



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – January 2009

New Year in Ferment

HAPPY NEW YEAR! May I wish you a year of ferment! In my dictionary 'ferment' comes out as 'agitation, excitement, tumult' or, when used as a verb, 'excite, stir up, foment'. It's something that happens during baking, when the yeast (leaven) gets to work on (leavens) the bread mixture. It's something that happens during wine-making, when, through the lively activity of the yeast, the sugar begins to turn into alcohol. 'Ferment' is a 'bread and wine' word, a eucharistic word. It's there in the Lord's teaching - 'the kingdom of heaven is like leaven [yeast] which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened' (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:21) - and St Paul mentions twice that 'a little leaven leavens all the dough' (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9). The Lord warns us against bad yeast – 'beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees' (Matt 16:6, 11; Mk 8:15 and Luke 12:1). So does St Paul: 'Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be new dough....let us celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven...of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (1 Cor 5:7-8).

Christians are the leaven in the lump, what brings the wine to life. It is the work of Christ, the Word of God in creation, that brings the living world into being and, and Christ, born for us in Bethlehem, that brings light and life to our very existence. Without him, we are surrounded by darkness, our partying and our presents are just ways of warding off despair. At the heart of our Christmas celebration was the 'Christ Mass' itself. At Mass, Christ transforms the unleavened bread into his life-giving Body. At Mass we drink the rich vintage of his life-giving Blood. In Bethlehem shepherds and wise men saw him face to face, and he was apparently just a baby. At the Jordan and Cana people saw him face to face, and he was apparently just a man. At Mass we receive him into our bodies, and he is apparently just bread and wine. His life fills our life with ferment. His life, within the parish community, becomes a leaven for all those in whose midst we live. This was expressed very well by Pope John XXIII, whose fiftieth anniversary of accession we kept towards the end of last year:

Moulded by the Eucharist, the parish will become a beneficial ferment amidst the widespread consumerism and individualism of our time, reawakening solidarity and opening, in faith, the eye of the heart to recognise the Father, Who is gratuitous love and Who wishes to share his own joy with His children.
(Zenit 29th October 2008)

May God bless us as we celebrate his appearing amongst us as a man, his sharing in our humanity.

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