

NEVER ALONE

1. STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND?

A SHARED REALITY

In one generation Ireland has changed from a society in which it was the norm to be a practising Catholic to one in which the believer, at least in the area of religious commitments and activities, feels out of step with the mainstream. This is in spite of the fact that believers are very much in the majority. Once it was the person who was not a practising Catholic who felt the need to explain. Now the 'burden of proof' has shifted so that it is the practising believer whose way of life seems strange and alien.

This is not entirely a bad thing. It is good that believers should ask themselves why they believe, what being a believer means in the Ireland of today, what the Gospel of Christ might offer to the new Ireland, how they might be part of the mission to bring the Gospel to this new world.

People of a previous generation experienced their Catholic faith as a shared reality that permeated their lives, a familiar presence underlying the life of their community. Now faith seems to be absent from daily conversation, except when particular events 'give permission' to raise it – disasters, illness, death, marriage, or family occasions such as first Communion or Confirmation. And there are the usual controversies that pass for discussion about faith in Ireland today.

The Irish tradition provided a greeting or prayer for every occasion from lighting the fire to meeting a neighbour. In many spheres of modern life faith is silent, individual and unobtrusive. The believer can begin to feel that the questions and challenges which a new world poses to faith are a private matter to be dealt with in the solitary silence of one's own thoughts.

This sense of being alone can be corrosive and draining. If we reflect on our faith we see that it is not meant to be lived in isolation. The very heart of the task we face is to live a life inspired by the love of God made visible in Christ and to bring that faith to the new world in which we live. The isolated believer would be missing an essential element of Christian life, which would make that task virtually impossible. During September 2006, Pope Benedict made an Apostolic Visit to Bavaria, to his native region and to the places that are dear to him. The theme chosen for that visit was: "*The believer is never alone*".

The baptismal faith of young Joseph Ratzinger began to grow through his relationship with his father and mother, his brother and sister and the people of his village¹. He carried into the whole of his life the Good News that he first learned in the community of his family and his parish.

St Paul asks how people could come to believe in him of whom they have never heard. And how, he asks, are they to hear without a preacher? (Rom 10:14) One might put it this way, 'How are they to believe unless they are drawn by a community in which the message is heard and preached and lived?'

That is how any of us comes to believe. Our faith is not an individual achievement; it is not something we have worked out for ourselves. It is a gift of God, made visible in Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. That gift is transmitted to us by parents, family, friends, teachers and the whole community that surrounds us and by the generations that preceded us.

In a society changing as rapidly as ours, these various influences are themselves affected by the change. Those who influence our faith, the young people who are growing into full and

¹ RATZINGER, J., *Milestones*, Ignatius Press 1998.

active membership of the faith community, each of us in our daily lives, face new pressures, new opportunities, and new expectations. In such a scenario things do not seem to work as they did in the past; we can easily be tempted to look around for someone to blame.

Many adults feel disappointment and incomprehension that, in spite of our hopes and prayers, a new generation is not responding in priestly and religious vocations, in religious practice, in involvement in parish activities. We worry about whether the faith of today's children and grandchildren will be strong enough for the new world in which they will have to live. It would be too easy, and too comfortable, to assume that the fault is always elsewhere, in the schools, or in the clergy or in the young people themselves. It is the whole community of faith that has to welcome and encourage those who are being initiated into its life; it is the whole community that has the task of sharing its faith in a way that speaks to the changing world. If young people are not involved as we would wish, the first question we should ask ourselves is whether our faith community is one to which they feel attracted and in which they feel welcomed and needed. Pope John Paul warned that if the community does not carry out that task, their efforts to pass on the faith will not bear fruit:

A person who has given adherence to Jesus Christ by faith and is endeavouring to consolidate that faith by catechesis needs to live in communion with those who have taken the same step. *Catechesis runs the risk of becoming barren if no community of faith and Christian life takes the catechumen in at a certain stage of his catechesis.* That is why the ecclesial community at all levels has a twofold responsibility with regard to catechesis: it has the responsibility of providing for the training of its members, but it also has the responsibility of welcoming them into an environment where they can live as fully as possible what they have learned.²

We are baptised in the community and in it we worship God who speaks to us as friends; God came to live among us in his Son, who lives now in his Church. We meet God and we hear his word in the whole life of the Church and its members and in all the overlapping communities which form the Church.

After we have first come to believe, our faith continues to grow in a believing community. It is never a purely individual thing; "the believer is never alone". We grow in faith by sharing and living and celebrating our faith together.

The Second Vatican Council pointed out that God "willed to make women and men holy and to save them, not as individuals without any bond between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness"³.

"We have been made into a people." But our problem is that we live in a situation where a believer can feel isolated in a faith which society regards as a private matter. We can feel like strangers in a strange land 'aliens and exiles' (1 Pet 2:11).

DISINTEGRATION IN SOCIETY

That sense of isolation is echoed throughout society. The western world lives with the unspoken fear that we are a civilisation in decline. We hear predictions that this century may see the earth rendered virtually uninhabitable as a result of human irresponsibility, greed and our inability to work together.

It is already clear that the twenty-first century very unlikely to fulfil the hopes we had as we celebrated the arrival of the new millennium. That celebration was all the more positive when it became clear that the dreaded 'Millennium Bug' did not exist. As we look ahead, seven years on, we are haunted by far more insidious and venomous bugs which carry threats that are undoubtedly real.

Oil supply will be unable to meet demand; climate change will strike devastatingly with huge new deserts; large tracts of land – including entire Pacific nations – will be flooded; vast numbers of species will disappear; food supplies will be devastated; terrorism will continue to

² JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 24, my italics.

³ VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

grow and the coming years will bring even more lethal atrocities; the 'war on terror' will exacerbate rather than diminish that danger; the balance of power will move from the West; the hostility, mistrust, misunderstanding, anger and fear of the Islamic world will not be met with reason and respect, and this will bring ever-deepening tensions; the contrast between 'wealthy and surfeited people' on the one hand, and 'individuals and groups suffering from hunger'⁴, lack of basic education, health care and housing on the other, will remain; the divisions, resentments, disillusionment and anger within our own country, will continue to fester, particularly in the all too numerous neighbourhoods abandoned by the Celtic Tiger. As yet these threats have not yet reached their full potential for destruction; some of them may yet be averted. But none of them can be dismissed as illusory.

In spite of the very real achievements and economic success and in spite of a more positive situation in Northern Ireland, we in Ireland can see all around us a world which is in danger of losing hope and cohesion. The assumption that today's children will live their adult lives in a world like ours, only better, looks increasingly unrealistic.

There is a more basic problem. The West lives with the even deeper fear that human life may have no purpose. We face threats of the dissolution of our civilisation without a strong framework of belief about the meaning of life. Indeed, for the first time in history, we live in a civilisation which tries to treat such questions as pointless or at least as unfit matter for public discussion. Thus we face profound threats to our future without any public language in which we can address the question of whether life might be simply absurd. We face them without a common vision which challenges and enables us to look to the future with trust that we are loved by our Creator.

And so we are caught in insoluble tensions. We protest that leadership is lacking, but resent it deeply if someone says what our priorities and direction should be: "Who do he/she/they think they are?" We are particularly dismissive if someone suggests that the problems we face cannot be solved without serious sacrifices and radical changes: "'People' would never be willing to make such transformations in their life style. You have to be realistic about what people would be prepared to do". We seek to measure the scale of the problems we face by how much discomfort we are prepared to bear in order to solve them!

We search for the truth about ourselves but we live in a society which regards those who believe they know the truth as absolutists and as undemocratic⁵. We point to crying needs in our society, but we are not willing to do what is necessary to meet them. We rarely ask whether we might have some role in responding to them either as individuals or as communities. The most commonly offered solution is some variant of the cry "Somebody should do something!"

We distrust institutions of all kinds – political, professional, commercial and religious, but the more we distrust them and dismiss them and refuse to participate in them the more isolated and helpless we feel: "These institutions never listen to ordinary people, so there is no point in trying to speak to them".

All of these frustrations have some basis in fact. There are great gaps in modern society between the individual and the state, between the individual and the various institutions which affect his or her life.

It is worth mentioning that the gaps are sometimes two-way: people's frustration is often exactly mirrored in those they complain about – politicians, professionals, multinationals, religious leaders. One politician was said to have described his job: "I pull the levers of power and nothing happens!" The leaders of large corporations or of nations may feel that however hard one person listens to thousands or millions of others, with often incompatible demands, the latter will always presume they have not been heard; other leaders complain that they are prisoners of expectations that cannot be met; they see themselves required to solve problems that cannot be effectively addressed unless communities are willing to take the lead in

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, (On the Mercy of God) 11.

⁵ Cf, JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

responding to their own needs and unless people in general are ready to make a realistic assessment of what is required and accept huge changes in their priorities and lifestyles.

Whatever the complexities, many people feel that they do not matter to the powers that be and that soulless institutions operate with little concern or respect for the 'cogs' on which they rely to keep the wheels turning.

The tragedy is that we are heirs to a vision, a faith, which tells us that every individual is valuable, that we will be judged on our response to the hunger and thirst and isolation and deprivation of the least of Christ's brothers and sisters, that our faith community is full of the great variety of the Holy Spirit's gifts, that evil and death do not have the last word.

