

NEW LIFE WITHIN US

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A TIME OF DECISION

The Church in Ireland is living through challenging times. A half a century ago, the great majority of people were convinced and practising Catholics. The older ones among us remember the sense of wonder and anticipation when, in January 1959, Blessed John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, and expressed his hope for a new Pentecost in the Church. When Pope Paul VI presided over the Council for the first time he said it should be seen as “a new springtime which awakens, within the Church, immense energies and possibilities which are latent in people’s hearts”¹. In September/October 1979, Ireland was enthusiastically caught up in the great celebration of the visit of Pope John Paul. As we approached the year 2000, Pope John Paul expressed the hope that the Jubilee Year would reveal a new springtime of Christian life².

All of that seems a far cry from the situation we experience today. Commitment to a Christian way of life and to Christian values seems much less evident in our society; the statistics of religious practice have steeply declined; many parents and grandparents are troubled to see that so many young people no longer seem to have much attachment to the faith of their home. Parishes are painfully recognising the implications of the sharply diminishing number of priests and their increasing age-profile. In the diocese of Limerick, 60% of the priests are over the age of 55, and only 20% are under 45. With vocations at their lowest for centuries, we face a situation that would have been hard to imagine even a few decades ago.

In recent years we have tried in many ways to bring new life to parishes and clusters and to involve people more fully in the life of the diocese, through prayer groups, “Seven Steps” and other forms of *lectio divina*, through the establishment of Parish Pastoral Councils, Cluster Teams and the Diocesan Pastoral Council. The Pastoral Centre has contributed greatly to this renewal, as have many other bodies in the diocese such as the Social Service Council, the Limerick Youth Service and Mary Immaculate College, especially through the Nostra Programme of ongoing education. The work done in schools, especially by teachers, parents, boards, religious, retreat teams has been remarkable, and this is especially true in areas of disadvantage.

The situation that we face in a dramatically changing Ireland has given an impetus to these attempts to renew the life of our Christian community. It would be a great mistake, however, to see this effort simply as a response to a crisis. During these years we have been asking ourselves the question that the Apostle Thomas put to Jesus: “How can we know the way?” The answer to that question remains the same, whether in challenging times or in times where all seems to be going well³.

Jesus is the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:5,6). The first question we have to ask ourselves is not about this crisis or that problem or the other structure; it is about how we can travel with him along the road, how we can listen to him so that our hearts may burn within us (Lk 24:32).

If we are asking *that* question, then the challenges we face do not provoke disillusionment but a renewal of faith and hope. The statements of recent Popes about a new springtime and a new Pentecost are not expressions of baseless optimism; they are expressions of Christian hope firmly founded on the knowledge that the Lord is walking with us on the road as he promised.

¹ PAUL VI, Address at the Opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, 29 September 1963.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 18.

³ When things seem to be going well, we must beware of complacency. The challenge of the Gospel means we can never cease to strain forward for what lies ahead (Phil 3:13).

That does not lead to baseless optimism, or to give that sin its proper name, presumption. This is not a time for complacency. This generation, as Pope John Paul was already stressing during his visit to Limerick, is “a generation of decision”⁴.



TO FILL OUR WHOLE LIFE

In 1979, Pope John Paul challenged us: “Ireland must choose”; “You the present generation of Irish people must decide”; “Now is the time of testing for Ireland”; “What would it profit Ireland to go the easy way of the world and suffer the loss of her own soul”. As we reflect on the events of the intervening years, we can see that the Holy Father was issuing a clear and urgent call. That call is more inescapable today than when he first spoke it.

Over two decades later, in his reflection at the end of the Jubilee Year, he pointed to one of the most fundamental aspects of the challenge:

“... it would be wrong to think that ordinary Christians can be content with a shallow prayer that is *unable to fill their whole life*. Especially in the face of the many trials to which the world subjects faith, they would be not only mediocre Christians but ‘Christians at risk’⁵.”

This is the heart of the problem. It is right that science, technology, economics, politics, sport, art and other areas of life have their own autonomy and their particular methods of operation. Our complex world is full of many different spheres which serve specific purposes and require their own kind of experience and expertise in order to understand them and perform successfully within them. Respect for human realities with their own methods and sciences “is at once the claim of humankind today and the desire of the Creator”. This, however, is quite different from the false claim that “material being does not depend on God and that humanity can use it as if it had no relation to its Creator”⁶.

Faith in the God who created the universe, in God’s Incarnate Son who redeemed us, in God’s Holy Spirit who is renewing the face of the earth, must, if it is to be real, ‘fill our whole life’. There is no aspect of life, no corner of creation, no moment in time in which the God of the universe is absent or irrelevant. God is the ultimate meaning and purpose of everything in our lives, everything in the universe.

Pope Paul VI pointed to the separation of faith from the rest of life as one of the great issues of our time as it was in the past:

“The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelisation of culture, or more correctly of cultures”⁷.

The split between the Gospel and culture in western society often takes the form of according Christian belief a certain respect, but only on condition that it does not presume to have anything too demanding or uncomfortable to say about the practical questions of political and social life or personal morality. The fundamental problem about a secularist view of the world is that it thinks that faith can exist simply as one sphere of life among others. The great temptation for believers is to accept that worldview and to regard faith as having no practical influence beyond certain limited areas and times and settings.

When Jesus was asked which commandment was the first of all, his reply was clear: “The first is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Homily in Limerick, 1 October 1979

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, [NMI] 14 (my italics).

⁶ VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, [GS] 36.

⁷ PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, [EN] 20

strength.”(Mk 12, 29,30). None of us can say that we have fulfilled that commandment. None of us can claim to love God with our *whole* heart and soul and mind and strength.

Holiness *means* loving God wholeheartedly – always and everywhere – and loving one another as God love us. We are always only on the way to that wholeheartedness. Again and again we discover that there are issues and situations in which we are not responding with unqualified love to God’s love. The self-giving of Jesus, which is without limit, constantly calls us to turn more fully to God⁸. We all fall short of that call; we are all ‘only mediocre Christians’. But the greatest temptation would be to begin to believe that mediocrity is ‘not so bad’ and that we can settle for it.



