

SMF The Society for the Maintenance of the Faith

Presidential Address
by Dr Colin Podmore MBE
17 June 2023

This year sees the 150th anniversary of the founding of our Society. I begin therefore by paying tribute to our founders, Canon E. G. Wood and his younger brother James, who was a barrister. Fr Wood was ordained to the parish of St Clement's Cambridge in 1865. He served as assistant curate for twenty years and then as vicar for a further forty-five years – 65 years in all in that one parish. Although co-founded by a priest, our society has always been lay-led. When we designed the new website (at www.smftrust.org.uk) I included brief entries about each of my ten predecessors as President: <https://smftrust.org.uk/presidents/>. Do read them and give thanks for those who have steered our society through the last 150 years.

The context for the founding of the Society for the Maintenance of the Faith in 1873 was Ritualism – a phenomenon that developed from around 1858 as a second phase of the Catholic Movement, which had begun a quarter century earlier with the Oxford *Tracts for the Times*. An important feature of the Ritualist movement was that it was led by, and resulted in the formation of, catholic societies. The primary network that fostered its spread was the priestly Society of the Holy Cross (SSC), founded in 1855, of which most Ritualist priests were members. Our founder Fr Wood served as Master of the SSC for three separate periods of three years. The Ritualist movement's 'political' arm was the English Church Union (ECU), formed in 1859 in large part to defend Ritualist parishes and priests (the role that Forward in Faith has today). A third Ritualist society, the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament (CBS), was founded in 1862. Fr Wood was an active member of both the ECU and the CBS.

Also founded as part of the Ritualist movement was the Guild of All Souls. Like us, the Guild celebrates its 150th anniversary this year. It is also like us in holding patronage (about 40 benefices, compared with our 99) but it is unlike us in that patronage work is very much secondary to its objects (which are to promote prayer for the dead and the two great Christian doctrines that relate to it), whereas our patronage work is the main way in which we fulfil our object, which is 'to promote and maintain Catholic teaching and practice within the Church of England'. There has long been a crossover of membership between our two Councils: currently Anne Gray, Vicky Cole and I all serve on both. Vicky has recently become the Guild's General Secretary. I hope that this will lead to even greater co-operation in future.

We planned to mark our 150th anniversary in three ways. The first and foremost, of course, is today's mass of thanksgiving. Secondly, we have had our archives at Pusey House professionally sorted, rationalized and catalogued so that they can be consulted easily by researchers. Thirdly, I am delighted to report that the first of those researchers has already been at work – our General Secretary, Fr Corbett, who spent part of his sabbatical this spring at Pusey House undertaking the research for a history of the SMF that we plan to publish before this anniversary year is out. I for one am awaiting it with bated breath.

One key point that our history will demonstrate is the place of this society in the Catholic Movement of the Church of England. As I have said, this society was founded as a Ritualist society. The movement that we are part of is not a 'private patronage' movement; it's not the 'Save the Parish' movement: we are part of the Catholic Movement. We do not hold and

administer patronage in order to defend parishes against overmighty dioceses and bishops (though that might be a very happy by-product of our work – I too want to save the parish). It cannot be emphasised often or strongly enough that we hold and administer the patronage that has been committed to us in order to further our charitable object, which is *‘to promote and maintain catholic teaching and practice within the Church of England’*. That is why we are here. The Society for the Maintenance of the Faith is here to do what it says on the tin.

We now have sole or joint patronage of 99 benefices. I am delighted to announce that in this last year the Church Union transferred to us the patronage of Great and Little Bardfield in the Diocese of Chelmsford and also that of Up Hatherley, which is one of only two catholic resolution parishes in the Diocese of Gloucester. As the General Secretary mentioned in his report, with the help of our Council member Fr Harbord we were able to make a patronage exchange in the Diocese of Sheffield. One of our parishes, which has no church, is to become part of Doncaster Minster parish. But instead of becoming joint patrons of Doncaster Minster with the Bishop, we are now instead the sole patrons of the catholic resolution parishes of Edlington and Hexthorpe. Fr Corbett is in active discussion with two other dioceses about possible patronage exchanges that would result in us becoming sole patrons of important catholic resolution benefices in exchange for parishes where our tradition is sadly no longer maintained. This all contributes to the goal of making our patronage serve our Object *‘to promote and maintain catholic teaching and practice within the Church of England’*.

At this meeting we have concluded the work of updating our Constitution. During the last year the Council has adopted a Grants policy (it’s on the website at smftrust.org.uk for all who might want to apply for grants for parish projects). We also adopted policies on how we administer Patronage, on Conflicts of Interest, and on Records Management, as well as Financial Controls. So we have done a lot to get our governance in order and up to date. The Treasurer’s report mentioned the work to simplify the structure of our funds and therefore the clarity of our accounts, and I very much hope that that work will be concluded before the end of this year. I hope that we can then turn our attention more to building up our relationship with the catholic parishes that are in our patronage, their bishops and their priests and people.

Another sign of renewed health is that our membership is growing. I am delighted to report that we have elected eighteen people to membership in the last year, and our membership now stands at 110. Members must fully support our Object, *‘to promote and maintain catholic teaching and practice within the Church of England’*. Membership doesn’t cost anything (though we’re always grateful for donations), but we do ask members to pray for our work and to come to our Festival and AGM.

In concluding this address, I want to express thanks to a number of people. On my own behalf and on yours I want to thank all the members of the Council for their support and their important contributions to discussions at our meetings and between meetings. I have already expressed my thanks to three longstanding members of the Council whose membership of the Council ends today under our amended Constitution – Fr Owen Higgs (21 years), Mr Christopher Gabriel (18 years) and Miss Julia Elton DL (8 years). I thank Fr Corbett for organizing our Festival today. Having done this sort of thing professionally in the past, I know just how much work is involved. And I offer a special ‘thank you’ to the Bishop of Oswestry for coming and preaching for us. We are patrons of four parishes that are under his oversight: St John the Evangelist, Clevedon; St Mary Steps in Exeter; Up Hatherley; and Holy Trinity, Reading, and we look forward to supporting him in his ministry to them. Finally, many thanks to Fr Philip Warner and all his team here at St Magnus the Martyr – choir, servers and congregation members – for our Eucharist and for their hospitality.