In today's world it is hardly surprising that a sense of alienation should be found also in the Church. But that makes it even more vital that we followers of Christ live as what we are: we have been made into a people.

FRIENDS OF GOD

Isolation and lack of hope are in fundamental contrast with the nature of the Church. The theme of the Pope's visit to Bavaria was not that believers *should* never be alone but that we *are* never alone. This poses a particular challenge for us followers of Christ as individuals and as communities to live as what we are.

The first step is to recognise the most basic point: It was *God* who set out to save us, and who wished to save us not as individuals without any bond between us, but by making us one people. We are a people because we are *God's people*, called by the Father, united in the Son, filled with the Holy Spirit. We are never alone because Christ is with us always, as he promised. We thank God saying, "You gather a people to yourself"⁶. Our unity with him and with each other is not a feat we accomplish but a gift we receive. What is in doubt is not the fullness and generosity of God's love but the fullness and generosity of our response.

Pope Benedict began his first encyclical by presenting what he called 'the heart of the Christian faith', the 'summary' and the 'fundamental decision' of the Christian life: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us" (1 Jn 4:16).

We who try to follow Christ may sometimes feel downhearted and alone, but the fundamental decision by which we try to live is our knowledge and belief that God has spoken to us through his Eternal Word made flesh. Jesus spoke to us and showed us by his preaching, his life, his death and resurrection 'the love God has for us'. He showed us the God who is love. That central truth gave the encyclical its title: *God is Love, Deus Caritas Est* (1 Jn 4:8, 16). If we accept that truth then our lives are built on rock and can withstand any storm or flood (cf. Mt 7:24, 25).

We are not left wondering whether our thirst to find meaning in life, our thirst to belong to a new creation where death and pain, ingratitude and betrayal, hatred, violence and evil are overcome, our thirst to share in a life that can satisfy our deepest longings, is just an illusion. That life has already begun in the Risen Jesus, and that life touches us and flows in us through our Baptism, through the Eucharist and the other sacraments and through our whole lives in the community of Christ's followers.

In that community we find Christ and his Father; in that community we are united in their Spirit. Pope Benedict spoke recently of the conversion of St Paul:

For Paul, adherence to the Church was brought about by a direct intervention of Christ, who, revealing himself to Paul on the way to Damascus, identified himself with the Church and made Paul understand that to persecute the Church was to persecute him, the Lord. In fact, the Risen One said to Paul, the persecutor of the Church: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (Acts

⁶ *Third Eucharistic Prayer.*

9:4). In persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ. Paul converted then, at the same time, to Christ and to the Church⁷.

We are God's people; we are the Body of Christ. Being saved, sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, means becoming branches of Christ the vine, members of his body. A passage of I Peter calls us to come to the living stone, who is Christ, "and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house".

But the individual is a living stone of the 'spiritual house' only by remaining bonded to the others and acting with the awareness of this bond, powered by the grace which incorporates him or her into the 'holy nation' the 'priestly community'. The church... has for its flesh the network of mutual relationships created between the baptised by the 'spirit of glory which is the Spirit of God' (4:4)⁸.

CULTURES IN CONFLICT

Our Christian tradition or culture tells us that we are a people, a community, the Body of Christ, whose members should love one another – and those who do not follow Christ – as they love themselves. But we live in the western, largely secular, culture which will recognise religious beliefs only as 'private views' which ought not to intrude into the way society operates.

These two cultures are not simply a competition in which Christians are in conflict with the rest. Like everyone else, we Christians are immersed in the culture of the western world. That culture is part of us. It is most fundamentally within ourselves that our faith encounters our culture.

In this encounter the two views of the world function in different ways. The Catholic tradition may be understood in varying degrees and lived with varying levels of consistency. It is nevertheless a culture which states its beliefs and values explicitly⁹. The culture of western society on the other hand is often unspoken; it feels no need to express its fundamental attitudes because it regards them as self-evident. In public discourse – politics, media, academic debate, the discussion of social questions, 'pub talk' – the underlying frame of reference of modern culture rarely faces a fundamental challenge. This is not surprising. A culture can operate unrecognised. It can function as, "a lens, something we see through without realising that it is not the only way of seeing... a womb in which one feels perfectly at home, not knowing there are other worlds"¹⁰.

Thus we hear people who see themselves as liberals looking on the 'antiquated' views of believers either with undisguised hostility or with an impatient hope that such views will quickly crumble away.

In a contest between an unspoken all-pervasive culture on the one hand and inner convictions which are seen as private and somewhat eccentric on the other, the outcome is all too predictable. That is especially so if the inner conviction of the Christian is content to acquiesce in the assumption that it is no more than a private point of view. In doing that it would deny its own fundamental nature as the faith of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (I Pet 2:9).

If Christians are to relate in a Christian fashion with the surrounding culture, they have to realise that their view of the world, their faith, is itself a response to the underlying question of meaning which gives birth to culture. It is a way of life.

At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of

⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *General Audience*, 22 November 2006.

⁸ TILLARD, J.-M.-R., *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2001, pp. 23, 24.

⁹ Cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

¹⁰ GALLAGHER, M.P., *Clashing Symbols*, Darton, Longman and Todd 1997, p. 8.

personal existence. When this question is eliminated, the culture and moral life of nations are corrupted¹¹.

Christian faith and life are a way of facing the question of the meaning of life and finding that meaning in the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption.

We are not alone; but we are far from being fully aware of who we are. We are a body filled with a variety of gifts and activities been given to each of us for the good of all (1 Cor 12:4ff). At the Synod of Bishops of 1987, the late Cardinal Ó Fiaich said: "The laity in the Church are like a sleeping giant. Over seven hundred million strong, they can do immense work for the Kingdom of God. But they must first be fully awakened."

If we do not have the impact we should on the culture that surrounds us – and is within us – might that be because we are not fully awakened? Might it be because we do not believe that we can or should have an impact? Might it be because we have never reflected with one another about what the Gospel has to say to the problems of our time? Might it be because we have accepted in practice that faith has nothing to do with the life of the human community? Might it be because we have failed to understand that the Gospel has to speak not just through words but through the lives and actions and attitudes of individuals and communities? We are weak because we do not recognise the gift and the task that God has given us.

TWO CULTURES, ONE PERSON

Christians cannot simply stand apart from and oppose a culture which leaves little or no place for God in public life. We live in that culture; we are part of it; we benefit from its achievements.

The scientific, technological, medical and humanitarian advances and accomplishments of the last century are part of the flourishing of the gift of reason which God has given us. At the same time, we are aware that they have sometimes been abused. Their application has sometimes been dehumanising.

These advances offer the possibility of plenty for the poor, of dignity which comes from understanding and control of creation, of power to get things done. These are good things. The tension for the Christian is clear in the fact that they are also the temptations placed before Jesus in the desert: turning stones into bread, the recognition that would come from floating down from the temple, ruling all the kingdoms of the world. What was at stake in those temptations was that he was being asked to put these things in the place of God – to treat them as if they were the meaning and purpose of life. "Not on bread alone". "You must serve him alone". "You must not put him to the test".

That is our temptation too. How do we live in a world of such fascinating achievements and not be blinded to the question about the meaning of everything whose answer is found in the love of God made visible in Christ?

Over forty years ago an eminent Jewish scholar reflected on the opening chapters of Genesis¹². They contain two quite different stories of the creation of human beings. He pointed out that it is not enough to say that two traditions have been placed side by side. The Bible is a unity. The two stories point not to a contradiction in the Bible but to a contradiction or an insuperable tension within the human person.

In chapter one, what he calls 'Adam the First' is created in the image of God, with no process, simply a creative word. From the first moment, 'Adam the First' is 'male and female'. The instruction given to these new beings is "to fill the earth and subdue it."

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, 24.

¹² SOLOVEITCHIK, J. B., *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Three Leaves Press 2006.

In chapter two, on the other hand, 'Adam the Second' is created from the dust of the earth and placed in the garden "to till it and to keep it". He receives a companion, not through a simple creative word but by being placed into a helpless, deep sleep and sacrificing part of himself which the Lord makes into the woman, who is 'bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh'.

'Adam the First' lives as an image of God by being a creative agent, discovering how the universe works, learning to control and use the potential that God has placed in creation. For him relationships are primarily functional. In order to succeed in subduing the earth, human beings must work together. 'Adam the First' seeks order and beauty in the understanding of creation. He seeks the dignity of being like God, reflecting the glory and majesty of the Creator.

'Adam the Second' on the other hand is not so much interested in know-how and control. His basic questions are 'why' and 'who' questions not 'how' questions. They are about meaning. He is not so much in control of nature as awed by it, seeing in it a God who is close to us but who is at the same time infinitely beyond us. He knows that he is one with creation, formed out of the earth itself. His relationship with Eve is costly; he loves her not just as someone he needs in order to pursue the quest to subdue the earth, but as one who is like him and whom he can love only by giving himself to her.

For Adam and Eve 'the second', loving God is not just the fruit of their admiration of the wonder of creation; it is founded on God's loving self-revelation. It is a covenant relationship with a God who is both a friend and an utterly transcendent Lord. In the end, the meaning of their lives is found not in mastery of the world but in surrender to God. 'Adam the second' is the person who has received God's revelation and who has understood himself in the light of that revelation.