WE ARE ALL CALLED TO HOLINESS

The approach which would say, “What is the least I need to do to keep God happy with me?” would entirely miss the point. Much of the resistance to religious faith in the contemporary world is due to the attitude which sees God as a source of rules and restrictions which straitjacket and impoverish our lives. On the contrary, it is God who reveals to us the wonder of human life and community, the deepest possibilities his love offers and the overwhelmingly fulfilling destiny that he promises. God’s law points the way to “practise love as something freely chosen and freely lived out”⁹.

One reason why we do not love with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength is that there are areas of our lives in which we have not fully recognised and welcomed God’s presence and promise; there are areas which we live ‘as though God did not exist’. There is no point in asking who is to blame for the apparent absence of God if the lives of believers echo that absence.

A chapter of the Second Vatican Council’s document on the Church bears the title “The Universal Call to Holiness”. The Council wished to say plainly that holiness is not just for priests and religious:

“It is quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity and that this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth”¹⁰.

All of this means that, for all of us, ‘in whatever state or walk of life’, the task of allowing twenty-first century Ireland to hear the message of Christ and to be transformed by the awareness of his presence involves bringing the Gospel to bear on every aspect and moment of our own lives. And that, in turn, is the same as the call to holiness, that is, the call to love God with our whole self.

At the close of the Jubilee Year, Pope John Paul wrote a letter to the entire Church calling us to ‘put out into the deep water’ and let down the nets. When Jesus spoke those words to his disciples, the result was a great catch of fish, so great that their nets were breaking (Lk 5: 4-7). Thus, the Pope was putting before us another image, similar to the images of new springtime and new Pentecost, an image of the overflowing fruitfulness and plenty which is God’s gift.

In that letter, he clearly presents the link between holiness and the task of renewing the life of the Church and of society:

“... since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity. To ask catechumens: ‘Do you wish to receive Baptism?’ means at the same time to ask them: ‘Do you wish to

⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, [RH] 20.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 18.

¹⁰ VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, [LG] 40.

become holy?' It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'." (Mt 5:48)¹¹

Indeed he goes on to say that, without prayer and a recognition of 'the primacy of holiness' it is no wonder if "pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration"¹².



RECEIVING OUR MYSTERY

But what does all this mean in practice? What are we supposed to do about it? The question is not, in the first place, about what we should *do* but about what we should *be*, how we should understand our lives. The answer to the question, 'How can we know the way?' is not found in any technique or plan. The way is a Person, our encounter with him and our relationship with him:

"Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John's Gospel describes the event in these words: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him... should have everlasting life'¹³

Pope Benedict's first encyclical began with what he called the heart of the Christian faith and the summary of the Christian life: we are people who know that God, who is love, has come to live in us: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us (1 Jn 4:16)"¹⁴.

Saint Augustine describes the same truth in another way. When we receive the Eucharist, he says, we hear the priest say, 'The Body of Christ' and we answer, 'Amen':

"If, therefore, you are the Body of Christ and His members (1 Cor 12:27), your mystery is present at the table of the Lord: *you receive your mystery*. To that which you are, you answer: 'Amen'; and by answering, you subscribe to it"¹⁵.

What is 'our mystery'? The word mystery does not simply mean 'difficult or impossible to understand' – although that may also be true of us! It means that in the limited, visible reality of our world, and in ourselves, the God who dwells in unapproachable light is present and active.

Human realities such eating and drinking, washing, forgiving, marrying, reveal a depth of meaning in the sacraments when they become instruments and actions of the Risen Christ. This new meaning does not destroy, but enriches and enhances their basic human meaning. That is what we see in the Church. The opening chapter of the Second Vatican Council's document on the Church is given the title *The Mystery of the Church*. It begins by telling us that: "... the Church, in Christ, is a sacrament, that is a sign and instrument, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race..."¹⁶

The uniquely perfect sign and instrument, or Sacrament, is Christ, the eternal Son of God who "has in a certain way united himself with each individual. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will and he loved with a human heart"¹⁷. In him God has come to live among us and is present and active in us. The Church is a continuation of the presence and work of Christ in the world.

¹¹ NMI, 31

¹² NMI, 38.

¹³ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, [DCE] 1.

¹⁴ Cf. DCE, 1.

¹⁵ AUGUSTINE, Sermon 272 (my italics), cf Sermon 227, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 36..

¹⁶ LG, 1.

¹⁷ GS 22.

We too are a mystery. We acknowledge our mystery every time we receive the Eucharist. We are the Body of Christ. God is present and active in the Church and in each of us. We are signs and instruments of unity with God and the unity of the human race in God. That mystery, the mystery of ourselves seen in the light of Christ¹⁸, is what gives the fundamental meaning and shape to every aspect of our lives:

“There is nothing authentically human – our thoughts and affections, our words and deeds – that does not find in the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full”¹⁹.

The mystery within us is the one spoken about by St Paul: “For God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:9,10). We are signs and instruments of unity with God and of the unity of the human race; we are signs and instruments of the plan of God for creation, to unite all things in him. That is the Good News; that is our hope.



A MYSTERY BELIEVED, CELEBRATED, LIVED

After the Synod of Bishops of 2005, which discussed the Eucharist, Pope Benedict issued an Apostolic Exhortation. That document is called *Sacramentum Caritatis*, the Sacrament of Love. It pivots around three overlapping aspects: *The Eucharist: a Mystery to be Believed*, *The Eucharist: a Mystery to be Celebrated* and, *The Eucharist: a Mystery to be Lived*.

i) The mystery is first of all a reality to be *believed*, namely, that God gives himself to us, sending his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Bread of God given from heaven to give life to the world (cf. Jn 6:33). In the Eucharist, “God’s whole life encounters us and is sacramentally shared with us”²⁰. That divine life is “a perfect communion of love” in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit give themselves eternally to one another. In the death and resurrection of Christ, and therefore in the Eucharist, God gives himself to us in order to save us from sin and from every fear and every limitation. This great mystery changes everything: it “renews history and the whole cosmos”²¹.

