

Mount St. Anne's Killenard, 22 March 2011

Why do I remain a Catholic?

Japan, Christchurch, Haiti, – earthquake, tsunami, nuclear disaster.

Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, - political unrest, violence.

Ireland – economic and spiritual meltdown.

It is hard to make sense of it all. Where is God in all of this? Where is the loving God who cares for each one of us? Not easy questions to answer. It is a time when it is hard to believe – a testing time for faith.

And where is our Church in all of this?

Do you sometimes feel like I do that our Church seems to live in another world far removed from these everyday realities on a global level as well as the realities of our own personal daily lives – the messiness of life and love that is challenged on a daily basis as we struggle to pay bills, raise children, mind our jobs, lose a job, win a match (or lose it), sickness and death, friendship, loneliness, isolation, poverty. Life presents us with a strange mix and we cannot run from it and we cannot help but feel at times that our Church is out of touch with these realities.

This series of Lenten talks is entitled “Why do I remain a Catholic?” It is indeed a timely question. Large numbers of people have decided in recent years not to remain a catholic anymore. Some have taken the official route and asked that their departure be formally noted in the register of Baptisms. Others have simply walked away. Others remain but remain on the periphery and come to Church for events such as Christmas and Easter, baptisms, weddings and funerals. And many who

have chosen to remain and are active participators in the life of the Church are far from happy about their Church and how it continues to function in today's world.

And why do you and I remain? I suppose that each one of us can only answer that question for ourselves. Timothy Radcliffe a well-known Dominican priest has written a wonderful book entitled "**What is the Point of Being A Christian?**" and he gives a very short answer "Because it is true". He goes on to talk about many different aspects of Church and Church teaching. He writes of its beauty and its flaws, its strengths and weaknesses. He concludes that for him life would make no sense without the Lord.

Coming as I am towards the end of my own life and of more than 50 years of priesthood I feel that I am heading in the same direction as Radcliffe. The Church has been my home since birth. It has been a secure home where I have experienced friendship, love, support and it has given direction and hope to my life. It has been at times an unhappy and even a cold uncaring home which left me in despair. But it is my home and despite all of its flaws I still believe it is the best home for someone who is equally flawed like me.

So what are the implications of deciding to remain a Catholic? I would try to answer that question in two parts:

1. I want to offer some sort of vision of the Church to which I want to belong (in other words how the church need to develop).
2. I would like to comment on what I see as signs of hope in our Church today

Part 1: Vision of Church

A Christ Centred Church

Our Church exists to continue the mission of Christ. It has no other purpose. Its work must be inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. This Jesus was not just a good man, but the Son of God through whose life, death and resurrection our friendship with God was restored. This belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ is at the heart of our faith. All we say and all that we do in the name of the Church must be measured against the life and teaching of Christ. A Christ centred Church will give greater importance to the Sacred Scripture. The renewed emphasis on the scriptures should draw our attention more strongly to the fundamental Gospel values of justice and truth, compassion and forgiveness and love.

Christ was never obsessed by laws, rules or regulations – in fact he was harsh on those who laid heavy burdens on others while refusing to accept the same burdens themselves.

A People's Church

I am uncomfortable when a priest speaks of “my parish” or a bishop speaks of “my diocese”. Killaloe is not “my diocese”, it is “our diocese”. The Church is “our Church”, The diocese is “our diocese”, the parish is “our parish”. The baptised people of God constitute the local living Church. Baptism is the primary sacrament which gives all of us a share in the priesthood of Christ. Baptism involves a shared dignity, equality and responsibility among all of us.

When we speak of collaboration between priests and people we are not talking of laity “helping the priest” or “helping the parish”, We –all

the baptised- are the parish; we are the Church. We all have responsibility for our Church. This is the foundation for participative style of leadership which ought to characterise our Church. This participation in leadership is exercised in pastoral councils, in liturgy committees, in the different ministries which have developed over the past 30 years.

A Loving Church

If our Church is to be a Christ centred Church, then it must also be a loving Church. “By this shall all people know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”

As imperfect human beings, love does not always come easy. Yes, it is easy to love those who love me. But to love those with whom I may be in conflict, to love those who appear unloveable, is a constant challenge. It seems to me that Christ’s commandment of love at the very least demands that I respect the dignity of every person no matter what differences may arise between us.

At a very basic level our Church often presents as less than loving to those whose lives are in some way in conflict with official teaching. I have in mind people in second/irregular unions, people of homosexual orientation, people who feel alienated by teaching on family planning.

