

**Company of Servers
Southwark Chapter Inaugural Meeting
Saturday 4th September 2010 11am
Southwark Cathedral**

**Homily by Fr Geoffrey Thompson SCP
Chaplain-Designate**

+ “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

At the risk of slightly overstating the case I wonder if what went through Our Lady’s mind when she realised what she was being called upon to do and be gives a hint as to what those who serve at the Altar might think from time to time.

Years ago, in many churches, someone would only be allowed to start serving at the Altar if they knew the catechism backwards and, quite possibly, knew all the responses in the Eucharist in the best Church Latin. Becoming a server was something to be earned and cherished; a privilege that you would cling to and strive to retain.

By the time I started serving some 30 years ago the days of awe and privilege had perhaps already largely vanished to be replaced by a sense that you were doing the priest a favour simply by turning up when rota said so or by being in church to take the place - at the last minute - of someone who had *failed* to turn up. The casual had taken the place of the formal.

Maybe some rebalancing was overdue but, like Mary, we are faced with the extraordinary fact that we are all ordinary people doing something not so much out of this world but something important at the point where heaven and this world meet - in the Eucharist.

It’s really no wonder that the Church has always seen that it makes sense to draw servers together into groups that will help to reinforce a sense of loyalty and a sense that what is going is seriously special even when we know the ritual and the words backwards. The Company of servers now takes its place in this honourable and long-established tradition.

Girls, boys, women and men now have the opportunity to be together in one organisation that exists solely to serve the servers of the sanctuary. A company of God’s people that will work to support and reinforce the idea that there is a true privilege in serving at the Altar - that will help to maintain and develop the role of the servers in parish life.

Speaking from local experience I can tell you that the servers at Croydon Parish Church constitute one of the biggest groups of young people we have - far outstripping the youth group and running the choirs a close second. Young people along with a large body of adults, engaged in holy work at the heart of our life and worship.

The Company of Servers is now here to reinforce the truth that in serving we are exercising a real and valued ministry in the Church - a ministry that is open to all and includes all.

We, gathered here this morning, are simply in at the beginning of something that I believe will become very significant indeed; something that will enable people of ages to rediscover the importance of their work or maybe realise it for the first time.

We have the chance to develop a way of life that will enrich our devotion to the Eucharist and deepen our understanding of it. We have the chance to learn afresh what to do and why we do it.

I remember well the awkwardness I felt when I could not even nod my head to the Blessed Sacrament exposed upon the altar when I was carrying the processional cross - why? Because, I was told, I had *become* the cross and how could the means of our salvation nod to the author of our salvation?

That is how intimate the ministry of serving can be. Like Our Lady, intimate with the things that have to do with God.

Awesome though that thought is it should also remind all of us who serve God in any way at the Altar are not there to flash or sparkle. Servants are discreet; working at their best when hardly noticed. Servers, like bishops and the rest of the clergy, are not immune from the cult of personality. Our job is always to make the worship of God by other people better and easier. The Company will, I know, help in that worthy goal.

We all pray that the CoS in this diocese will flourish for that flourishing will benefit the worship of everyone in our churches. It is my own prayer that I can serve the servers well as their chaplain.

The things we touch are holy things - and they do not belong to us, they belong to God. So be it to all of us according to God's word.

Amen.