At the central moment of the Eucharistic Prayer, immediately after the consecration, we “proclaim the mystery of faith”. We do so because we are in the presence of the heart of our faith: “Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life, Lord Jesus, come in glory”. We are in the presence of the mystery; this is not a mere remembering, it is an action of Christ *now* in which he draws us into himself, into his act of self-sacrifice.

He is the wisdom, the truth, the Word, the *Logos* of God for which humanity hungers, often without knowing it. He is the definitive, unsurpassable Word in which God says everything²², addresses us as friends and invites us into his own company²³. This is the Word which faith accepts by God’s grace.

“... this same *Logos* now truly becomes food for us – as love. The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving”²⁴.

The Eucharist draws us into this mystery. We become part of his self-giving which brought about the renewal of the whole of history. The ordinary realities of bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of the Risen Lord who sits at God’s right hand in the new creation. Then we too are transformed by receiving his Body. We become part of what

¹⁸ Cf. RH, 10.

¹⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, [SC] 71.

²⁰ SC, 8.

²¹ SC, 10.

²² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [CCC] 65

²³ Cf. VATICAN II, *Dei Verbum*, 2.

²⁴ DCE, 13.

Pope Benedict described as “a sort of nuclear fission... which penetrates to the heart of all being... a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world to the point where God will be all in all”²⁵.

ii) The mystery is a reality to be *celebrated*. All the sacraments are celebrated first of all *by Christ*: “When anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes”²⁶. It is easy to become so accustomed to the mystery among us, that we lose our sense of wonder. Pope John Paul wrote an encyclical on the Eucharist to rekindle our Eucharistic amazement²⁷. Cardinal Montini (Paul VI), before being elected Pope, said to the priests of Milan:

“The truths that we practise, the words of the Psalms, our prayers, and above all the mysteries that we hold in our hands and our ministries, are far greater than our capacity to understand them... St Augustine says, ‘The fountain is greater than our thirst’. And I must marvel at this. I must always be ready to marvel, to feel amazement...”²⁸.

Participating in this celebration of the mystery is not just a question of being there. It is not only the about the things we do, such as making responses and singing. All of that is very important, but our first step in participating well is to look to our personal dispositions. Participation begins before the Mass starts and does not end when the celebration is over. One can hardly expect to participate actively without examining one’s life, making the effort to turn more fully towards God and preparing oneself in recollection and silence²⁹. For that reason an atmosphere of silence and prayer in the Church before and after Mass is a visible sign of a community that sees participating in the Eucharist as the high point of its whole life.

Full participation in the Eucharist is based on more than the preparation we make just before the celebration. It needs the ‘contemplative outlook’ by which we see the whole of life as a gift, and seek the Creator’s image everywhere and in everyone³⁰.

Nowadays, in the world of the communications explosion, we can feel swamped by the flow of written or spoken words and the unlimited sources of information that surround us. In order to participate well in the liturgy, we need to understand that it involves not just our intellect, but the whole of ourselves. The liturgy communicates in a variety of ways and on a variety levels: ‘words and music, gestures and silence, movement, the liturgical colours’³¹; it communicates through the beauty of art and architecture, but above all the beauty of God’s love shining even from the desolation of Calvary³².it recognises ‘the importance of gestures and posture’³³; These are not just actions and decorations, they are ways of helping us to respond with the whole of our selves.

iii) Two aspects of the celebration, which have not received enough attention, point eloquently to the fact that the mystery is a reality to be *lived*.

The presentation of the gifts is a simple rite, but it has an important meaning:

“... in the bread and wine that we bring to the altar all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. In this way we also bring to the altar all the pain and suffering of the world, in the certainty that everything has value in God’s eyes”³⁴.

²⁵ SC, 11, cf. BENEDICT XVI, Homily at Marienfeld 21 August 2005 [Marienfeld], GS, 39.

²⁶ VATICAN II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

²⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, [EE] 6.

²⁸ MONTINI, G.B., *The Priest*, Helicon 1965, p. 137.

²⁹ Cf. SC, 55.

³⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

³¹ SC, 40.

³² SC, 41, 35.

³³ SC, 65.

³⁴ SC, 47.

This is not just a ritual moment; it is an expression of our mission in the world, and in particular of the mission of the laity. Offering all creation and the pain and suffering of the world is something that we are meant to be doing throughout our lives:

They (the lay faithful) are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel... It is their special task to illuminate and order all temporal matters in which they are closely involved in such a way that these are always carried out and develop in Christ's way and to the praise of the Creator and Redeemer³⁵.

Pope Benedict points, as did Pope John Paul, to the importance of the Concluding Rite. The words, "The Mass is ended, go in peace" are addressed to us as a people ready to be sent out on a mission. The words "succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church"³⁶. We are sent to share the truth and joy of what we have celebrated.

Thus the Eucharist is a mystery to be lived. We believe that we are part of the mystery which is transforming the universe. With the whole of ourselves we celebrate a truth that we are sent to share. Understanding this truth is the key to understanding the challenge that we face in an Ireland which needs to choose its way forward.

Eternal life, for which we hope, has already begun in us through Baptism and the Eucharist. That is why, "... the mystery 'believed' and 'celebrated' contains an innate power making it the principle of new life within us and the form of our Christian existence"³⁷. To say that the new life within us is the form of our Christian existence means that it gives meaning and direction and shape to our whole lives.

The hope of eternal life is not just for the future; it is transforming our world now:

God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us... His love is at the same time our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is "truly" life³⁸.

The new life within us is the presence and action of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and enabling us to cry out, 'Abba, Father' (Gal 4:6). It is what St Augustine called 'our mystery'.

