

The Dwelling Place of the Uncontainable
A Sermon for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Old St Edward's, Clementsport, consecrated 1797
August 15, 2010 at Evensong

“From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty has made me great and holy is his Name.” (St Luke 1.49-50)

Our Acadian neighbours as a community are among a billion Christians celebrating a homecoming with us today. Together, we rejoice that Mary the Mother of God was welcomed home by her Son and reigns there as Queen of Heaven. However, we, here, at Old St Edward's, and ten thousand Greek and Russian Christians near Trebizond in Turkey, are joining *this* homecoming to *another*. We come back *annually* at this time to refresh our souls by meeting God again in the place consecrated as our spiritual home during more than two centuries. But those thousands of Orthodox Christians, for the first time in almost ninety years, worship again today at a site sacred to the Blessed Mother for fifteen centuries. This morning the Ecumenical Patriarch and his flock came home again to a shrine so sacred to the Virgin Mother that *a Christian Emperor* was crowned there and there *Moslem Sultans* visited and left lavish gifts. Nationalism, not religion, divided Our Holy Mother's children in her lands.

No day could be more appropriate than this for our homecoming here, and the other in Turkey. Mary, the all holy God-bearer, as the Orthodox call her, is the greatest exemplar of sacred place for us. Our forebearers here, those who built Old St Edward's, shared this idea.

We are celebrating three hundred years of Anglican worship in these parts; this is a year and a day to take up what our founders believed and loved. St Mary was at Bishop Charles Inglis' heart. Seven years before he consecrated St Edward's, he designed and saw to the building of a church, near his home, St Mary's, Auburn; he worshipped in, loved, and ornamented her temple like a personal chapel. He made her dwelling in that place so fair that it is depicted among the most beautiful religious buildings in the world. This was the first of seven more Anglican churches dedicated to St Mary in the provinces of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. One of these is very close, St Mary's, Belleisle. Several more are prominent in New Brunswick. But there, as well as in this parish, and in Toronto, we find something very rare: Anglican churches consecrated to *French Canada's* favourite saint, Anne, the mother of Mary. Saints Anne and Joachim, the mother and father of the Blessed Virgin, come down to us, not from the Bible, but from the holy stories which have grown up about their daughter. Devotion to Anne comes from devotion to Mary and shows its depth. The extent of that love might surprise you.

My first surprise at the extent of Mary's power to be the sign and cause of holiness occurred in the beautiful old town of Wolfenbüttel, Germany. There, on the main square, stands the first church built by the Protestant reformers in Germany. The Great Church of the city, and of the Lutheran diocese, is dedicated to St Mary the Virgin. This is also the title of two Anglican Churches in Nova Scotia.

The strength with which our Holy Mother still draws Catholics to religious deeds and holy love was brought home to me on Good Friday in Palermo, Sicily. Youth of Palermo carry heavy floats on their shoulders through seven parts of the city. In each procession, one float has an

image of the crucified Christ; the other is of his faithful sorrowing mother. Starting at three, for twelve hours, hundreds of young men bear Christ and his Mother through the streets as the hellish traffic rushes by. These ordinary working men are just of the age, fifteen to twenty-five, we almost never see in church. Yet annually they faithfully perform this hard devotion to the Crucified and his Compassionate Mother. At three in the morning, I was present at the end of one procession.

After the heavy floats were lifted back into the church, the men who had borne them through the night pressed together in a great circle with the flower decked image of St Mary still on their shoulders. Out of the silence, a single piccolo sounded a sweet melody; to my astonishment, the whole ball of this mass of tough youths, wrapped in a great embrace, began to sing a lullaby. As they sang, they rocked Our Holy Mother, comforting her. Then off they and I went into the dark.

