

**Sermon preached by the Rev Dr Alan Griffin at the church of
Our Lady of the Assumption and St Gregory, Warwick Street, Soho, London
on Sunday 27 October 2013**

In the near future, the new Roman Rite Ordinariate Use approved for Masses celebrated by priests of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham will be regularly celebrated in this church. For those of us nourished in the Anglican tradition, much of it will be very familiar, coming as it does from Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer. This use is an important fruit of Pope Benedict's vision of the reconciliation of Anglicans with the Holy See which enables many Anglican traditions to be incorporated and valued within the Catholic Church as "gifts" and "treasures". It is a noble vision – an acceptance by the Catholic Church that many aspects of post-reformation Church of England faith and practice can be legitimately integrated into the faith of the Catholic Church. This vision reaches out to all Anglicans, not just to Anglo-Catholics. Archbishop Cranmer was certainly no Anglo-Catholic nor, in fact, were Lancelot Andrewes, William Laud, Jeremy Taylor and a host of other great Anglican divines during the centuries of separation of the Church of England from the Holy See. But much of what they believed, taught and wrote is compatible with the Catholic faith and, by bringing Cranmer "on board", as it were, a bridge is being built across the centuries to the middle of the sixteenth century. It is a generous and gracious reaching-out by the Holy See.

In return, there needs to be some reciprocation by England and the Church of England. This may take time for, as yet, it is almost exclusively Anglo-Catholics who have responded to the Holy See, and Anglo-Catholics have always been a minority group in the Church of England and a modern one at that.

England needs to be reminded of its Catholic past. In fact, that past is all around us, and in some surprising ways. Take the District or the Circle Line eastwards from St James's Park – every station, St James's, Westminster, Charing Cross, Temple, up to Blackfriars reminds us of pre-reformation Catholic England.

Another interesting example of our Catholic past is the churches of the City of London, the Square Mile. On the eve of the Great Fire of London in 1666, there were 109 churches. Why so many? The obvious answer is that the churches were small and served small parishes or guilds and livery companies, the trade associations of the day.

But there is another explanation of the proliferation of City churches in pre-Fire days which is less obvious and more interesting. This explanation is found, not in English history but in fourth and fifth century Rome.

The City of Rome, in pagan times, was chock-a-block with temples, altars and shrines dedicated to a vast array of gods and goddesses. In the fourth century AD the Roman populace began to lose interest in the ancient religious cults which, for centuries, had sustained the empire. This was partly due to the adoption of Christianity as the official state religion by the Emperor Constantine. The Roman aristocracy of his day – conservative as ever – disliked the changes to a new religion, Christianity.

A century later the Bishop of Rome, Leo the Great, was still hearing complaints from the Roman aristocracy about the desertion of the gods of antiquity. Pope Leo replied to these complaints as follows: “If you once believed that you were built on Romulus and Remus, now you know that your foundation is another pair, Peter and Paul. If the gods you once trusted stood around the forum, your present patrons and protectors now live in the churches in this city.”

New churches had been built all over Rome to commemorate the heroes and heroines of the Christian faith, particularly those who had been martyred for their Christian beliefs. And so Peter and Paul were still to be found in the churches where they were buried and venerated. The same applied to other Roman saints like Clement, Lawrence and Agnes. The new Christian churches replaced the shrines and cults of the Roman gods.

The memory of these Christian heroes spread in time to our northern City of London. The Tiber, as it were, began to flow into the Thames and the saints who watched over Rome now watched also over London. Peter was venerated to the west of the City at Westminster Abbey. Paul was venerated to the east in the cathedral erected in the seventh century on Ludgate Hill. Churches were dedicated to other saints who had cults or churches in Rome: Agnes, Anne, Augustine, Clement, Denis (wrongly thought of as Paul’s Dionysius the Areopagite), Gregory, Lawrence, Helen, Anthony of Padua, Helen and Pancras. The Roman custom of dedicating churches to Our Lady, Saint Michael, St John the Baptist and the Apostles was also followed in London.

It strikes us now as a curious twist of history that the City of London’s churches mirrored those of Rome – the saints who protected the eternal city came in time to protect our city on the furthest edges of the Roman Empire.

In time the British church acquired its own heroes and heroines and London churches were dedicated to them – Alban, Alfege, Botolph, Bride, Dunstan, Giles, Margaret, Mildred, Edmund, Ethelburga, Edwin, Swithun and Olave.

The old pagan cults and priesthoods failed and faded in Rome and were dissolved by imperial edict in 382. They were replaced by the new Christian heroes and heroines. No respectable city in the Roman Empire (London included) was complete without its forum, temples, amphitheatre, markets and business houses. The Christian saints filled the gap left by the demise of the old pagan gods.

But this should not be seen as a capitulation to paganism or as a continuation of it. Rather the claim was being made that London, no less than Rome, accepted Christianity as its religion and now had its own heroes and heroines in abundance. The churches of London are outward and visible signs that God still dwells among his peoples in this great city and that his church belongs to the market places, in the assembly halls, in the business houses as well as in the Christian temples. As members of the Ordinariate we also have the privileged task, charism if you like, of reminding England and the Church of England of our Catholic past, present and future. The words inscribed above St Patrick’s Church in Soho Square find a response in the Ordinariate – *Ut Christiani ita Romani estis* – As you are Christians, so you are also Romans”.