The Synod of Bishops of 2005 paid particular attention to the words of Saint Paul which describe how the Eucharist is meant to give our lives their meaning, direction and shape: "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1).



SPIRITUAL WORSHIP

These reflections may seem far removed from our daily lives with their challenges and joys, worries and tensions, far from the challenge of meeting the unending needs of our communities, the work of parish Pastoral Councils, the development of clusters, the task of school Boards of Management and the effort to 'seek new ways' to communicate the Gospel in the 'new continent'³⁹ of a rapidly changing society. That apparent gap is, under another guise, the dramatic split between faith and culture which Pope Paul said we must make every effort to overcome⁴⁰.

³⁵ LG, 31.

³⁶ SC, 51, cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dies Domini*, 45.

³⁷ SC, 70.

³⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, [SS] 31.

³⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Knock, 30 September 1979.

⁴⁰ Cf. EN, 20.

When we talk about the Eucharist, we are not in some theoretical sphere detached from ordinary life. We do not just present to God our best moments, or our prayers, or our failures or any other particular 'bits' of our lives. Our spiritual worship is to present our bodies, that is, our whole selves. In this phrase, St. Paul emphasises "the concrete human reality of a worship which is anything but disincarnate"⁴¹. We are to offer our whole lives, all the areas in which we are involved, and the world in which we live.

We do not properly understand our lives or any part of our lives until we know the mystery that is within them:

"Only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is"⁴².

So how can we see God in our own lives, the life of our parish and diocese, the world in which we live? What does it mean to say that the mystery believed and celebrated in the Eucharist gives our lives their meaning, direction and shape?

When Pope John wrote about the importance of having a contemplative outlook, this was not about closing oneself off from the world. On the contrary, it is about seeing things as they truly are, rather than filtered through our self-interest, our possessiveness, our narrow perspectives. It is a "disinterested, unselfish, aesthetic attitude that is born of wonder" which allows us to see in visible things the message of the invisible God who created them"⁴³. It enables us to "see life in its deeper meaning...grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility... and to see) in every person (the creator's) living image"⁴⁴.

In every person, in every sphere of life, the loving God is present to be recognised and celebrated. The contemplative approach has been described in various ways: "a long, loving look at the real" (Walter Burghardt); "awareness, absorbed and amazed" (St Teresa of Avila), "finding God in all things" (St Ignatius).

The Word of God, through whom all things were made, became part of creation, now Jesus the eternal Son is lifted up from the earth on the Cross and in the Resurrection; he is drawing all of creation to himself and into his relationship with his Father. That is the meaning of Calvary.

Jesus presented his body as a living sacrifice to his Father. Our mystery is that we are his body, which he offered without reserve to God. We are part of that offering. That is not just something we do at Mass, it is the meaning, direction and shape of our whole lives. In the Mass the whole Christ is offered to God, Head and Body.

Christ draws us and the whole of creation to himself and presents it to his Father: "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (I Cor 15:24).

We ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit on the offerings of bread and wine, 'that they may become the body and blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ'⁴⁵. In our Baptism and Confirmation, our participation in the Eucharist we are filled with the Spirit of Christ so that we may share in Christ's offering of himself and in his cry, 'Abba, Father' (Gal 4:6).

This is nothing less than "the reformulation of the very meaning of our lives"⁴⁶. The meaning, direction and shape of our lives as followers of Christ is to make our whole selves -- our

⁴¹ SC, 70.

⁴² BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of his Pontificate, 24 April 2005.

⁴³ JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, 37.

⁴⁴ EV, 83

⁴⁵ Eucharistic Prayer III.

⁴⁶ PHILIBERT, P., *The Priesthood of the Faithful*, Liturgical Press 2005, p. 161.

activities, our relationships, our interaction with our community and with the world – part of that offering of all creation by Christ to his Father – a living sacrifice, spiritual worship.



A PRIESTLY PEOPLE

Jesus suffered and died on Calvary. He has been raised from the dead and will never die again (Rom 6:9). His death is the source of salvation for all humanity. And yet St. Paul says, “in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24). Christ's offering on Calvary was complete and perfect, but his body, the Church, is to follow in his path, bringing our sufferings, our gifts and our lives to be transformed and presented by him to his Father⁴⁷. The whole people of God shares in Christ's priesthood, offering themselves through, with and in him:

“The whole Church is a priestly people. Through Baptism all the faithful share in the priesthood of Christ. This participation is called the “common priesthood of the faithful”⁴⁸.

That common priesthood, the whole life of the Christian, has its summit and source in the Eucharist where the ordained priest gathers the community and leads it in the name of Christ the Head of the Body, saying with the power coming to him from Christ, the words “This is my Body”.

“Based on this common priesthood and ordered to its service, there exists another participation in the mission of Christ: the ministry conferred by the sacrament of Holy Orders, where the task is to serve in the name and in the person of Christ the Head in the midst of the community”⁴⁹.

The phrase ‘common priesthood’ may be unfamiliar, but the older ones among us grew up with the idea, if not the term. As often happens, ideas that may strike us as new are in fact old ideas that those who went before us may have appreciated better than we do. *The Morning Offering* is a prayer which is not used as often today as in the past. It unmistakably expresses this understanding of the purpose of Christian existence as an offering of ourselves and our lives to God:

O my God! I offer you all the thoughts, words and actions of this day
for your greater honour and glory,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In saying those words, I pray that the meaning, direction and shape of my whole life will be to offer everything I think and say and do through Jesus Christ to the Father. It is about making Christ's sacrifice, which is present in the Eucharist, ‘the form of our Christian existence’; it is about living out ‘the principle of new life within us’.

