

EDITORIAL

2,000 at Worship

It was a real religious and spiritual experience. It took place in a hired circus tent on a field in North Uist on August 17th this year, and over 2,000 people participated.

The sanctuary area was raised up so that all could see the celebration and the celebrants. Against the east wall hung a 70 foot by 50 foot tapestry depicting, in almost surrealistic terms, the hills, lochs and sea lochs of the Outer Hebrides in varying shades of rock grey. The celebration was to take place in front of this tapestry. On gantries overhead a firmament of lights were ready to shine down on the sanctuary area.

For an hour and a half before the celebration was to take place, cars, mini-buses and coaches converged on the field where the tent stood. The congregation had travelled from as far as Bernerary in the north and Barra in the south and each had paid £10 in order to be present. The youngest was possibly 7 years of age and the oldest around 60. In the congregation itself were 3 parish ministers, the Anglican Chaplain to the Army Base on Benbecula, myself as a School Chaplain, and a Roman Catholic priest.

The "Act of Preparation" began with singing. Calum Iain, a local accordionist along with a guitarist and drummer singing generalised items of praise in which the congregation joined. However, the congregation was eager for the main part of the liturgy to begin.

And begin it did - with style !

The lights dimmed, acoustic guitars accompanied by the organ played evocative and romantic full chords. Through the darkness and from behind the tapestry a spotlight shone out, creating a nocturnal scene with lunar effect.

The "Approach" was beginning and it was Orthodox in style. Unseen thurifers billowed smoke across the sanctuary area and, as it cleared, the con-celebrants were seen to be in place. The congregation raised their

arms and sang with them the Song of Approach. It was truly "Incarnational". Bodies swayed in time with the rhythm, arms were raised heavenwards. Two thousand harmonious voices in tune with the con-celebrants whose voices were amplified through radio microphones. At the west end, the lighting engineers were at their consoles, anticipating the unfolding of the liturgy, with sensitivity and expertise.

And so to the "Greeting". Pace "Private Eye" and its "Rocky Horror Service Book" - but the con-celebrants were "Glad to be here with you" as "We were with them". Another Song of Praise was sung - the lights had changed from amber to green, casting an eerie light over the Sanctuary area - but this item of praise was in the vernacular - Gaelic. Again the congregation's arms were raised with a strange ritualistic pointing of the index fingers on both hands.

The drama of this liturgical act continued apace for three hours. For three hours the congregation stood - again in Orthodox style. The lighting created atmospheric moods of incomparable beauty, in "state-of-the-art" style with motorised filters working their way through all shades of the spectrum.

There were moments of high and intense emotion as words were offered on the tragic history of the life of the Outer Isles and the Highlands. One particularly poignant moment was the preamble to a sung Prayer of Peace for Ireland and her people (coming, as it did, at the end of a week in which seven people had been brutally murdered:

"Whose history is so like ours;
Whose countryside is so like ours;
Whose language and music is so like ours."

One could not stem the tears.

It was a highly professional and majestically stage-managed "performance" in the truest sense of the word. At its conclusion the lights turned onto the congregation whose voices drowned out those of the con-celebrants as we prepared to leave. But before we did, the President spoke of the very deep joy that two of his con-celebrants felt in being there that evening. "All that they were," he said, "they owed to the people of these islands."

Never before had so many people in the Uists been gathered together in one place. Never before had young and old been so united in their singing; in their recollection of their history; in their hopes and dreams for the future peace of the world; in their hopes and dreams for the restoration of all their nationhood and its language.

What was this celebratory occasion ? None other than a concert by "Runrig" on their 1991 tour of the Highlands and Islands.

I do not intend to demean all that takes place in our churches Sunday by Sunday, year by year, by calling this concert "a great liturgical act" and by using liturgical terms in its description. However, what did occur to me during the three hours of that concert, was the poverty, lack of style and paucity of true professionalism in our worship, which often degenerates into the apologetic - if not banale. In contrast to that was the vibrancy, controlled emotion and expertly stage-managed involvement of the chief participants in this concert.

Many of us have buildings of majestic cathedral proportions if not dimensions. Others have beautifully cared-for village churches. Others, like myself, are less fortunately blessed with lavatorial glass in the windows, but at least a sanctuary area with a central vested Communion Table and side pulpit, balanced by a lectern.

What a difference it would make to our worship if:

We used - dare I say "exploited" ? - our evangelistic opportunities during the "great" parochial occasions, be they weddings, funerals or Harvest Thanksgivings, by rehearsing and rehearsing again those who are taking part, so that those who seem to be mere "onlookers" say "Goodness! They know what they're about."

We used - dare I say "exploited" ? - our buildings, by skilful and well-rehearsed use of the space, lighting, colour, textiles, and music which we offer to Almighty God.

By taking our people from where they are their past and their present and lifting them up in a great paean of praise to God the Creator of all - we might re-discover the mystery and magic of worship.

Graeme Longmuir.