in the production of a diocesan statement concerning its outreach to homosexual persons, and the response of the SMPC to that statement which was entitled *Our Places at the Table*. Both these documents, together with a statement recently produced by the American bishops, have gained a certain notoriety and have been the basis for the beginning of a wider public discussion, not least in this week's Tablet where James Alison and John Haldane discuss the initiative taken by Westminster diocese to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people, together with their families and friends.

As I read James Alison's response to John Haldane, I was, as usual, sent scurrying to a textbook so that I could be sure of what Donatism actually was. There's nothing like avoiding a 4th Century heresy to get me going! I think the point that James was trying to make was that the sacraments derive their efficacy from Christ, not from their human ministers. And in understanding that, James finds a point of contact or a sense of *Communio* with John Haldane.

The discussions which I witnessed, and which for the most part took place in my own parish of St Francis Notting Hill, were ultimately marked by the desire to maintain and deepen our sense of communion and its reality. There is a communion, a sense of belonging and relatedness, which is undoubtedly experienced by the people who attend these liturgies. But it was recognized that such an experience of ecclesial communion should always have as its reference point the local church within which that reality is signified and through which our identity as part of the universal church is expressed.

The desire to belong and to be accepted are very sensitive issues especially when they are discussed with regard to people who sometimes have been made to feel by the Church that they can have no place at the table. Such attitudes do no more than re-enforce the pathology which identifies the gay man or woman as an outlaw. As one who stands outside the given norms of society and who therefore is regarded as a threat. Yet the diocese in its document emphasized the teaching of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. That people cannot be identified merely in terms of their sexual orientation and that our fundamental identity, and I should like to add, our fundamental dignity, is to be found as creatures of God.

To my mind the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was marked by a revolutionary concept. A concept which we might call inclusivity. When Jesus stands on the mountain top with Moses and Elijah, Peter is afraid and wants to go back to the tradition that he knows. *Master it is wonderful for us to be here, so let us make three tents, one for you one for Moses and one for Elijah.* In other words let us honour this moment by recalling our history and building those temporary shelters which remind us of our wandering in the desert through which we became God's people. And let me escape my fear by not entering into what is happening. The scripture says that Peter *did not know what he was saying.*

In other words this moment of transfiguration offers the law, prophetic witness and encounter with the Christ not just to one nation but to the whole of humanity. This is an encounter which cannot be contained or kept within the booths of tradition. On the holy mountain all people are invited to discover their identity as sons and daughters of God. I hope that at the heart of what takes place in these liturgies will be that same sense of discovery, openness, acceptance and love. It is good to be home.