Pope Benedict refers to another “form of devotion – perhaps less practised today” by which minor daily hardships were ‘offered up’ to God. In this way “these little annoyances could be inserted into Christ's great com-*passion* so that the somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race”⁵⁰. This too is a practice which understood better than many of us do today, the meaning of the common priesthood of all the baptised. We are offerers of our world to God. Although in its own way all creation gives praise to its creator (e.g. Ps 148), we do not know whether in the unimaginably vast universe there are any other beings like us who can freely, consciously and lovingly praise the Creator of All.

In our flesh, in our praying and acting, in our speaking and listening, we “complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions”. He is lifted up from the earth in his perfect and complete sacrifice; now he is drawing all creation to himself. We are drawn into his offering to the

⁴⁷ Cf. I Cor 15:24, GS 39.

⁴⁸ CCC, 1591.

⁴⁹ CCC, 1591.

⁵⁰ SS, 40. ‘Compassion’ literally means ‘suffering with’.

Father. The all powerful love which transforms creation invites us to follow Christ in our flesh, that is, with the whole of our lives.

The First Epistle of St Peter tells what it means to be a follower of Christ: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”(1 Pet 2:9)⁵¹. Every celebration of the Eucharist has two aspects, which should never be separated. There is the proclamation and hearing of the Word of God: *we declare his wonderful deeds*, and there is the making present among us of Christ’s death and resurrection, “the hour of the redemption of the world”: *we are called into his marvellous light*⁵².

The priest, acting in the person of Christ the Head⁵³, leads our hearing and proclaiming of the Word, and our participation in the offering of Christ to the Father – “Father, accept this offering from your whole family”⁵⁴. Gathered up in that offering – ‘completing Christ’s afflictions’ – are our lives, which are offered to God not just in that moment, but all the time. In the prayer of consecration the priest repeats the words of Jesus, “This is my body”; he is also saying, “This, therefore, is ‘our mystery’”.



LIVING OUR MYSTERY

Here is the fundamental meaning of our lives. But we all know the regret and the hope expressed by T. S. Eliot:

“We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning”⁵⁵.

Pope John Paul constantly reminded us that without attending to the meaning, our lives and our attempts to renew the life of our Christian community will be empty:

“Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, ‘masks’ of communion rather than its means of expression and growth”⁵⁶.

If we get lost in the experience and miss the meaning, the structures of our communion will be mechanisms and masks without a soul. In a world of constant activity, movement, noise and restlessness, it is a particular challenge to be rooted in prayer and contemplation. It is particularly important to avoid the tendency to be always ‘doing’: “We must resist this temptation by trying ‘to be’ before trying ‘to do’”⁵⁷.

There is no shortcut to the renewal of ourselves and our communities and to living our faith as a fruitful sign and instrument of Christ. All pastoral initiatives must be based on holiness⁵⁸.

Our mystery has to be lived in many different contexts.

a) *Families.*

⁵¹ This passage was part of the First Reading at the Mass at which Pope John Paul preached in Limerick.

⁵² Cf. EE, 4, SC, 44.

⁵³ Cf. SC, 23.

⁵⁴ Eucharistic Prayer, I.

⁵⁵ ELIOT, T.S., *The Four Quartets, The Dry Salvages.*

⁵⁶ NMI, 43, cf. VS, 83,

⁵⁷ NMI, 5.

⁵⁸ Cf. NMI, 30.

In hearing and proclaiming the Gospel, the family plays a primary part. "Parents are to be the first preachers of the faith to their children by word and example"⁵⁹. The most important way in which they do that is not by what they say but by what they are.

The heart of the Christian life is "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us"⁶⁰. The first step in coming to understand this truth is the experience of being loved. That is what good parents give to their children. When children have not experienced love, or if they have experienced neglect, cruelty or abuse, the effort to rebuild their lives can be agonising and life long. The experience of being loved is what awakens our ability to love. In that too, parents are images of God's love: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us" (I Jn 4:10).

For most of us, our parents give us or lead us into the first experience we have of realities which are basic to understanding the mystery of God: love, fidelity, forgiveness, encouragement, dependability, belonging, sharing and hoping. To say that the family is 'the domestic church'⁶¹, the church in the home, means that it is there for the vast majority of us that the mystery is first believed, celebrated and lived. The lives of Christian families are among the most important elements of the spiritual worship which the family members and the whole community present to God when they gather to celebrate the Eucharist.

There are two sides to any renewal of our living of the mystery. One is to look for new ways, new opportunities new obstacles to be overcome, new perspectives. The other is equally important, *to recognise and appreciate the mystery already present and active in our lives*. If we are not to miss the meaning, we need to recognise full significance of many things that we are already doing and that we may be in danger of taking for granted. Family life, in which husband and wife try to love one another for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health until death parts them is a living of the mystery of God's faithful love⁶². The love of parents is meant "to become for the children the visible sign of the very love of God"⁶³.

The family plays a central part in the spiritual worship which gives the Christian life its meaning, direction and shape:

The family is part of this priestly people which is the Church... it is continuously vivified by the Lord Jesus and called and engaged by him in a dialogue with God through the sacraments, through the offering of one's life and through prayer. This is the *priestly* role which the Christian family can and ought to exercise in intimate communion with the whole Church through the daily realities of married and family life⁶⁴.

That spiritual worship, gathered up in the Eucharist, necessarily leads to a sending out to share the mystery with family members, with the whole community, with the world. That offering is the expression of the mystery of God's plan; it is the meaning of life. It is the truth for which the human heart hungers, often without realising it. Bringing that truth to the world is what we are sent to do. Families do this first of all by their love for one another and their appreciation of the Christian meaning of marriage and the family. But that also has to spill over into the rest of life:

"Among the various works of the family apostolate the following may be listed: adopting abandoned children, showing a loving welcome to strangers, helping with the running of schools, supporting adolescents with advice and help, assisting engaged couples to make a better preparation for marriage, taking part in handing on the faith, supporting married people and families in a material or moral crisis, and, in the case of the aged,

⁵⁹ LG 11, cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2008*, esp. par 6.

⁶⁰ I Jn 4:16, DCE, 1.