This is 'the lonely man of faith:

What can a man of faith like myself, living by a doctrine which has no technical potential, by a law which cannot be tested in a laboratory, steadfast in his loyalty to an eschatological vision whose fulfilment cannot be predicted with any degree of probability, let alone certainty, even by the most complex, advanced mathematical calculations – what can such a man say to a functional, utilitarian society which is *saeculum*-oriented and whose practical reasons of the mind have long ago supplanted the sensitive reasons of the heart?¹³

The Genesis stories, however, form part of one biblical account. This cannot be an 'either-or'. The 'two' Adams live in the same world. In fact they are the same person. The man of faith is lonely because the language of 'Adam the Second' addresses reality at a different level and in a different way from that of 'Adam the First'. It is a language not simply of the mind, but of the whole person. It involves relating, not on the surface, not in terms of usefulness, but in terms of a deeper and fuller truth. Adam the First will always seek to translate that message into his own terms: "Can you prove it?" "What benefit will it bring to me?" "What has this got to do with real life?"

"Adam the First" in the depth of his being hungers for the truth who is Christ, he may even be genuinely religious but this is not the same as being a person of faith:

He... comes to a place of worship. He attends lectures on religion and appreciates the ceremonial, yet he is searching not for a faith in all its singularity and otherness, but for a religious culture. He seeks not the greatness found in sacrificial action but the convenience one discovers in a comfortable, serene state of mind. He is desirous of an aesthetic experience rather than a covenantal one, of a social ethos rather than a divine imperative¹⁴.

When the Word is spoken in its transcendence and with its call for the surrender of one's whole self, he will only hear it in a more practical, more superficial language which deprives it of its meaning. His eyes will glaze over as he realises that this is not useful to him in any

¹³ *The Lonely Man of Faith*, pp., 6,7. [eschatological = related to the last things, death and the afterlife; saeculum-oriented = related to the (material) world.]

¹⁴ *The Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 98.

obvious sense. As soon as he begins to speak the foreign language of faith, Adam the Second, “finds himself lonely, forsaken, misunderstood, at times even ridiculed by Adam the first, by himself”¹⁵.

This is a conflict which plays itself out *within* each of us. There is no point in asking ‘which Adam am I?’ I am both. But it is important to know that it is Adam the Second who understands what it is to be redeemed, to be in personal relationship with God rather than to have a detached admiration of him. In our kind of world it is more important than ever that Adam the Second guides our life.

It is not too much of an oversimplification to say that the unspoken culture of our time is a culture of ‘Adam the First’; the counter culture of faith is a culture of ‘Adam the Second’.

Science, technology, efficiency, invention are all important, but they are not the meaning of life. That is why “Mary has chosen the better part” (Lk 10:42). Hearing the word of God, the word of the covenant, is what offers the fundamental meaning that can make sense of all the rest.

The person of faith will always be lonely in the sense that he or she stands before the transcendent God. But the covenant relationship with God is a relationship which forms a people. We are never alone because God’s love is without limitations and wishes all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

We are God’s own people, chosen, in order to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Pet 2:9). The person of faith is never alone, but is seeking to be open to the love which moves the universe and draws all humanity to itself.

A COUNTER CULTURE

Sometimes one is privileged to glimpse what might be. I have attended three World Youth Days, in Rome, Toronto and Cologne. In July 2008 I look forward to attending the celebration in Sydney, Australia. ‘Look forward’ is an understatement. The previous experiences have been extraordinary. Hundreds of thousands of young people gather in an atmosphere of celebration. The occasion is not a music festival or a great sporting contest, but a religious event. There are Masses and reflections about important issues; there is a vigil with the Pope; throughout the week they meet with other young people of all nationalities who have all come to celebrated and explore their faith.

One might imagine that it would be a restraining, inhibiting and rather dull context. Those who have been there will remember, on the contrary, a joyful, enthusiastic, exuberant gathering. These young people are *liberated*. They are liberated to be what their societies do not expect or encourage or allow them to be. They are liberated to think about the fundamental questions of their lives, their attitude to ‘the greatest mystery’.

They have grown up in the first generation in history which believed that the task of building a more human society could be undertaken without reflection on the meaning and purpose of human life and without reference to ‘the greatest mystery: the mystery of God’. They have left behind them for a few days that culture of shallowness and they feel liberated to be themselves in a way that would seem impossible at home.

Similar glimpses of what might be can be seen on a pilgrimage to Lourdes. It takes some time to realise what is so different. Being wealthy, or young, or healthy or famous are not the things that count. The weak and the sick take first place. Lourdes is a place where the criteria by which we often judge one another do not apply.

In Lourdes we are no longer in the world which tries to ignore the unwelcome realities that threaten our contentment – illness, disability, suffering and death. But the result is not an air of gloom and hopelessness. In the sanctuary of Lourdes one is in the presence of people, not

¹⁵ *The Lonely Man of Faith*, p. 100.

least the invalids themselves, who are expression the 'fundamental decision' of the life of a Christian: "We have come to believe in God's love"¹⁶. And, just as at the World Youth Days, there is atmosphere of joy and liberation.

Many people still speak of our celebration of *One Diocese: Many Stories* during the Jubilee Year. In it we saw a great variety of initiatives undertaken by parishes and groups, meeting a huge variety of needs. The sense of being part of something vibrant and creative, something of which none of us had been fully aware, was transforming. The word 'buzz' is sometimes overused, but on that occasion it was perfectly apt.

For a short time such experiences make it possible to see things differently. They enable us to live in a different culture with different values, a culture which looks at human life more deeply and more realistically than the world of constant sound and images and activities and stresses either wants or allows. It is a world which needs to listen to deeper truths. Pope John Paul once described the person of today as "often unable to be silent for fear of meeting himself, of feeling the emptiness that asks itself about meaning; man who deafens himself with noise"¹⁷.

These experiences of living briefly in a different culture communicate that most common of biblical greetings to someone who is being given a new task: "Do not be afraid". When we meet ourselves, when we ask about meaning, when we celebrate our search for meaning together, we open ourselves to the truth that sets us free.

The sad thing is that this insight so quickly evaporates on returning to the culture that is afraid of meeting those questions. After a while, what is left is a warm and very positive memory, often strong enough to ensure that the experience will be repeated, but not strong enough to fill one's life.

The reason is that an individual cannot be his or her own culture. A culture is a context in which one lives with others and with a shared understanding of the importance of fundamental questions about the meaning of life. If we are to live our faith vibrantly we can only do it as a community. We are not alone. That is God's gift to us. It is also God's task for us.

We need to build up a counter culture in which we see ourselves as what we are. We have been made into a people. The culture of the faith community is not separate from the wider culture in which we live, rather it is how we look at and serve and enrich that culture together.

2. BUILDING THE COUNTER CULTURE

THE SOURCE: EUCHARIST

The community, the counter culture, where we can live and share and be inspired and challenged by our membership of Christ's Body, already exists. Every Sunday the community of faith gathers to celebrate its own foundations, its present reality, and its hope. Let us take just four examples of how this presents us with the gift and the challenge.

a) The priest, acting in the name of Christ, the Head of the Body, gathers the community and, in *the penitential rite* asks us to acknowledge who we are – sinners, fragile, mortal, seeking to open our hearts and lives to the transforming mercy of God. We have failed one another and together we seek the forgiveness of God and of each other. It is an act in which we recognise the shallowness and the illusion that occupies so much of our lives. We look deeper and we see the questions which can only be fully resolved by the love of God made visible in Christ.

The issue for us is whether we understand what it is we are doing and what it demands of us: "the individual is a living stone of the 'spiritual house' only by *remaining bonded to the others*

¹⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 1; cf. I Jn 4:16.

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Oriente Lumen*, 16.

and *acting with the awareness of this bond, powered by the grace* which incorporates him or her into the 'holy nation' the 'priestly community'¹⁸.

b) We listen to the Word of God. We are hearers of the word which gathers us into a community. We are called and challenged and enlightened and led by the word in the Scriptures. In them we meet the Word made flesh. "(Christ) is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church"¹⁹.

If our awareness of being a community is not as strong as it should be, might it be because we do not listen well to the word? Do we hear it 'cold', without preparation or without recollection? Is Sunday Mass the only occasion during the week when many people listen to the word which is their call to live as followers of Christ? Having heard the word of God in the church, how often do we think about it, still less speak about it afterwards? If we regard the hearing of the word as a purely private matter to be shared with nobody, is it any wonder we feel helpless and alone in living our faith?

