

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

**Sunday 18th January 2026 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Benediction**

Since exposition of the Blessed Sacrament before Mass has been introduced more frequently at St Pius X, I have thought about my time as an altar boy at Benediction on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings. I knew the Latin and my role in the service but not much if anything of the history behind it. This reflection explores the history and meaning behind benediction.

Benediction (meaning blessing) is a special way of receiving the blessing of Jesus directly from a consecrated host instead of through His minister, the priest or bishop. The humeral veil that removes the priests' hands from direct contact with the monstrance holding the host brings emphasis to the fact that the blessing is being received as if Jesus were physically standing before us offering it Himself, because He actually is doing just that, through His sacramental Real Presence. Through Benediction we receive the same direct blessing from our Lord that the disciples received 2,000 years ago.

There are of two distinct elements to the ordinary Benediction service. There is the direct veneration of the Blessed Sacrament, which appears in the exposition, blessing, "Tantum ergo", etc. There is also the litany to the Blessed Virgin composed in the middle ages and approved by Pope Sixtus in 1587), or of popular hymns in honour of Our Lady. These two features are derived from different sources. The idea of exposing the Blessed Sacrament for veneration in a monstrance appears to have been first evolved at the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century. The elevation of the Host at Mass was introduced in the early years of the thirteenth century and by degrees took firm hold in people's mind that special virtue and merit were attached to the act of looking at the Blessed Sacrament. To such extremes did this go, that the seeing of the Host at the moment of the elevation was judged to be the most vital part of attendance at Mass. In certain churches in Spain a screen of black velvet was held up behind the altar in order that the priest's hands and the Host might be more easily seen from afar; in others strict injunctions were given to the thurifer that he should on no account allow the smoke of the thurible to obstruct the view of the Host."

The Blessed Sacrament in the processions which became common after the institution of the feast of Corpus Christi in 1246, came by degrees to be carried in

transparent vessels, resembling our present monstrances. Moreover, a custom grew up, especially in Germany, of keeping the Blessed Sacrament continually exposed to view in churches. It was forbidden by many synods, but a sort of compromise was arrived at through the construction of the *Sakramentshäuschen* of which so many examples still exist in central Europe. These tabernacles, of great height and imposing appearance, were erected in the most conspicuous part of the church, and there the Blessed Sacrament was reserved in a monstrance behind a metal door of lattice-work which allowed a more or less free view of the interior.

From the beginning of the thirteenth century, a custom prevailed among the confraternities and guilds which were established at that period in great numbers, of singing canticles in the evening before a statue of Our Lady. Confraternities were formed for the express purpose of singing these canticles and their members were called *Laudesi*. It was such a company of *Laudesi* that brought together the seven holy founders who, in the first half of the thirteenth century, established the Order of Servites, or Servants of Mary. Although the *laude* hardly flourished outside Italy, where both the language and the character of the people lent themselves readily to the composition of innumerable canticles, the idea of an evening service of a popular character sung before the statue of Our Lady, spread throughout Europe. In particular, the "Salve Regina", a special devotion of the Servites, Dominicans, Carmelites, and other orders, was consecrated by usage to this rite, and traces can be found everywhere of its being sung, often by choirs of boys, for whom a special endowment was provided, as a separate evening service. In France, this service was commonly known as a *Salut*, in the Low Countries as the *Lof*, in England and Germany, simply as the *Salve*.

Now it seems certain that our present Benediction service has resulted from the general adoption of this evening singing of canticles before the statue of Our Lady, enhanced as it often came to be in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament to lend it additional solemnity. The blessing at the close seems to have been added simply because the custom gained ground of making the sign of the cross over the people whenever the Blessed Sacrament was replaced in the tabernacle after a procession or after being carried to the sick or any kind of an exposition. But in the course of the seventeenth century there were a great number of bequests for *Saluts* in French wills, being minutely specified, and among these the condition were frequently appended that the Blessed Sacrament should be exposed during the whole time of the *Salut*.

Little did I realise when serving at Benediction that there was such a history to the service. I recited or sang the Latin and swung the thurible. Unfortunately, on one occasion at a convent Benediction, I hit the floor spreading hot coals across the highly polished chapel floor, much to the consternation of the nuns!

Bernard Kellett