⁶¹ LG, 11.

⁶² Cf. Eph 5:25-33.

⁶³ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, [FC] 14.

⁶⁴ FC, 55.

providing them with what is indispensable and procuring for them a fair share of the fruits of economic progress”⁶⁵

Needless to say, these examples, formulated forty years ago for the whole Church, need to be thought through in our situation in Limerick today. In particular, the mystery has to be lived by individuals, families, parishes, and at every level, so that we “become ‘bread that is broken for others, and... work for the building of a more just and fraternal world”, and are determined “to transform unjust structures and restore respect for the dignity of all men and women, created in God’s image and likeness”⁶⁶.

Some practical questions:

- What do families need in order to appreciate better the importance of the role that they are already playing in the Christian and human community?
- What do they need to be able to carry out that role more fully and with greater confidence?
- How could the Christian community support families struggling in many different ways and for many different reasons?
- When we look at our community, our city, our diocese, where are families labouring under great difficulties, and what can we do with and for them?
- Can families support one another better?
- Do families feel isolated in their efforts to be what they would wish to be?
- What help do parents in our community need in being “the first preachers of the faith for their children”⁶⁷?
- How can the community give effect to the welcome and encouragement they expressed to young people at Baptism (“The Christian community welcomes you with great joy”) and at Confirmation?
- How can family life be more clearly seen as a vital part of the ‘spiritual worship’ we offer in the Sunday Eucharist?
- How can our families express their faith in the life of the home? Is it ever discussed? Is the ‘source and summit’ of our Christian lives, the Sunday Eucharist ever reflected on? Is there prayer in the home? What place does the Bible have in the family? Are there religious symbols or images? Are there religious books, magazines, DVDs etc? Are there religious websites among the ‘Favourites’ on the computer?
- Do we see ourselves, individuals and as families, as sent to bring the Good News to our lives, the lives of others and of society? How can we reflect as families and as communities on how to do that in our own situation?
- Do we understand that every human being without exception is a brother or sister in the family of our Father and that in the name of the least of them Christ will judge us on our response to them? How do we as a family respond to injustice and need at home and abroad?

b) **Parishes.**

⁶⁵ VATICAN II, *Apostolicam Actualitatem*, [AA], 11.

⁶⁶ SC, 88, 89.

⁶⁷ LG, 11.

The part played by the family in hearing and proclaiming the Gospel is fundamental. But it is in the parish that the family learns to appreciate and to live its Christian role:

“[The parish] must rediscover its vocation 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 the 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 world”⁶⁸.

The life of the Christian is never isolated from the wider community of the parish, the diocese and the universal Church; it is always part of the Body of Christ⁶⁹. In the Sunday liturgy we do not simply offer our own individual and separate lives with Christ to the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. We offer the whole life of our community, of the Church, and of the world. We transpose the ‘Morning Offering’ into an all-inclusive prayer: “God, our Father we offer you all the thoughts, words and actions *of our lives and of all creation* for your greater honour and glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The pity is that we often miss the meaning; we fail to grasp the dimensions of what we are doing in the Eucharistic sacrifice:

“... the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated *on the altar of the world*. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation... He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed”⁷⁰.

In particular, the parish community offers its whole self, all of the thoughts, words and actions of all of its members. Some of those actions were sinful; all were imperfect. They are offered to the infinitely merciful God to be transformed, as the cruelty and injustice of Calvary were, by the endlessly forgiving love of God made visible in Christ crucified and risen. That is why the Mass begins with an acknowledgement of our sinfulness; that is why the priest prays before Communion “By your holy body and blood free me from all my sins and from every evil”; that is why together we ask the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world to have mercy on us.

At the Eucharist we pray for family and friends and for many intentions, but we are not as aware as we should be that this offering is one we make together with the whole congregation and the whole community. At the end of the Prayers of the Faithful we often pray ‘for our own personal intentions’. It would be good sometimes to pray ‘for one another’s intentions’.

Parish life is changing in various ways. It is clear that, for the foreseeable future, we are unlikely to have the number of priests to which we are accustomed. It seems that a growing number of smaller parishes will find themselves with no resident priest. In urban areas, parish boundaries do not mean as much to people as they did, and areas that were once villages are becoming city areas. All of these changes pose challenges for the parish in living up to its vocation to be a place where people ‘become aware of forming the People of God’.

It is necessary for parishes to reflect on how they see themselves. The priest has a vital role in leading the parish in the Eucharist, gathering up the whole of its life into the offering of Christ, in preaching the word, in inspiring and guiding. But to think of the priest as the one on whom every aspect of the entire life of the parish depends would be a distortion for a number of reasons.

There is a rich variety in the life of the parish: in family life with its joys and struggles and anxieties and joys and sorrows, in the prayer and thanksgiving of individuals and families, in the personal commitment of parishioners, in the care and support that neighbours offer each

⁶⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, [CT] 67.

⁶⁹ Cf. MURRAY, D., *Never Alone*, Lent 2007.

⁷⁰ EE, 8.

other and in generous work for many charities and causes and associations. The first distortion would be to fail to appreciate the richness of what is offered at the 'summit' of the life of the parish when the priest presides over the Eucharist in the person of Christ, the Head of the Body.

It would be a distortion also because, even beyond the personal lives of individuals and families, there are larger issues that face parish communities if they are to participate in the offering of creation to the Father. And they need to face these issues not just as individuals but as a community. The Church tells us that lay people should "develop the habit of ... bringing before the ecclesial community their own problems, world problems, and questions regarding humanity's salvation, to examine them together and to solve them by general discussion. According to their abilities the laity ought to cooperate in all the apostolic and missionary enterprises of their ecclesial family"⁷¹.

It would be a distortion, finally, not just because it would place on the priest a burden which would be too heavy, but because it would 'miss the meaning' of the experience of people's baptismal commitment. Our world has become complex in a way that was never so overwhelming before. Nobody is an expert in everything; nobody can be an insider in everything. If the light of the Gospel is to shine in many areas of modern life, that has to be done by those who are experts and insiders. Church teaching can often give clear principles, to apply them, however, one must know the details of the issue and the complexities involved.