If Christian individuals and families are not regularly drawing new life from the reading of the sacred text in a spirit of prayer and docility to the Church's interpretation, then it is difficult for the liturgical proclamation of the word of God alone to produce the fruit we might expect²⁰

In the liturgy we receive the gift of God's word; God speaks to us. Our task is to listen, to give thanks, to allow the word to change us, to bring the word into every aspect of our lives.

c) We stand to recite the Creed. It is a proclamation of our faith. It is also a proclamation of truths which challenge our own lives and the life of our society. In a world which regards every view as equally valid and equally likely to be true, we proclaim the fundamental truth which gives life its meaning. In a world which regards any convictions about the meaning of life as private and somehow embarrassing, or even offensive, we proclaim out loud and together our convictions about the Father who created all things, about his Son who died for us and about their Spirit poured out for us. One writer expressed it like this:

Every Sunday millions of Christians recite the creed. Some sleepwalk through it thinking of other things, some puzzle over the strange language, some find offence in what it seems to say. Perhaps few of them fully appreciate what a remarkable thing they are doing. Would they keep on doing it if they grasped how different it made them in today's world? Would they keep on saying these words if they really knew what they implied?²¹

d) In the Eucharist the death and resurrection of Christ, the turning point of human history, is present to us. In the Eucharist we receive his Risen Body, the beginning and the centre of the new creation beyond death and suffering and evil. This is the gift God gives us. This is what gives meaning to the whole of human history. Do we live as people who believe that here, in our encounter with Jesus, risen from the dead, is the core of our lives?

The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and of civilisation, the centre of humanity, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations²².

The Eucharist is the presence of Christ. Its purpose lies in the community which Christ is forming into his own Body. It is no accident that we use the word 'communion' to describe our reception of him. By sharing in his body, we share with one another in the life of the risen Lord. In a passage which is worth reflecting on Pope John Paul described it as "the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning" to make the Church the home and school of communion²³. The Eucharist is the source which enables us to take up the challenge and task of growing in the communion that is Christ's gift.

¹⁸ TILLARD, J.-M.-R., *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, Liturgical Press, 2001, pp. 23, 24, (my italics).

¹⁹ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Liturgy Constitution), 7.

²⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Dies Domini*, 40.

²¹ JOHNSON, L.T., *What Christians Believe and Why it Matters*, Doubleday 2003.

²² VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, (The Church in the Modern World)45.

²³ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.

It is vital that each of us recognises that the task belongs to us. Anyone, layperson or cleric, young of old, whose first reaction is to look around for somebody else to take the initiative, is part of the problem. At the end of the Mass, each of us is sent out to bring the presence and message and power of Christ into the world and into our communities.

HERITAGE

One of the characteristics of any community is that it has a shared tradition. To put it another way, it has foundations. Of course, like any foundations, they may need to be repaired; they may be weak in places; they may need to be strengthened because of unforeseen stresses that they now have to bear.

A community should not allow itself to be trapped in its past, by failing to be open new ideas and possibilities so that its tradition can meet new opportunities, dangers and challenges, or by closing on in itself in a way which prevents it from welcoming strangers or engaging with other cultures. But neither should a community ignore its past; it will never develop itself if it forgets its foundations. And we are in danger of doing precisely that. The unspoken culture assumes that we, the people of the twenty-first century can have little to learn from the more primitive eras of the past. That would be especially dangerous for us whose faith is founded on past events and, in particular on the person of Christ and on his incarnation and redemption.

The advance of science and technology has achieved great things, in knowledge of the universe, in medicine, in communications, in transport, in so many areas of life. The unprecedented growth in our mastery of nature brings with it a temptation to regard our generation as uniquely wise, accomplished and powerful.

Climate change, growing energy shortages, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, the fear that new genetic knowledge may be abused, that cloning may bring new horrors, and that vulnerable people may be less valued than the strong and productive, have now shown us a negative side to that progress. But we still have not learned to face the fact that our generation is as flawed and as fragile as any that have gone before. We still have not learned to acknowledge that our ancestors had a wisdom, an understanding of life and a set of priorities from which we can learn a great deal.

They lived the faith that we try to live. We think that our times are particularly difficult for believers – and in many ways they are. We feel that the tide is running strongly against faith – and in many ways it is. But they knew persecutions and hardships that we can hardly imagine. As the year 2000 approached, I was in conversation with some people when one of them remarked that the Church was in a desperate state at the end of the second millennium. A very wise member of the group responded, “You should have seen it at the end of the first millennium!”

Our heritage will not give us grounds for complacency. It will show us the good and the bad. But it will tell us in a particularly striking way that we are not alone:

We have two thousand years of the history of the Church, with such sufferings and with such failures: we can think of the Church in Asia Minor, the great and flourishing Church of North Africa, which disappeared with the Muslim invasion. Therefore, parts of the Church can really disappear as St John says in the Apocalypse, or rather the Lord through John: “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lamp-stand from its place” (Rev 2:5). But on the other hand we see how through so many crises the Church has risen with a new youthfulness, with a new freshness²⁴.

That is the importance of heritage. It is part of our becoming aware of the community which is God’s gift to us, the community which it is our task to value and to keep alive. It will show us people like ourselves, some of whom were worthy bearers of the tradition, some of whom betrayed it and failed it.

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI, To the priests of Albano, 31 August 2006.

The martyrs of Limerick, the ruined churches and graveyards²⁵, the lives of missionaries who went out from our towns and villages to every part of the earth²⁶, the often forgotten courage and generosity and fidelity of people who thought of themselves as 'ordinary', the story of our parishes and schools, the traditions, the prayers, the art and the music of those who went before us – these are not just history, they are our family history²⁷. All of these things live on in us and we are infinitely the poorer if we do not know it.

THE CHURCH IN THE HOME

Every human being is involved in relationships, is part of a community, from the moment he or she begins to exist. Already in the womb, the tiny being is a son or daughter, a grandchild, a member of a human family. More than that, he or she is a member of *the* human family. Family relationships can sometimes be seriously soured, even destructive, but for most of us, thank God, they are an essential and treasured part of our identity.

The tiny being in the womb is already a child of God. We believe that each human being is brought into existence by God²⁸ and addressed by God as a friend²⁹. In Baptism, the child of Christian parents is received into the family of Christ's followers, into Christ's Body, and shares in the life which is the hope and destiny of all humanity.

The sacrament of marriage is the foundation of the Christian family. It is itself a community in God's life. The love of husband and wife reflects and shares in the love of Christ for his Church. They are to give themselves to one another without the servitude and exploitation which have sometimes scarred marriage: "be subject *to one another* out of reverence for Christ (Eph 5:21). This "must be understood in the sense of a 'mutual subjection' of both 'out of reverence for Christ'"³⁰. They are to be examples to one another, to the world, and above all to any children that may be born to them, of the sincere giving of oneself which is the only path along which human beings can truly find themselves³¹.

In the family we begin to learn what it means to belong to a community. There, a child first learns to think in terms of 'we' and 'us', to understand that one should be fair and truthful, to be considerate of others particularly in times of sickness or worry or disappointment. In the family the child learns what it means to be loved and to love.

In the love of his or her parents, the child comes to recognise the love of God: "Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way. The *union of man and woman* in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fecundity"³². That is how we first begin to see what Pope Benedict tells us that the fundamental decision and summary of the Christian life is "We have come to know and believe in the love God has for us"³³. It is in the experience of the love of parents that most human beings first glimpse what that might mean.

In today's world this kind belief and the commitment it implies are more important than ever. Ever smaller portions of our lives are lived in communities where we are in contact with people who know us personally. We spend most of our time interacting with and playing a part in institutions, structures, undertakings, offices and supermarkets in which we are largely anonymous and in which any reference our beliefs or to questions about the meaning and purpose of life would seem utterly incongruous.

²⁵ See the Diocesan Heritage Project: <http://www.limerickdioceseheritage.org/>

²⁶ Cf, for instance, Doody-Scully, Margaret, *From the Bog to the Bishop*, 2005.

²⁷ The "Our Story" Heritage Project is an imaginative way of arousing awareness among young people of that knowledge of who we are. Like the Eucharistic Art Competition last year, it will have a lot to teach us.

²⁸ PIUS XII, *Humani Generis*, 36

²⁹ VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum*, (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) 2.

³⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 24.

³¹ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2335.

³³ *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.

This anonymous world in which deep personal relationships and loyalties play little part is not where we are 'at home'. The family is the fundamental place where we learn the meaning of love and commitment. But the world of efficiency and profits and quality control and advertising, the unspoken culture around us and within us, affects how we see ourselves. We live most of our lives in the world of productivity, efficiency, and the bottom line, the world of 'Adam the First'.

Relationships can come to be seen as products to be measured by the satisfaction they give. It then seems natural to demand that marriage be redefined to allow people to have that satisfaction and fulfilment even though death has not parted them from their first spouse, even if they *cannot* be husband and wife because they are both of the same sex. That redefinition began to take place in our State with the introduction of divorce. The drive for further redefinition of marriage is at work throughout the western world.

Such redefinition (that is, changing the meaning and nature of marriage) will inevitably have profound effects on society, of which marriage and the family are the basic building blocks. This makes it all the more important to appreciate that marriage is an indissoluble commitment of love between one man and one woman, as long as they both shall live.

When a bride and groom commit themselves to one another in marriage, they are proclaiming a truth that is vital for our future – the truth that we are not alone and we are not powerless. We are in relationship with God and with one another, and our relationships are stronger than any events that may happen to us. We can commit ourselves to each other 'come what may': "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part". A man and a woman, usually young, with no idea what the future may hold, nevertheless declare what they will be to one another forever, no matter what life may bring.

In a world where people so often feel lonely, powerless, at the mercy of forces they do not control the couple state on their wedding day that their freely given love can be stronger than any 'worse, poorer or sickness'. Human history is full of examples of the triumph of love and loyalty over disaster, tyranny and violence.

