

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Solemnity of The Assumption Sunday August 15th 2021

Every few months I give myself a week without any appointments that will give me some time for some serious study, to immerse myself in some books, and this week has been one of those occasions. One of the books I have been reading was a new book by Sohrab Ahmari, the Iranian born convert to Catholicism, in which he tries to make sense of the chaos of today's society by looking at some of the great religious and philosophical traditions of the past; these are traditions that have the power to resolve much of our confusion and reverse the slide into chaos discernible in our culture. So he asks questions like 'Can you be spiritual without being religious?' 'Should you think for yourself?' 'What is freedom for?' and several others. It's a bit more hard work than I had expected, which is no bad thing, but it is such a rewarding read. Anyway, in a roundabout way this is bringing me to The Assumption, because at the end of this well thought out, well researched book that draws on the stories of many thinkers, ancient and modern, he writes a very moving letter of advice to his young Son. The letter ends with these words:

'Relate to the Blessed Virgin Mary as an uneducated peasant might. Can you do that for me? Hold her hand. She is our Mother. She will tell you everything that truly matters to a happy life. 'Do as he says' (John 2.5)

So, this book that addresses some of the biggest questions of life in some detail and with deep research and thought, ends with advice to relate to Our Lady as an uneducated peasant might. What is that all about?

Of course it is no accident. Ahmari is far too intelligent and too spiritually switched on for that. Nor can it possibly be just some strange religious blindness to the power of the intellect, because that is precisely what he has been arguing in favour of. This is quite deliberate. He is saying to us that there are limits to the power of the mind, places that the intellect cannot take us. In fact he quotes the famous story about St Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest minds the world has ever known, who one day laid down his pen and never wrote again because he said that everything he had written was so much straw compared with the experience of God that he had had.

The uneducated peasant knows what he knows, and knows what he doesn't know, and he is happy with that. We are being invited to relate to Our Lady as people who know that there are some things that we will never understand, never get our minds around, and that is ok. It is good to be inquisitive, and thoughtful, and challenging: to explore ideas and try to understand the world around us, all of these are very good. But there are some things that we cannot understand, and never will, and that is fine. If we kid ourselves into thinking that our minds are big enough to conquer everything, such arrogance only sets us up for a fall, like the builders of the Tower of Babel who thought their ability with bricks was enough to conquer everything. His advice to relate to Our Lady as an uneducated peasant might is the little piece of grit in the oyster of intellectual craft that will turn into a pearl of devotion. It punctures the

arrogance of the human mind and makes us human once again. The true fool, it turns out, is the one who thinks they can know and understand everything.

So how might the uneducated peasant relate to Our Lady? He will not be too worried about exactly what the Dogma of The Assumption means, or how it works, or what happened. He will be happy just to know that it is true. What will matter is simply Our Lady as a loving presence in his life. He – or she – will know that when the Lord performed his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, Our Lady was there; he will know that she was there all through the child's growing up, and as he was preaching, and then she was there beneath the cross as well. When the disciples gathered together after the Resurrection, she was there too. She does speak, and we know some of the things that she said, but above all she is there, present and filled with tender love. The Assumption of Our Lady means that Mary has found, for all eternity, her home in God; and because God is able to be everywhere, this means we are never far from Our Lady. From the cross Jesus specifically gives her to us to be our mother, and her heart aches to be this for us. There are plenty of dragons stalking our world, huffing and puffing, full of fire and noise, but they lose their power to frighten if they come up against the heart of tenderest love. She wants to be present to us whenever the dragons are most noisy, most intimidating: fear, loneliness, loss, anxiety, sickness, bereavement, disappointment, desertion, failure, the sense that life is slipping away. All of these dragons rely on cornering us on our own to intimidate us, but if we only ask, her loving presence will be beside us and their power fades.

What might the uneducated peasant do when faced with the dragons? He would, I think, take up his rosary and even if he didn't pray it, just to hold it would be enough to help him feel her presence. There is nothing magic about the rosary, it is not some sort of lucky charm, but it is a symbol, and picking it up is a symbolic act. When Ahmari advises his son to hold Our Lady by the hand I think perhaps this is what he means. Just to take up the rosary is in symbol to take her by the hand, and her loving presence is with us, and we are not alone, and although some things remain beyond our ability to understand, this loving presence is enough.

Sohrab Ahmari 'The Unbroken Thread: Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos' Hodder & Stoughton 2021