Pope John Paul spoke forcefully about the role of the laity during his visit to Limerick:

It is their specific vocation and mission to express the Gospel in their lives and thereby to insert the Gospel as a leaven into the reality of the world in which they live and work. 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.

This too is part of the mission of the parish. In many instances nowadays people work outside their parish. This may add to the perception that what one does at work has little connection with what happens at Sunday Mass. On the contrary, the vocation and mission of the lay Christian is to see the whole of his or her life as part of God's presence and action in the world: "There is nothing authentically human — our thoughts and affections, our words and deeds — that does not find in the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full"⁷².

Church documents refer to 'the secular character' of the life of lay Christians. This should not be understood as saying that their life is somehow divorced from the religious dimension. What is being said here is the very opposite of *secularism*. The context in which lay people live their Christian lives is "not simply an external and environmental framework, but... a reality *destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning*"⁷³. For the Christian, the term 'secular' points to the world (*saeculum*) which has been created and redeemed by God and in which God's plan is at work.

Some practical questions:

- How could the life of our parish help us to become more clearly aware that we are God's people and that we have a mission that extends to the whole world?

⁷¹ AA, 10.

⁷² BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, [SC] 71.

⁷³ JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles Laici*, [CL], 15.

- Is our parish one in which strangers feel welcomed, in which all are treated as brothers and sisters in Christ, in which we feel the sufferings of others as if they were our own?
- How can we learn as a parish to consider “(our) own problems, world problems, and questions regarding humanity’s salvation, to examine them together and to solve them by general discussion”?
- Our parish contains people with different experiences, areas of work, backgrounds, interests and skills. How can we see all of this as an opportunity to transform our parish and the world from within by Christ’s redeeming power?
- How can we celebrate that variety of gifts and efforts in our liturgies?
- What role can the Parish Pastoral Council play in heightening awareness and reflection?
- How might the parish create awareness and appreciation of how its members, in families, neighbourhoods, associations, groups and as individuals are already living out the implications of the new life within them?
- In a world where many people are looking for meaning, where people live with the fear that life has no meaning, how can our parish be a place where the fullness of meaning and the light of hope can shine for us and for others?
- How can we reflect together so as to recognise, celebrate and live the implications of the mystery of God’s presence and action in our work and in our whole life?
- How might our parish liturgies reflect more clearly the variety of gifts and experiences, joys and sorrows that we offer? How might they reflect our mission to the whole parish, diocese, church and world?

c) **Clusters and the Diocese.**

The challenge of living the new life within us, and making it our spiritual worship and the form of our lives, is endless. No isolated individual could have the experience, the expertise, the talents, or the time to respond to the limitless dimensions of the task. But Jesus established a *community* to be his Body, and to be the sign and instrument of his presence.

Even the parish community will often find that its resources are simply inadequate to meet many of the issues that are seen to be pressing. But “those who believe are never alone”⁷⁴. That is true for the parish just as it is for the individual. It is true that God will transform our inadequate efforts, the five loaves and two fish that we bring, in order to accomplish his plan beyond all our expectations. But we have to bring not just our own personal efforts but the efforts of our parish community and the efforts of all those with whom we can cooperate as a parish community or as part of other associations or clusters or ecclesial movements. We cannot approach the Lord, saying “We have only five loaves here and two fish” (Mt 14:17), if there are resources in the parish next door that we have not looked for.

A parish which did not look outside itself to see how it could help others to believe and celebrate and live the new life within us, and which did not look outside itself to find the talents and skills it requires to meet its needs, would be seriously dysfunctional. There can be no such thing as a self-sufficient Christian community and there can be no such thing as a Christian community that does not experience the call to a mission that extends beyond its borders.

⁷⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of his Pontificate; Theme of his visit to Bavaria 2006; cf. Lenten Pastoral, *Never Alone*, 2007.

The development of the cluster has been given a sense of urgency by the realisation that the number of priests in parishes, at least for the foreseeable future, will continue to fall. This has also made it urgent to pray for vocations to the priesthood and to create an atmosphere in which vocations are encouraged. But even without the decline in the number of vocations, and even if, please God, the numbers begin to rise, this kind of cooperation between parishes would remain a necessity.

The mystery that we live is that we are the Body of Christ. It would, therefore, be a great anomaly if we were to regard neighbouring parts of the Body as separate or foreign: "The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you" (I Cor 12:21).

The mystery believed, celebrated and lived in the Eucharist is universal – that is, catholic – by its nature: "In the celebration of the Eucharist, the individual members of the faithful find themselves in *their* Church, that is, in the Church of Christ"⁷⁵.

The diocese is a family in which we believe, celebrate and live our faith together. It is the responsibility of the Bishop to help the diocese to "grow, through the Gospel and the Eucharist, into one community in the Holy Spirit"⁷⁶. It is also the responsibility of everyone to try to become more aware of the parish, cluster and diocese as their Church, the Church of Christ.

There were many reasons in the past which led parishes to see one another almost as free standing units, needing neither to give to nor receive from the parish next door. Today we need the richness and variety of a sharing with other parishes, if we are to be signs and instruments of Christ to a world which thirsts for Christ but which often drowns his voice.

To speak effectively to this world swamped with information, activity and pressures, we need the voice of a counter-culture, a community which lives by deeper truths. Just as an individual needs to be part of a community in order to make any effective response to the complex issues we face, so a cluster may provide the context in which to face a project which an individual parish could never undertake alone.