Christian marriage goes a further step: it recognises the ultimate source of that strength – that human love is a reflection of the unlimited tenderness and power of God's love. Christian Marriage is powerfully countercultural in a society of anonymity and helplessness. The gift of married life as a sharing in the love of Christ and the Church is also the task of allowing that love to shine in family, in the Christian community and in society as a whole.

No society can survive, above all in our kind of culture, unless it cherishes and sustains marriage. That will mean realising that the family needs to be part of a wider community, needs good friends and neighbours around, needs somewhere to turn in difficulties, needs a society that recognises the fundamental need to support families in the face of all the stresses life can bring.

For the Church and especially the local parish it will mean recognising in a more practical way that marriage is a sacrament which gives a couple a role in the Church and the Church a role in encouraging and supporting them. ACCORD plays a very valuable role here, but its excellent work should not disguise the responsibility of every member of the community in this area.

The first element in the couple's role is their growth in love and responsibility towards each other. Adapting to married life or the birth of children will bring new challenges which in the past would have been met with the help of parents, grandparents, elder siblings, lifelong friends. Now a couple often face these experiences alone, living in a new area, perhaps in a new country. Their need for a supportive community is greater than ever.

The second element is their role of living as people who share in the love of Christ with one another. Their love is meant to be a sacrament or sign of the love of Christ to the wider

community³⁴. They are a sign and an instrument of a love which spreads out to the world. Their marriage is a new 'domestic church'³⁵ a 'church in the home'. Like the whole church, this little church is "by its very nature missionary"³⁶

It is the foundation block of the community which is the Body of Christ. The strength of that building block depends on how each person lives their family life as a share in the self-giving love of Christ and how each member of the community sustains the love of families by prayer and by practical help. Parishes and clusters could reflect on ways in which families could be encouraged to help one another.

EDUCATION

The temptation to allow the world of profits and productivity to set the criteria is all too evident in the sphere of education. The primary purpose of education is not to provide efficient and qualified workers for the health of the economy. A good education will do that, but it is not its first aim. Its primary goal is to enable the pupil to develop as a whole human being and as a person capable of relating in love and truth. That will mean discovering, encouraging and developing the gifts that the pupil has received and guiding him or her as to how best they might be used. This is done not first of all for the benefit of the Gross National Product but for the benefit of the individual and of the human community. This is true of every level of education, not least third level, where the pressures deriving from increasing dependence on commercial funding pose particular dangers.

Education is not first of all an activity of the economy or of the state; it is an activity of the family and of the wider community. It is an activity that involves the whole person of the pupil, the parents, the teachers, boards etc. The idea that this could be done in a school which would regard the religious faith of the pupil as irrelevant is absurd. If education means preparing a person for life, it cannot be carried out without some idea of the nature of the person and the purpose of life! To seek to do so would be "odd beyond all words... And the depths of (people's) unawareness of its oddness is the measure of the decay of thinking about fundamentals"³⁷.

For those who think of education as the producer of an effective workforce for the economy, and who think in terms of the structures and plans that will most effectively bring about that result, the idea of the State as the primary educator can become an assumption and become part of an unspoken culture.. The concept of denominational schools will then appear, at best, as something of an anomaly or a nuisance.

But parents and communities, not the institutions of the State, are the educators. The Irish Constitution recognises the family as "the primary and natural educator of the child" and "guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents" in relation to education³⁸. It states not that the State shall provide free primary education but that it shall "provide for" it³⁹.

At the various stages of education, primary, secondary, third level and lifelong, it is very important that we should reflect on how the gift that we have received in being called as a community of faith, is to be expressed in the community's educational task.

The extraordinary contribution of the religious congregations over the last couple of centuries has given us a rich heritage of schools and colleges. With the decline of religious vocations our tradition of education is suffering a loss on scale which we have not yet fully understood. The work done by religious in the past may sometimes have allowed the rest of the community to rest in the illusion that this was not their task. That illusion is no longer plausible.

³⁴ Cf. for instance, JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 69, 71.

³⁵ VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) 11.

³⁶ VATICAN II, *Ad Gentes*, (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity) 2

³⁷ SHEED, F., *Society and Sanity*, Sheed and Ward, 1953, p.4.

³⁸ *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, art. 42.1

³⁹ Art. 42.4,

The new situation poses a huge challenge to us, but it enables us to see with new clarity the essence of Catholic education. It does not mean in any way devaluing or diminishing the importance of the subjects in the school curriculum, nor does it interfere with their autonomy. On the contrary, it means valuing them all the more by seeing human knowledge, history and achievements in the light of the promise that all that is good will be found again in the eternal kingdom, freed from imperfection and transience⁴⁰.

Catholic education means *the whole faith community* exercising its responsibility to share its vision of the human person and the purpose of human life with its members, and especially its young members. It is about preparing people for life. It does so in the context of the deep wonder and amazement with which we understand ourselves in the light of the Incarnation and Redemption. “In reality, the name for that deep amazement at human worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity”⁴¹.

We speak about the ‘ethos’ of the Catholic school. There are many aspects to that and many ways in which it can and should be expressed. But the essential factor is simple: a Catholic school is a living part of a Catholic community. It is the Catholic community carrying out its educational task. More fundamentally, it is the Catholic community in this place and in this generation carrying out the task received from the Apostles:

Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the people of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes⁴².

The task of this generation is to continue that task which has been carried out in various ways since the beginnings of the Church. We face a testing time, and the test will be different at the different levels of education. What is clear is that if the community of faith does not recognise in practice the importance of sharing its understanding of humanity embraced by God’s love through education, we risk losing an immeasurably valuable heritage. If we do, our whole society will be poorer. The loss of an educational tradition based on the Gospel vision of human worth and dignity will lead to a widespread obscuring of the true nature of education as a preparation of people for life.

VOCATION

The decline in vocations to the religious life has had and will continue to have huge effects in education and in health care. Education, especially of the young, is an essential role of the Christian community. The followers of Jesus, if they are to carry on the mission of their Master, must be like him in their care for the sick: “they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them” (Mt 4:24). As the number of religious diminishes we will have to recognise more clearly what was always the truth – that these are tasks of the whole community. Religious priests, sisters and brothers will find new ways to continue these apostolates while involving more and more lay people in continuing the work and the spirit that their congregations have built up.

Religious life has an even more important lesson for us. It has itself been a counter culture at the heart of the Christian people. The unspoken culture of our time is based on a sense of achievement and self-sufficiency. In much of our lives we share in concerns and activities that are carried out by people of differing religious beliefs or none. We are affected by the drive for efficiency and productivity. Religious life, more properly called the consecrated life, is founded on a visible, life filling commitment, a way of life which proclaims that “our eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the nations” (Lk 2:30). It is founded on the recognition that our own efforts, however effective or admirable, can never produce the answer to all our longings. The life of a consecrated person could only make sense for those

⁴⁰ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

⁴¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

⁴² *Dei Verbum*, 8.

who “have come to believe in the love of God for us” and who see that as the fundamental reality and meaning of life.

The unspoken culture wants to judge people in terms of their social standing or their income or their celebrity status. The vow of poverty is an expression of the counter culture that says possessions and resources only have value to the extent that they can help to build up the Body of Christ; the resources of the earth are gifts that are meant for the benefit of all.

The unspoken culture tends to cheapen relationships and deprive them of depth. A shallow sexuality treats the other person, and oneself, as something rather than someone⁴³. The vow of celibacy speaks of a love which is generous and free from self-interest. It points to the fundamental nature of genuine love, to be self-giving.

The unspoken culture tells the individual to do it his or her way. It sees life as competitive; it tells us to fight our corner and to ensure that nobody gets an advantage over us. The vow of obedience says that I am not the centre of the world; the measure of what is important is not how it affects me. The vow expresses a willingness to overcome our own prejudices and preconceptions, and to put ourselves at the service of others and to place our trust in the Lord.

In all of this the consecrated life is pointing to things that are an essential element in living as a Christian in today’s world. This is why it will continue, perhaps in some instances in unexpected new forms, to have a vital role in the Church:

The Church can in no way renounce the consecrated life, for it *eloquently expresses her inmost nature as “Bride”*. In the consecrated life the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world finds fresh enthusiasm and power. There is a need for people able to show the fatherly face of God and the motherly face of the Church, people who spend their lives so that others can have life and hope. The Church needs consecrated persons who, even before committing themselves to the service of this or that noble cause, allow themselves to be transformed by God's grace and conform themselves fully to the Gospel... The whole Christian community — pastors, laity and consecrated persons — is responsible for the consecrated life, and for welcoming and supporting new vocations⁴⁴.

The decline in vocations to the priesthood is already beginning to produce very painful changes on a scale that we have scarcely begun to understand.

The unspoken culture tells us that these are inevitable, irreversible historical trends. It may even suggest that the diminishing place of religion in the life of society is to be welcomed. Even in believers it may prompt approaches to the question that would seek the solution in importing large numbers of priests and religious from Africa or from Eastern Europe where vocations are plentiful.