The many Christian churches of Syria, both old and new, are packed with worshippers devoted to the Holy Mother invoked as their strong protector. Her power to draw Moslems and Christians together to holy places and holy things in that Moslem country was shown to me at a shrine outside Damascus. The monastery near Trebizond in Turkey, celebrating a homecoming with us today, once treasured an icon of Blessed Mary so filled with holy strength that it drew Christians and Moslems. The convent of Orthodox nuns at Seidnaya near Damascus still venerates a similar ancient, jewel-like, painting of St Mary. Perhaps the greatest of the miracles that icon works today is bringing Moslems and Christians together when asking for the help of the Virgin Mother.

The Qur'an refers to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, more than the Bible does. For Islam she is a virgin mother (Qur'an 19:20) upon whom the Qur'an says "God's word was cast" (4:171). Angels come to tell her that she will bear the prophesied Messiah: "God has chosen you and purified you, exalted you above the women of all peoples" (3:42). In the Qur'an, God declares: "There was the one who kept her virginity, and we breathed of Our Spirit into her, and so we made her and her son a sign for all the peoples" (21:19). In consequence, while I was at the shrine, both veiled Moslem and Christian women came with gifts and prayers to Our Lady—moreover, as I was leaving, a group of Moslem men arrived. Probably the most notable Moslem male pilgrims to Seidnaya in recent years were the Syrian cosmonauts who prayed for her protection before they circled the earth in Russia's space vehicle, the Mir. When they were safely home, they returned with gifts to thank the All-Holy Mary.

Travel with me to one more place, holy to Mary, so that I can explain there why your joining her feast to Old Saint Edward's is profoundly right. This morning, when the Ecumenical Patriarch traveled from Istanbul to Trebizond, he left behind the remains of a monastery dedicated to the Holy Mother. Like St Edward's, it was in the fields when it was built. Miraculously—and I mean this literally—, because of earthquakes to which the region is prone, it preserves three of the greatest Christian religious masterpieces of all time. They were created near the fall of Christian Empire in 1453; its capital, now Istanbul, was once the largest, richest, and most sophisticated city on earth. The icons and frescos of the monastery communicate holy depth and strength. Christ and his Mother convey all the suffering, and all the true religious hope born in that suffering, of dying Christian domination. The name under which St Mary is venerated "in the fields" is as "the dwelling place of the uncontainable". Her holiness, beyond all other humans, is as the finite containing the infinite. "From henceforth all

generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his Name.”

Christianity is the endless miracle that the uncontainable dwelt in Mary and, because of Mary, dwells in us. Every Eucharist enacts it. Every holy life fulfils it. Our hope for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come is based in it. And this is why Old St Edward’s is a holy place. It too in word, and sacrament, and faithful people has contained the infinite: the body of the Son of God. The Jesus who lived in the flesh and blood of Mary lived and lives again within these walls; this fact made and makes this a holy place, consecrated from “all profane and common use.”

We face the extinction of much of the natural life of our world, and with it of the conditions of human life. The problem is material. But Christians know that the material problem is at root a spiritual one. We know that body and spirit are married indissolubly because they were so married in Mary “the dwelling place of the uncontainable”. We believe in the resurrection of the body to eternal life. We believe that in the blessed sacrament we become bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh of the God man. Our spiritual problem is what we have done with the material. We have made *everything* profane, common, and of use. *Nothing* is *holy*. Nothing beyond use. Our spiritual disease and our material ills turn into each other. Our Lord Jesus commands and warns: “Give not that which is holy to the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample you under their feet, and turn again and rend you” (Matthew 7.6). Against our utilitarian desecrations stand our fore fathers in this place, led by Charles Inglis. He set apart this holy house and St Mary’s, Auburn, from “all profane and common use” for the sake of the beauty of holiness. His personal church was not dedicated to Mary by accident. By God’s good providence, you return to Old St Edward’s at the festival of Mary’s homecoming. What you do here in this place through time, reverencing what is the holy, loving what is beautiful, and preserving it in hope for coming generations, is an act of Christian faith, witness, service, and hope. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God that by these acts we may save ourselves and others. Amen.