I have a sense of this characteristic of our Church as a loving one as presenting enormous challenge to our leadership. I don’t sense any great difficulty in respecting the dignity of each person at least on a theoretical level. But can I give a sense of a loving Church if I exclude some people because they don’t measure up to certain ideals which we regard as sacred?

A Church of Saints and Sinners

It is well to remind ourselves that it is Baptism and not holiness that gives each of us this special dignity of being a member of the Church – “the body of Christ”. Our Church is not a Church of saints alone. It is and always will be a Church of saints and sinners – and which of us is not part saint and part sinner. And the saint of today will be the sinner of tomorrow and vice versa.

While our Church is the baptised people of God open to saints and sinners alike, it must also be open to the wider world, respecting people of other faiths and of none. It must respect too those who have been baptised but who have chosen “to walk no more with us”.

A Church which Speaks to the Real Lives of People

We are a people committed to following Christ. We are a pilgrim people journeying towards God. In that way we are always touching the mysterious, grasping at the unknown, dealing with the “unreal”. And yet we journey in the real world and what we say and do must touch into the real lives of people. We preach and strive for ideals but we must recognise the struggles in which all of us are involved on a daily basis.

A Church and Church leadership is unreal to people if it fails to recognise the ups and downs in most marriage relationships, the tensions between parents and teenage children, the enormous pain involved in caring for the child with special needs, the often sadness of old age, the aloneness of the single life, the insecurity of so many of our young people.

A Church that speaks to the real lives of people will not only recognise the struggles it will also joyously celebrate the achievements of people – the unspeakable joy of parents in the new life of their child, the quiet joyous satisfaction of grandparents, the wonder of new love and the joy of old love renewed.

So while we may speak of the struggles and pain of life our message must be one of hope. Someone said to me about a very good priest in our own diocese – “He is a very good man but he even makes the resurrection sad”. The Gospel is Good News! It is a message of Hope. Church people should be messengers of hope.

Part 2 Signs of Hope

My Own Existence

The very first sign of hope is in the awareness of my own existence – the wonder, the miracle that is me. I am alive, I am special, I can love, I can be loved. Such is Hope: without life and love there is no hope.

God’s Love for me

I see hope in the conviction – and I am not saying there are no doubts – that our God is a loving God, who loves me as I am. His love for me does not depend on my being good. I do not have to earn God’s Love.

Our God is a forgiving God. Yet I fail regularly to live up to the ideals but once I turn back to Him I am forgiven.

Our God is a gentle, compassionate God. I would prefer not to believe in God than to believe in a harsh, judgmental punishing God. When I was appointed bishop I chose as a motto: “Cinealtas Christ” to in some way keep reminding myself of a faith based on the kindness of Christ.

Returning to Christ

I see hope in the increased emphasis on returning to Christ. This is seen in a revival of interest in Scripture e.g. Lectio Divina and an increased emphasis on re-evangelisation and an emphasis on personal spiritual growth.

I see hope in the Peter McVerrys, the Alice Leahys, Nuala O'Loans and the hundreds of less known people who live out their Christian lives in a very authentic manner.

Hope in Truth

I see hope in the growing conviction of the value of truth: "I am the way, the truth and the life."

Truth is truly sacred and many of our difficulties in our Church in recent times stemmed from an avoidance of truth.

The fear or avoidance of truth has been at the heart of the terrible darkness of the abuse scandals. The very act of abuse is carried out in darkness, concealment, deception and denial. And our response as bishops was often one of secrecy, of cloaking the truth.

I see hope in the frank openness of close friends. Truth can at times be painful as it has been in recent years when we as priests and bishops had to face the truth about our failures. Thankfully the laity is no longer reticent in speaking the truth, often in justifiable anger and outrage to us.

Christ is the Way, the truth and the life

The main reason I want to remain a Catholic is that despite all the failures of the Catholic Church and my own personal failures the Church keeps pointing me in the direction of Christ.

The Church is my spiritual home where I find sustenance in this world and direction on the path to my eternal home. My life is in Christ and for Christ who journeys with me and whose love, teaching and goodness uplifts me.

At times Christ carries me, reassures me and gives meaning to my life. Christ gives me courage when darkness falls because Christ is my remaining light when all light is extinguished.

That is my Hope, I live with that Hope and I find it in the Church of Christ here on earth.

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