It may come to that. But before we declare to the world that in one generation we have passed from being a Christian country with a thriving missionary tradition to one which is in dire need of missionary clergy and religious ourselves, we need to ask an uncomfortable question: Why has our community virtually ceased to produce vocations?

God still calls people to the priesthood and religious life. The call may even be heard, but it can be starved of nourishment or ridiculed into silence by the unspoken culture which regards a priestly vocation as odd, as a thing of the past, or even as absurd. A half a century ago a young man thinking of going to the seminary belonged to a community which encouraged him, which regarded a vocation to the priesthood as a wonderful gift, which included many others following the same path. Nowadays he will expect to hear people saying – or at least to sense them thinking – ‘Are you mad?’

But in the hearts of many young people there is a call. The task of the Christian community is to allow it to be heard:

⁴³ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2007*, 2.

⁴⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, (Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life) 105.

Even if Christian commitment is considered unfashionable in some circles, there is a real spiritual hunger and a generous desire to serve others among the young people of Ireland. A vocation to the priesthood or the religious life offers an opportunity to respond to this desire in a way that brings deep joy and personal fulfilment⁴⁵.

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the weakness of our 'counter culture' than the lack of urgency about vocations. Many people pray for vocations; that is an essential first step in a much larger task. Even those who pray earnestly might not welcome the thought of a member of their own family becoming a priest. If we are not a community with an active sense of the importance of the priesthood, a community which visibly longs for vocations, we should not be surprised that so few come forward.

It is not enough to ask ourselves what we should do in order to foster vocations. The question is rather, 'what should we *be*?' Vocations emerge from a community that is, and is aware of itself as, living by faith, a community which genuinely recognises the Eucharist as the summit and source of its life⁴⁶, a community filled with "God's joy which longs to break into the world"⁴⁷. If the Eucharist is seen an interlude rather than as the heart of life, if we do not live with the contemplative outlook in which the beauty and grandeur of the Gospel is grasped and handed on⁴⁸, if Christians are "content with a shallow prayer that is unable to fill their whole life"⁴⁹, it will be extraordinarily difficult for people to hear God's call to a life which must have these realities at its centre.

THE LEAVEN OF THE GOSPEL

We followers of Christ are meant to be a 'counter culture'. That means more than simply recognising and pointing out inadequacies in the culture of early twenty-first century Ireland. We are to be a counter culture in the sense that our lives are to bring something richer and deeper to bear, something that will make our society more human.

It is not enough, like the old monologue, to be prophets of doom: "We'll all be ruined, said Hanrahan, before the year is out". We have to bring our wonder and amazement at human worth and dignity, into the contribution we make to the creation of a better society. This was the challenge put before us by Pope John Paul when he spoke to us in Limerick:

The great forces which shape the world — politics, the mass media, science, technology, culture, education, industry and work — are precisely the areas where lay people are especially competent to exercise their mission. If these forces are guided by people who are true disciples of Christ, and who are, at the same time, fully competent in the relevant secular knowledge and skill, then indeed will the world be transformed from within by Christ's redeeming power.

His homily on that day repeatedly put it to us that Ireland was faced with a crucial choice. It is a choice between two different kinds of society, two different cultures. He was inviting us to be a counter culture:

The Irish people have to choose today their way forward. Will it be the transformation of all strata of humanity into a new creation, or the way that many nations have gone, giving excessive importance to economic growth and material possessions, while neglecting the things of the spirit? The way of preferring economic growth and material possessions to the things of the spirit? The way of substituting a new ethic of temporal enjoyment for the law of God? The way of false freedom which is only slavery to decadence? Will it be the way of subjugating the dignity of the human person to the totalitarian domination of the State? The way of violent struggle between classes? The way of extolling revolution over God?

In a modern society that is not an easy choice to live out. It clearly cannot mean seeking to impose our faith on others. Fundamentalism, which tries to impose the truth by force, "disfigures [God's] loving and merciful countenance, replacing him with idols made in its own

⁴⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Irish Bishops*, 28 October 2006.

⁴⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

⁴⁷ BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the inauguration of his Pontificate, 24 April 2005.

⁴⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

⁴⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 34.

image”⁵⁰. Neither can it mean looking on society as a sphere where God is irrelevant – which is the very flaw at the heart of secularism even in its most benign forms.

Last year I reflected on some of the most important implications of this issue in a Pastoral Letter, *Keep Your Lamps Lit*⁵¹. Here I will just refer briefly to the second item on Pope John Paul’s list, ‘the mass media’.

The media, print, broadcast and internet, reflect society. Like all of us, the media can too easily accept the apparent ‘self-evidence’ of the unspoken culture and its assumptions. But, consciously or unconsciously, journalists and broadcasters and others interpret events and present opinions and choose their stories according to what they believe or assume to be the true interpretation of the issues of the day. In this way they inevitably give a tone and an angle to what they are reflecting. That tone and angle are often very much out of harmony with the experience, the priorities and the essence of Church life as it is lived by believers. In fact the end result is an attempt to present the truth about the Church without any reference to the core of its existence. Speaking about the Church as if it were simply an institution is like trying to explain a painting in terms of the chemical composition of the paint – interesting as far as it goes, but never getting anywhere close to the point. Without its foundation in the love of God made visible in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the Church cannot make sense: “If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people the most pitiable” (1 Cor 15:19).

With a few notable exceptions media stories and comment reflect controversies and personalities rather than the deeper issues of faith. This is not surprising when the unspoken culture so strongly believes that faith matters are private. Furthermore, it tells any self-respecting journalist that he or she should not print what an “institution” would like to see in print. “News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising”⁵².

This once again makes it important to recognise the call to all members of the Church to accept the role of being a counter culture. A respected journalist expressed it like this:

Given the enormous potential for misunderstanding when the media covers the church, along with the all-too-frequent incapacity of the institution to tell its own story effectively, the church will never communicate well as long as we think of this as the exclusive responsibility of a small professional class of official spokespersons. Only when all Catholics come to think of themselves as "spokespersons" in their own arenas -- among their friends and neighbours, around water coolers at work, and with respect to their local media -- will the church stand a chance...

If we want the world to understand Catholicism, we have to tell our story -- and by "we," I don't mean a specialized class of experts speaking in our name. I mean all of us, striving to ensure that public conversation about issues in the church is at least based on a grasp of the underlying realities of Catholic life. Otherwise, we will continue to spend our time chasing ghosts and arguing over non-issues -- hardly a prescription for making progress.⁵³

A WELCOMING FAMILY HOME

In one of the first documents of his pontificate, Pope John Paul spoke of the importance of the parish:

It must rediscover its vocation, which is to be a fraternal and welcoming family home, where those who have been baptised and confirmed become aware of forming the People of God. In that home, the bread of good doctrine and the Eucharistic Bread are broken for them in abundance, in the setting of one act of worship; from that home they are sent out day by day to their apostolic mission in all the centres of activity of the life of the world⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2006*, 10.

⁵¹ <http://www.limerickdiocese.org/Publications/Pastorals/BishopMurrayBooklet.pdf>

⁵² Attributed to Lord Northcliffe.

⁵³ ALLEN, J., *National Catholic Reporter*, 24 November 2006.

⁵⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, (Catechesis in Our Time) 67.

It is a call to parishes to be a counter culture in which individuals and families can live their faith together and carry it into the life of the world. The first step in that is for parishes to become aware of themselves. We are usually very aware of our churches and schools and the value of our local traditions – and it is most important that we should be. But it is surprising how often people, especially in urban areas, can be completely unaware of the commitment and the activities of their neighbours and have little sense of the vibrant life of their own parish.

It is even more surprising how easily we fall into the thought patterns of the unspoken culture which tells us that family life and individual faith are not part of an 'institution' like the Church. When people talk about what is or is not happening in the parish, they rarely refer to the foundation of the living community, the domestic churches, the individual efforts to follow Christ, the "little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love"⁵⁵. John Allen points out the distortion involved in this:

For example, "the church" is not coterminous with the hierarchy, but many people don't seem to grasp that, so anything done by a lay woman or man simply doesn't register for them as "church" activity. Puncturing that sort of mythology will require the best efforts of the whole community...⁵⁶

It is the parish which should provide the supportive counter culture in which families, and schools can know that that they belong in a believing community, in which vocations to the priesthood and religious life can be nurtured and supported, in which believers can grow in the faith by which the world can be 'transformed from within by Christ's redeeming power'.

The call to be a welcoming family home has new dimensions today, in a society which can be anonymous and unwelcoming. The first challenge is to be a welcoming home for the young members of our society, so that they know that they are valued and needed in our community. We need to be a welcoming community to the individuals and neighbourhoods which feel excluded, neighbourhoods in which the Celtic Tiger has never been seen.

The people from other countries who have come to live in Ireland have a particular need of being welcomed into our parishes. During last year's *ad limina* visit, Pope Benedict referred to that new demand on our welcome in his address to the Irish Bishops:

After centuries of emigration, which involved the pain of separation for so many families, you are experiencing for the first time a wave of immigration. Traditional Irish hospitality is finding unexpected new outlets⁵⁷.

