

VISITING MY FORMER HOME

This is a day full of reflections and feelings for me. I've returned to this place very rarely, as the days and months and years have passed since I left behind your pastoral care. And now I'm told that ten years have elapsed, nearly a fifth of my life, and tonight I stand here to reflect with you on these ten years of our life, ten years of our Christian experience.

Don't let us forget how precious and irreplaceable these times are. We aren't people who have no understanding of time, and who don't know how to think about it. Some people try to ignore the years, either idly, thinking that the passage of time is not worth their attention, or industriously, thinking night and day about how to stave off its processes, cover its depredations, erase its wrinkling and insure against its robbery. Some refuse to take responsibility for their real life, telling themselves: *We should have been better if only things had been different, we should have chosen differently, we should have shone brighter under better conditions!* But these years are our real life, and we must say that if we value our life, we must value these years, this life; there is no other for us to think of as ours, there is no alternative.

So here is a Christian Church, a little house in a small village, a place which for all its littleness is consecrated to the greatness of God. And I come back to it as one who left it for another place, and I remember the things I did here for ill and for good, and the things I left undone, and the things I refused to do, for good or for ill. The story remains written, and when we've gone away for a while, we can feel the past as a closed book, a completed story. But the little house itself gives us a different view.

Ten weeks ago, on a Sunday, my mother was dying. I was with her in the early morning, and I whispered to her that I had to go and celebrate the Mass for my parish. She didn't find any words, but raised her hand, and waved. I returned afterwards, and stayed for twenty minutes, and then left again, to say Mass for the University. On my return, the whole family was gathered, and we prayed together for two hours until she went to God.

A little while ago I went to open my mother's house. It was ten months since she had lived in it, being in the care of my sister; yet visiting it while she was still alive was visiting her home. Now I was going to visit it for the first time since her death. It seemed deserted, almost alienated; it was like looking at a dead body – no longer the point, no longer a meeting. I knew then where I could be closest to her: in the place she had waved me off to, not knowing if we should meet again. Like Augustine, I knew that at the altar I would remember my mother. And this *remembering* is not the reminiscence of the timebound world, but that remembering which makes

present what it remembers, the Christian *anamnesis* which is the heart of the Mass. Augustine's brother asked their mother, *would she not be sorry to leave her body so far from home?* And she replied: *Nowhere is far from God.* And that is the message of this little house, and this Table, of the Word and of the Broken Bread. Since we first stood about it the wind has blown through ten years, often cold, sometimes hard: I think of *the friends who cannot sup with us*, the wonderful people I knew here, who have now gone to God. The presence of this house is not just their memorial: it is a doorway through which we can meet them, and the family table at which we can break with them the bread of eternity. This house is a house for the redemption of time, where the lost can be shepherded, the wounds healed, the promises remade and the lamps of hope kept alight. Truly it is the house of resurrection.

The message on such a birthday as this is not to do with the bricks and mortar, or the bills, or the many cares that have to be shouldered for this place to exist. Those matters are for every day – they are too much with us. Today is a day to lift our eyes from those things, and remember the treasure that can be held here, the wonderful encounter between us and the Risen Lord. It is that meeting which makes this a holy place. So come here often, and when you are here, make the place rich with your prayer, your search for the Lord, your hunger for life, and your devotion to the great mystery which unites us here. Then this house can become an open door for you and for others, through which all who pass enter into light and life.