Among those issues are the suffering that exists not only in Ireland but even more dramatically in parts of the world where hunger and disease and poverty and violence cause unimaginable suffering to our brothers and sisters. This too is an area where we need to respond as communities. But we must do so with an understanding of the nature of the Christian response:

"My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift"⁷⁷

That is the meaning of our participation in the Eucharist which must have practical consequences and which makes many demands: "welcoming, exchanging, sharing, going beyond barriers, being concerned for the conversion of people, the renunciation of prejudices, the transforming of our social milieu in structures and in spirit"⁷⁸. That is what we are called to be and to do as a people:

"We all eat the one bread, and this means that we ourselves become one... God no longer simply stands before us as the One who is totally Other. He is within us, and we

⁷⁵ SC, 15.

⁷⁶ CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 158.

⁷⁷ DCE, 34.

⁷⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Message to Eucharistic Congress Participants, Lourdes 1981.

are in him. His dynamic enters into us and then seeks to spread outwards to others until it fills the world, so that his love can truly become the dominant measure of the world"⁷⁹.

We need to see ourselves as one for another reason. Parishes which are seeking to live the new life within them need to feel that they are supported by others engaged in the same task; they need to understand that they are not struggling alone; they need to learn from the fruits borne in the life of other parishes as well as by the mistakes made. When that kind of sharing happens, it is remarkable how a parish struggling with a particular challenge can draw great strength from one which has been working effectively with the same issue. It is also surprising how often the people of the 'struggling parish' may find to their astonishment that the parish which helped them has in turn been inspired by their efforts.

Some practical questions:

- What priorities can we draw up for issues that we could tackle at a cluster level?
- What kind of communications process is needed to ensure that the people of the cluster are aware of such projects and feel welcome to join them?
- Some parishes seem more ready and willing than others to play their part in the cluster. How could we invite/encourage/persuade parishes to become more involved?
- The wholeheartedness of individuals, parishes and clusters can vary from time to time. What can we put in place in our cluster to foster a sense of constant renewal?
- What initiatives could we undertake to allow people to see the cluster as a resource for pastoral initiatives and for pastoral planning rather than a burden?
- Like the parish or the individual, the cluster is never alone. Are there areas where we should be speaking and working with neighbouring clusters or parishes?
- How can the cluster build up a sense of being part of our diocese which is meant to be 'one community in the Holy Spirit'?
- Among the major issues which we need to face in our day are the hunger and suffering of so many people, the dangers posed by the "ecological crisis"⁸⁰ and by "the culture of death" in all its dimensions⁸¹. Are there practical steps that our cluster could take in these areas?
- What contribution can clusters make to the process of regeneration in Limerick - prayer, help for parishes that are engaging with the process, impressing on Government, local authorities etc. that this process must be fully resourced?



SEEING THE DAWN

⁷⁹ Marienfeld.

⁸⁰ NMI, 51, cf. SC 92.

⁸¹ EV, 19-28, 95-100, et passim.

The Holy Spirit within us is “the pledge of our inheritance” (Eph 1:14). This is not just a promise for the future but the first instalment of a gift we have already begun to receive. “Here on earth the kingdom is mysteriously present; when the Lord comes it will enter into its perfection”⁸².

We offer our lives and the life of the world to the Father in union with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In doing so we entrust ourselves and our world to the merciful, transforming love of God for us, which is the heart of Christian faith. This is the source of the only hope which can look death, suffering, betrayal, cruelty and every form of evil in the face. No human effort, however wise, noble, courageous or generous, can conquer these threats to individuals and to the whole human family.

What we celebrate in the Eucharist is the moment in which the unlimited loving embrace of the Incarnate Son by his Father, released the Holy Spirit to renew the face of the earth. That is what Jesus told his apostles at the Last Supper: “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (Jn 16:7).

The new creation is mysteriously present; it is the new life within us. One could apply to the Christian what Oscar Wilde said about the dreamer. The Christian is not a dreamer but a person with a vision of faith who “sees the dawn before the rest of the world”⁸³.

Seeing the dawn before the others is a huge responsibility. We are the Body of Christ, a sign and instrument of God’s presence and action. That means that if we fail to live as Christ’s Body, we may hide from others “the hope that alone can give full meaning to life”⁸⁴.

The vision of faith does not give us a clear picture of the transformation that awaits us. It does not offer us details, but rather the assurance that “life will not end in emptiness”⁸⁵. It does not open up the ultimately unwelcome prospect of this life at its best going on for ever and ever. It offers transformation, where all that is good in our lives is freed from imperfection and impermanence; where ‘all is made new’ (Rev 21:5)⁸⁶. Our imagination, as St Paul told us, cannot grasp this new creation: “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2:9):

“...eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality... We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy”⁸⁷

Wilde described this vision of the dawn as both a punishment and a reward. In fact it is neither; it a free, unmerited, gift of God. It is the greatest of all gifts. We offer our lives and our world to the Father in Christ in order that the gift of God’s love may transform them into the glorious body of Christ, “the first born of all creation” (Col 1:15):

“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 aspirations”⁸⁸.

In a world which thirsts for hope and meaning, faith gives us “the most valuable gift” which we have to share with the world. That is what shows us the meaning, direction and shape of our lives which is, “to enter into Christ with all (our) own self, (we) must ‘appropriate’ Christ and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find

⁸² GS, 39.

⁸³ WILDE, O., *The Critic as Artist* (1891).

⁸⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Europa*, 22.

⁸⁵ SS, 2.

⁸⁶ Cf. GS, 39

⁸⁷ SS, 12.

⁸⁸ GS, 45.

ourselves”⁸⁹. The new springtime, the new Pentecost is coming; it has already begun. Jesus, the first fruits of the new creation is with us, as he promised:

“In the humble signs of bread and wine, changed into his body and blood, Christ walks beside us as our strength and our food for the journey, and he enables us to become, for everyone, witnesses of hope. If, in the presence of this mystery, reason experiences its limits, the heart, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, clearly sees the response that is demanded, and bows low in adoration and unbounded love”⁹⁰.

+Donal Murray
Bishop of Limerick
Lent 2008

⁸⁹ CT, 61.
⁹⁰ EE, 62.