If a lonely young Latvian or Nigerian Catholic attended Mass in one of our parishes some Sunday morning, is it possible that he or she might feel afterwards that they had not been made welcome by anybody? If it is nobody's job to welcome strangers, does it simply not happen? The celebration of the Eucharist by a community which does not make other members of the Church welcome would be a contradiction. Parishes should try to ensure that visitors, and indeed parishioners who may be lonely or in trouble, are helped to know that they are belong among those who have come to believe in God's love for us, "a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others"⁵⁸. Showing hospitality to new people is an important way of coming to appreciate the importance of a welcoming community and one's own responsibility to play an active part in that welcome.

More frequently than in the past, we find ourselves, thank God, responding to adults who wish to become Catholics. *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) highlights the fact that being 'received into the Church' is not just an empty phrase, it means that somebody is received, is welcomed, into the community of believers. It is obvious that this must involve the community!

Parishes or clusters should take steps to ensure that they can be a welcoming community;

⁵⁵ WORDSWORTH, W., *Lines composed above Tintern Abbey*.

⁵⁶ ALLEN, J., *National Catholic Reporter*, 24 November 2006.

⁵⁷ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Bishops of Ireland*, 28 October 2006.

⁵⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 18.

... For the Church and its members the supreme purpose of the apostolate is that Christ's message is made known to the world by word and deed and that his grace is communicated. (The faithful) should therefore show themselves ready to give the candidates evidence of the spirit of the Christian community and to welcome them into their homes, into personal conversation, and into community gatherings⁵⁹

The Pastoral Centre is ready to help parishes, or clusters, in setting up an RCIA group. Experience has shown that such a group is a great enrichment of the life of any parish. When the parish becomes more aware of itself and its role, it becomes stronger and more fruitful.

This has been evident over the last year or more in the work that has been done in ensuring that we can carry out Youth Ministry in a way that both ensures the safety of children and gives new confidence to those who work with them.

Since the parish is a community of faith, it has to look outside itself. The declining number of priests has made us see something that was always the case – the Spirit gives a great variety of gifts, but to different people. The community which is gathered by God is given the gifts it needs but also the task of recognising and developing those gifts. That is one of the most important tasks of the priest in his leadership of the community:

Priests must willingly listen to the laity, consider their wants in a fraternal spirit, recognise their experience and competence in the different areas of human activity, so that together with them they will be able to recognize the signs of the times. While trying the spirits to see if they be of God, priests should uncover with a sense of faith, acknowledge with joy and foster with diligence the various humble and exalted charisms of the laity. Among the other gifts of God, which are found in abundance among the laity, those are worthy of special mention by which not a few of the laity are attracted to a higher spiritual life. Likewise, they should confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action; in fact, they should invite them on suitable occasions to undertake works on their own initiative.⁶⁰

If the gifts and the experiences of the parish next door are just what is needed to begin to meet some pastoral need it would be nonsensical to allow parish boundaries to get in the way of living the Gospel. In recent years, at least in some parts of the diocese, pastoral councils and clusters have helped greatly in the identification, encouragement and sharing of gifts. That is something that needs to continue and develop. Every parish should have a pastoral council and should be playing an active part in its cluster. Parishes which are not doing so are seriously failing to rediscover their vocation as Pope John Paul called them to do.

RECONCILIATION

A clear symptom of the weakness of our sense of being a community called by God is the decline in the celebration of the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. There are many otherwise excellent Catholics for whom the sacrament does not play a regular part in their lives. But there is one setting in which the sacrament still flourishes – in the context of pilgrimages to Knock, to Lourdes and so on. It is worth asking why this might be so.

The Second Vatican Council said that “the sacred liturgy is above all things the worship of the divine Majesty”⁶¹. That has sometimes been obscured or forgotten in the case of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The focus has tended to be on oneself and one's sins rather than on God. It may be, therefore, that in the context of a pilgrimage, when the focus is on worship of God, the sacrament has a setting in which it can be more richly appreciated.

It is the sacrament of a person who is conscious of being part of a community called and sustained by God, a community with a mission to share the good news of God's love with one another and with the world. That is the context in which sin can be properly understood.

⁵⁹ *Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults*, Introduction, 9.1.

⁶⁰ VATICAN II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests) 9.

⁶¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33.

Serious sin is a rejection of the loving call of God. Less serious sin is a failure in responding properly to the call. Sin is also an offence against the community which is created by God's love and which takes flesh in our lives through our readiness to love one another as Jesus loves us. Sin betrays the mission given by God to the community – it is to be a sign and instrument of God's love in the world.

Surrounded by that community in prayer, recalling the significance of its journey towards the promised fulfilment and acknowledging its failures to follow Christ the Way, we can see more clearly that our selfishness and pride and dishonesty diminish the credibility of the church, Christ's Body. In a world which longs not just for teachers who speak the truth, but for witnesses who live it⁶², our lack of conviction and commitment weakens the Church's witness and fails the brothers and sisters with whom and to whom we are sent. In the praying, repentant community we recognise that we are all in need of the forgiveness, healing and renewal that only God can give.

In the confessional each individual knows that he or she has failed in a unique and personal way. We try not to make the mistake of the Pharisee (Lk 18:11) by comparing ourselves favourably to others, nor do we want to make the mistake of comparing ourselves unfavourably to others. Comparing is not our task, nor are we in any position to accomplish it. It is God, not we, who knows how we stand in his eyes. Our eyes are fixed on God and on our personal need of the mercy on which every human being's salvation depends; only that mercy, that continuing call, can enable us to play our part more fully in the community of faith.

The familiar term for this sacrament has been 'confession'. It is a term which has a number of meanings. It refers to the effort to put words on our sinfulness. This is an essential part of any process of apology and reconciliation. If somebody gravely offends us, we are not satisfied if they come with some vague statement such as "If by any chance I was mistaken, I'm sorry". We want the person to admit what they did and that it was wrong. And in a genuine, deep reconciliation, the offender wishes to express clearly his or her wrongdoing. Trying to bypass this effort to express our personal sin would impoverish the process by which reconciliation takes place.

That should not be separated from another meaning of the word 'confess'. Psalm 136 begins "O give thanks to the Lord for he is good". An older translation said "Confess the Lord for he is good". Jesus promises to acknowledge before his Father, those who acknowledge him before others; the Douai Version used the word 'confess' (Mt 10:32). 'Confess' in that sense means to acknowledge, praise and give thanks to someone. Confession, like every other sacrament is 'above all things' acknowledgement, praise and thanksgiving to God.

The two meanings of the word coalesce. Even in human relationships, what often makes the difference between a reluctant, vague apology and a wholehearted, honest acknowledgement is a recognition of the generosity of the forgiveness that is offered. If my tentative half-apology is met by a full, unreserved pardon, I will feel the need to be more honest and unreserved in acknowledging the wrong I have done. In the sacrament I confess the wonder of God's mercy while at the same time confessing the reasons, so far as I can recognise them, why I in particular am in need of it.

In the sacrament of Reconciliation, we meet "the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer"⁶³, the infinite mercy of God. If we understood that we are encountering the stupendous love that makes us member of God's family, the awe with which we confess that love would be matched by the honesty with which we confess our sins. If we began to understand that we would be well advanced on the road of recognising the living reality to which we belong – the people gathered by God's merciful love.

Communal services which combine our common worship of God's mercy with individual confession of our need for it have become regular features of the celebration of Lent and Advent. They should be carefully prepared, because they offer great possibilities for

⁶² Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

⁶³ *Dives in Misericordia*, 13.

deepening and renewing understanding of the sacrament. The atmosphere of prayer which places the sacrament in the proper context, the sense of being a sinful community seeking, celebrating and proclaiming the wonder of God's mercy, the opportunities for a more focused, more realistic, examination of conscience, can all help to deepen our sense of being the community called by God to "repent and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:14,15).

We should also seek ways of improving the celebration of the sacrament when people come individually. Prayer cards, reflections, examinations of conscience could be made available to penitents. When a number of people gather, an atmosphere of worship would be fostered by a short reflection and prayer. Homilies and newsletters might focus on some aspects of the sacrament of penance.

AS OURSELVES

The community of faith foreshadows and grows towards the new creation. That means that we are called to a community without borders. We pray in one of our Eucharistic Prayers:

Through the gospel proclaimed by your Son
you have brought together in a single Church
people of every nation, culture and tongue.
Into it you breathe the power of your Spirit
that in every age
your children may be gathered as one⁶⁴.

That is the most important reason why our community must welcome the young, the lonely the marginalised and the new members who join us. It is not so much that we invite them to belong to our community. It is God who invites them. The same God who has called us has called them.

Christian life from the very beginning was meant to be marked by the love that Christians show one another. We are to love others as ourselves, more than that, we are to love them as Christ loves us.

Loving others as we love ourselves is more demanding than it sounds. In our diocese there are brothers and sisters, belonging to God's community as we do, loved by God as we are who live in situations that the rest of us would find intolerable. People live surrounded by burnt out cars and burnt out houses. There are places where it is all too easy for young people to give up hope, places where parents have every reason to fear that their children will be caught up in the culture of drugs and violence, either as victims or as perpetrators, places where people are driven from their homes.

Do we love them as Jesus loves us? Loving them as we love ourselves would mean responding to their situation as if it were our own. In the coming year, as efforts are made to deal with the unacceptable situation in some parts of our city, we should continually ask ourselves not just as individuals but as parish communities whether we are responding as if the situation were our own. Is the urgency and the insistence with which we demand action the same as it would be if we were in their situation?

