Knights of St Columba's
Retreat and a Day of Reflection at Walsingham.
Wednesday, 31st October 2018
By Joe Rodriguez

Our thanks to the Very Rev. Canon Peter Rollings VF, for an interesting and inspiring day in the wonderful surroundings of Dowry House and Little Walsingham Village.

Paul Dardis, Carl Mellor, Peter Hardy, Jim Harrington, Lester Darby, Peter Martin, Charlie Bussitil and Joe Rodriguez.

On Wednesday 31st October 2018, the gathering of Brothers from King's Lynn and Peterborough accumulated at Dowry House for a Retreat and Day of Reflection.

The day started with Mass in the beautiful, low ceiling Chapel of Dowry House, celebrated by Fr. Peter, assisted by sacristan Peter Martin. Paul Dardis gave the daily reading; Ephesians 6:1-9 - Duties in domestic life. Fr. Peter offered the Gospel according to Luke 13:22-30 - The last shall be first and the first last, followed by his inspiring homily reflecting on the Gospel.

After Mass we retired to the Refectory for teas and coffees.

The rest of the morning was in the Conference Room where Fr. Peter's theme and interactive discussion was about Prayer and How do we Pray?

Although it is God who makes the first move, he never forces himself on us and always allows us to answer for ourselves. In response to his invitations to us we can answer yes or no. God allows that. But our responses are rarely, if ever, quite that straightforward. And so God also allows us to answer with a combination of yes and no. After all, we are complicated creatures; and even when we say yes with our lips, this so often comes with at least a touch of no.

There is an old joke about a person in an isolated spot asking for directions. The reply given is: 'Well, I can show you the way, but if I were you, I wouldn’t start from here.' The joke is that we always start from whatever place is here. There is no other place we can start from. And the same is true of our relationships with God, our relationships with others and our relationships with ourselves. We always start from where we are.

Fr. Peter gave examples of the Psalms, explaining that these were and are, the prayers of the Jews and Jesus would had been taught these, by his mother Mary, as he grew up. These are the prayers for all occasions. By reflecting on the Psalms we are saying the prayers of Jesus, from him and directly communicating with God.
Fr Peter explained that Jesus, his mother and the disciples were invited to a wedding feast at Cana in Galilee. In the Gospel of St John, his preaching begins, both in word and deed, in response to a human need. ‘Woman, why turn to me, my hour has not yet come’ he says to his mother, and yet she responds by saying to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ In this way, the water is turned into wine.

**Reflection**

His hour will come on the Cross and at his death, blood and water will issue from his sacred side. This has been taken by his believers to be a sign of the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, already prefigured at the wedding feast at Cana. ‘You have kept the best wine till now’. Washed in the water of rebirth, we are now nourished at the Lord’s supper in the eating of his Body and the drinking of his Blood.

We are told at the end of the Gospel, that Jesus let his glory be seen in this miracle, the first of the signs given by Jesus and that his disciples believed in him. We too are called to be believing disciples sent out by him to preach a word of mercy and hope, and to celebrate this in the sacraments, both to and for our human world.

Perhaps the preaching of wisdom and instruction is needed more now than ever before. We are exhorted in the Psalms to tell among the nations, the glory of God, and his wonders among all his peoples. However, it needs to be done in a humble and sympathetic manner responding to the needs of those who hear us, just as Jesus did at the behest of his blessed mother.

The group then retreated for lunch at Elmham House, off Friday Market Place.

Upon returning to Dowry House, the group descended into the Oratory, a cellar beneath the building. Here Fr. Peter and the group recited five decades of the Rosary’s Glorious Mysteries.

We returned to the Conference Room for the shorter session of the day to reflect on Mary, mother of God.

Fr. Peter spoke about the life of Mary reminds us of the extravagance of the love of God and introduced us to Marialis Cultus (Marian Devotion), the title of a Mariological Apostolic Exhortation by Pope Paul VI issued on February 2, 1974. It focuses Marian devotions, clarifying the way in which the Roman Catholic Church celebrates and commemorates Mary, the mother of Jesus.

