

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

With You For Ever

What do the words above evoke for us? At first sight, they are the language of love: *I want to be with you forever* is the sort of thing a lover might say. In precise terms, it's quite a praiseworthy thing to say, but it is notoriously open to question. The beloved traditionally responds by wondering how sincere it is. Does it mean what it says? Maybe what it really means is, *I want (for the foreseeable future) to be with you forever*. Then its sincerity rests upon the (dubious) foundation-stone of the lover's desires, which may suddenly change. But still, maybe it is more than that. Maybe that *forever* could indicate that our relationship has the power to open up something more permanent, something so valid that it will last. *Forever*, after all, is a big word. But if so, how would such a desire be fulfilled? Do *human beings* last forever? Even marriage is only *till death do us part*. How will "forever" look by the time I'm no longer sixteen, but sixty-four?

While Ever Our Mortgage Endures

But I think the word *forever* does mean something different. It relates to our human longing for the Eternal. Some robustly say *eternal fiddlesticks*. *Eternal doesn't exist*. *Make do with the time you've got and make the best of it*. I suppose that will work - for a time; but it has within itself seeds of instability. I might continue to work and keep my promises whilst life pays me a good return. But will I work when my life is a net loss: when the endless demands of my family suddenly appear relentless, and the kids are living their own life, apparently at our expense, when our parents' health is breaking down, and we are looking at long-term illness or geriatric care: when our own employment begins to look dodgy or provisional, when the future suddenly looks a bit cramped and limited? If we both get tired and worn, and can't raise the wind to communicate in the evenings, and he loses his lissom figure and she just joins the darts team and spends every night in the pub....what price *forever* then? O, I do believe in the Eternal, and I need to! I look across to the lands where there are no health services and no mortgages except the National Debt, and I see how the real lives of people are so often lived there, with a clear backdrop of religious feeling, a clear awareness of the human family and its need for trust and sharing.

Suddenly I feel an immense surge of pity for the rich country I've always lived in, for its childish trust in material prosperity, its short-lived illusion of eternal youth, and its puzzled surrender when these things run ragged and drop off. What is it worth when you gain the whole world, and forfeit your own soul?

A Tanzanian Mother

We had a visit a little while ago a Tanzanian missionary priest. I suppose you will have assumed that he was part of our Western world, with its easy assumption that all is for the best. His mum is suffering from cancer in Africa. "What treatment is she getting?" I asked. "None," he replied, "there is no treatment we can afford for her." My mother suffered the same cancer for 35 years, because she had every possible attention from doctors on the forefront of scientific progress. It isn't easy to be incurably ill, but thirty-five years is a pretty stunning form of palliative care! Fr Nicodemus is a man with a large heart, because he can see beyond the awful poverty of his own land to a world where there is fraternal sharing of what we have. He speaks to us of a generous world where our personal love is transformed and made great. He does so within the Church, which is a mighty pooling of hearts and minds and resources, so that things can be achieved which are beyond the reach of any individual. This isn't about money, it's about the meaning of my power to love, and the Church is the divine machinery of love in the world, the Body of Christ, who still reaches out to touch the leper and raise the dead. It is present in the card-carrying institution we call the Church: but it isn't confined there - however august, however sacramentally-rich that Church may be: it is present wherever the Holy Spirit moves anyone to look beyond self and selfishness, to that mysterious generosity which pours itself out for no reward. The promise that the Catholic Church will, like the poor, be with us always is of consolation to Catholics. The promise that the Spirit will always breathe love into the human hearts he chooses is good news for all the world. This is where the Eternal takes flesh, and we see his glory, being born like a new child for God, full of grace and truth. Isn't that something to make is generous - even for ever? Fr Philip