Loving them as Christ loves us would mean being ready to give ourselves without reserve for them. Giving ourselves for others does not imply any sense of superiority or condescension towards them. First of all, only in self-giving can we find ourselves⁶⁵. Secondly, "We recognise that we are not acting on the basis of any superiority or greater personal efficiency, but because the Lord has graciously enabled us to do so"⁶⁶. If we love as Christ loves us, our love will extend even to those who perpetrate violence, who are wrecking the lives of others and destroying their own humanity.

⁶⁴ *Eucharistic Prayer for Masses for Various Needs and Occasions*, A.

⁶⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

⁶⁶ *Deus Caritas Est*, 35.

In responding to the pain and deprivation and fear in society, one inescapable need is for a community that cares, a community that is ready to treat other people, however excluded or deprived, as belonging. Social welfare provisions have an indispensable role, but they can never substitute for the personal welcome and care that only a living community can provide. People are entitled to their rights, but they also need what one can never *demand* – “loving personal concern”⁶⁷. It can never be demanded, because it is of the nature of love that it is freely given.

The community which is God’s gift is at the same time the task, the obligation, of loving our neighbour, not as some “generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love”, but calling for “my own practical commitment here and now”⁶⁸. The community brought into existence by God’s love cannot but be a community that loves all other human beings:

One is so closely connected to the other that to say we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbour or hate him altogether. St John’s words should... be interpreted to mean that love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God⁶⁹.

The community into which God has called us is meant for people of every nation, culture and tongue. If our diocese and our parishes are to be truly what they are meant to be, we should feel acutely the “gigantic remorse caused by the fact that, side by side with wealthy and surfeited people and societies, living in plenty and ruled by consumerism and pleasure, the same human family contains individuals and groups that are suffering from hunger. There are babies dying of starvation under their mothers’ eyes”⁷⁰.

The response of Christian communities to these needs should be wholehearted and well organised. While these conditions continue to exist we cannot rest satisfied with what we are doing as individuals, as societies, and in the priority we give to demanding of our government that it should continually pursue more effective measures on an international level.

Among the key issues, how can we not think of the millions of people, especially women and children, who lack water, food, or shelter? The worsening scandal of hunger is unacceptable in a world which has the resources, the knowledge, and the means available to bring it to an end. It impels us to change our way of life, it reminds us of the urgent need to eliminate the structural causes of global economic dysfunction and to correct models of growth that seem incapable of guaranteeing respect for the environment and for integral human development, both now and in the future⁷¹.

It would be fatal to our Christian communities if we allowed ourselves to become so obsessed with our own difficulties and our own disappointments that we neglected the least of Christ’s brothers and sisters, who are our brothers and sisters, and in whose name he will judge us (Mt 25: 31-46). We are blessed in having three of our priests at work with missionary societies in different parts of the world. This should heighten our commitment at home to see missionary and development work as an essential part of the life of our parishes and diocese.

The immensity of the demands that are made on us by the needs of others should not lead either to the inertia that comes from disheartenment or to the unreality and coercion that comes from believing that we can fully solve the problems in a short time:

At such times, a living relationship with Christ is decisive if we are to keep on the right path, without falling into an arrogant contempt for man... or surrendering to a resignation which would prevent us from being guided by love in the service of others... People who pray are not wasting their time, even though the situation seems desperate and seems to call for action alone⁷².

⁶⁷ *Deus Caritas Est*, 28 (b).

⁶⁸ *Deus Caritas Est*, 15.

⁶⁹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 16.

⁷⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, (On the Mercy of God) 11.

⁷¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 8 January 2007.

⁷² *Deus Caritas Est*, 36.

The community into which God has called us stretches not only to every part of the world but to every moment of human history. It also unites us to those who will come after us. For that reason, the Christian community has to be conscious of the fact that we hold the earth in trust for the generations that will follow us. We cannot “remain indifferent to the prospect of an ecological crisis which is making vast areas of our planet uninhabitable and hostile to humanity”⁷³. We cannot ignore the likelihood that we will leave a devastated planet for the brothers and sisters who follow us.

In a world where climate change and energy shortages are ever greater threats, there is a new urgency about facing up to the destructive nature of our lifestyle. The lifestyle of the affluent west could never become universal. It is eating up the resources of the earth at a frightening rate. If its benefits are to be spread, we must tackle the voracious appetite for resources and the extraordinary waste which it generates.

The ecological challenge is closely related to the bonds that unite the human race. There is “an inseparable link” between peace with creation and peace in the human family: “Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa”⁷⁴.

We... invite rich countries to pay greater attention to developing and poorer countries in a spirit of generous solidarity, recognising that all people are our brothers and sisters and that we are duty bound to come to the aid of the lowliest and the poorest who are the beloved of the Lord. In this regard, it is also important not to exploit or abuse creation, which is the work of God. In this regard, we appeal to social leaders and to all people of good will to engage in a reasonable and respectful stewardship of *creation, so that it may be correctly administered* in a spirit of solidarity, especially for the sake of peoples afflicted by famine, so as to bequeath to future generations a world that is truly inhabitable for everyone⁷⁵.

THE SUMMIT: EUCHARIST

The community to which God calls us includes people of every culture and every moment in history. In the celebration of the Eucharist, Christ is present to us in his death and resurrection. It unites us to the apostles and saints and to all God’s people down the centuries who participated in the Eucharist and who now stand before the throne of God. We praise God ‘with all the angels and saints’. We are in touch with Christ the first born of the new creation and therefore with the destiny of God’s people. We join all those who are gathered around the risen Lord in the presence of his Father:

In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle; we sing a hymn to the Lord’s glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until He, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with Him in glory⁷⁶.

Here we recognise most clearly that the community of God’s people is not our doing but God’s gift. The joy and peace and glory of the new creation are beyond any human power to construct. The new creation is a gift in which God takes all that is good in human life – which is already his gift – and transforms it by freeing it from all imperfection and fragility⁷⁷. This is the fulfilment of every genuinely human hope and longing.

The Eucharist makes the paschal mystery present down through the ages. This thought, as Pope John Paul expressed it, “leads us to profound amazement and gratitude”⁷⁸. In that gratitude we recognise the reality, the meaning, of the community to which we belong. It is a

⁷³ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 51.

⁷⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2007*, 8.

⁷⁵ BENEDICT XVI and ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOLODOULOS OF ATHENS, *Common Declaration*, 14 December 2006.

⁷⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 8.

⁷⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

⁷⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 5.

place of amazement and gratitude, a place of wonder and hope, a place of fulfilment and peace.

The Eucharist is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed”⁷⁹. It is the great act of thanksgiving to God and the action in which we see our community in its full reality, gathered in worship and gratitude before the God in whose love we have come to believe.

In the Eucharist we see how God can bring the new creation out of the cruelty and injustice of the Cross. We also see how we as individuals and our small community is part of something much greater. The task that we face is infinitely too great for us; it is not too great for God with whom nothing is impossible (Lk 1:37).

We rightly feel inadequate before the task of bringing the Gospel to our world. Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift (Eph 4:7), and we are to use that gift generously. God sent the Holy Spirit to fill the Church, Christ’s Body, with a great variety of gifts (1 Cor 12), and we should seek out and encourage those gifts among us. But no individual or community has all the necessary gifts. So, above all our inadequacy should prompt us to recognise that the task is God’s task and that it is God, not us, who gives growth (1 Cor 3:6, 7). The light has come into the world and the darkness cannot overpower it.

The Eucharistic celebration is the Christian counter culture at its height, in touch with its final goal, with “the Kingdom which is already present in mystery” and which will be brought to full flower when the Lord returns⁸⁰. It is crucially important that we do not misrepresent that counter culture by allowing it to appear as something negative and restricting:

So often the Church’s counter-cultural witness is misunderstood as something backward and negative in today’s society. That is why it is important to emphasize the Good News, the life-giving and life-enhancing message of the Gospel (cf. *Jn* 10:10). Even though it is necessary to speak out strongly against the evils that threaten us, we must correct the idea that Catholicism is merely “a collection of prohibitions”⁸¹.

The community of Christ’s followers is life-giving and life-enhancing. We see that at World Youth Days; we see it in the generosity with which gifts are used and shared; we see it in the witness of courage and commitment left by the generations before us. We can and do disguise and obscure the meaning of that joyful, living union with Christ by our sins and divisions and sometimes shocking failures. The community of God’s people is a gift which is always a task. Generosity, courage, risk, self-giving, and integrity, all make demands from which we sometimes recoil. When we do recoil, it is we who lose. In the Bible when a person receives an invitation from God to undertake a task, it is almost always prefaced by the reassurance, “Be not afraid”. That was the reassurance that Pope Benedict gave to all of us, and especially to young people, on the day of his Inauguration:

If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction, on the basis of long personal experience of life, I say to you, dear young people: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything⁸².

+Donal Murray
Lent 2007

⁷⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

⁸⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 39.

⁸¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Bishops of Ireland*, 28 October 2006.

⁸² *Homily at Mass for the Beginning of his Petrine Ministry*, 24 April 2005