*Marialis Cultus* gives guidelines for devotions to Mary by the Church and attempts to make sure that all Marian liturgical celebrations and public expressions of devotion align with established doctrine. It noted that every element of the church’s prayer life, including Marian devotions, should draw its inspiration from the Bible and harmonise with the liturgy.

The four area covered by Fr. Peter was: *Mary is the attentive Virgin*—In order to live to the word of God we need first to be prepared to listen to it. Mary conceived the Lord Jesus in her heart and in her mind before she conceived him in her womb.

*Mary is the Virgin in prayer*—From the moment she was chosen to be the mother of Jesus and praised God in the words of the Magnificat to after Jesus’ ascension, Mary is described in the Acts of the Apostles as “joined in continuous prayer” with the other disciples. Mary is at prayer bringing the needs of others to God.

*Mary is the Virgin-Mother*—The fruitfulness of her life is a sign of the whole Church.

*Mary is the Virgin presenting offerings*—Mary is an example of worship which consists of
making one’s life an offering to God. At the foot of the Cross she is associated with Christ’s offering of himself to the Father.

**Reflection**

In the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Advent we find God yet again making the first move, this time coming into Joseph’s life and inviting him to play a role in the history of salvation. Of course, Joseph does not know the significance of what he is being asked to take part in. From his perspective he is in a dilemma. He cares for Mary, his betrothed, but she is with child. This is very difficult for him and he is facing a serious embarrassment both for himself and for Mary.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Joseph was preparing to do what most men of his time and place would do, but to do this in as kind a way as possible. He would divorce Mary quietly. Then God intervenes and sends his angel to Joseph in a dream, revealing to him something of what marvellous things were taking place, that Mary had conceived a son by the Holy Spirit and that he was to be called Jesus. We are not told what Joseph’s words were in response to this, or even if he said anything at all about it. But we know that his response was very much a yes. For Joseph went and did what the Lord commanded him. He took Mary into his home.

It’s worth comparing this with the account of the Annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Mary in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1.26-38). In many ways the two accounts are similar, but there are some important differences. Mary too is visited by an angel and the angel tells her about the son she would conceive by the Holy Spirit and who would be called Jesus. And at the end of the angel’s message Mary says, *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*’ Unlike Joseph, her words are recorded. But like Joseph her response to God was yes.

Catholics believe that Mary was conceived free from Original Sin and so lived a fully redeemed life. Because of this, Mary was given the special privilege that all her responses to God were yes to God, and not only yes to God, but pure, unalloyed by sin, by negativity, by resistance. And here we have perhaps another difference regarding what we can say about the responses of Joseph and of Mary. I do not claim to be privy to what graces were present in Joseph when he did what the Lord commanded him, but I suspect that even the very positive response of so a great saint as Joseph was touched at least to some extent by the same sorts of complexities as are found in our responses to God.

Now, even though this is to speak of human complexity and imperfection, Joseph’s story is, I think, deeply encouraging for all of us. Sometimes people think that in order for our responses to be meaningful they need to be perfect. The trouble with this is that if we insist upon perfection in ourselves and in others, for pure motives in ourselves and in others, then we will have to wait a very long time. Instead, we need to acknowledge the imperfection in ourselves and in others and come to see that God can do truly marvellous things, even with our highly imperfect responses.

God works with us where we are, but can bring us to where we ought to be. But he starts with where we are. God came into the life of Joseph, a righteous man, and brought him to great sanctity. But God works with men and women far more flawed than Joseph and does marvellous things with them. We see this in the lives of the saints, some of whom were great sinners, but who were brought to lives of great sanctity. God did not demand a perfect response from them, but God helped shape their ongoing responses as they journeyed with him.

After all, in our prayers, God continues to make the first move even after we say yes.