

**CARE FOR THE LORD'S FLOCK. 2  
IN A WORLD OF INSTITUTIONS  
Irish College Rome  
Friday 18 September 2009**

**God our Father,  
by the promise you made  
in the life, death and resurrection of Christ your Son,  
you bring together in your Spirit, from all the nations,  
a people to be your own.  
Keep the Church faithful to its mission:  
may it be a leaven in the world renewing us in Christ  
and transforming us into your family.  
Through the same Christ our Lord.**

(Opening Prayer of the Votive Mass for the Church B)

**A NEW KIND OF REVOLUTION?**

This is an age of investigative journalism, and financial scandals and political corruption, not to speak of the scandals that have hit the Church. It is, of course, a good thing that dishonesty and injustice are exposed, but one wonders whether there may not be a baby being thrown out with the bathwater.

It is a world in which tribunals and commissions and public inquiries provide us with all sorts of revelations which can usually allow us to fix the blame for things that we were all actually complicit with in some degree.

There are protests and court actions and programmes on the radio devoted unrelentingly to indignation about some cause or other. Most of these protests have more than a little justification, and yet there is a feeling that the quality of our society is not necessarily improved by the atmosphere in which there is constant conflict between groups, and constant hostility against politicians, bankers, social services, clergy and so on. No matter how much transparency we have, it remains a world in which people feel increasingly powerless and 'out of the loop'.

Maybe one source of uneasiness is that there does not seem to be any emerging consensus about the direction our society should take. John Habgood, the former Anglican Archbishop of York, said that there is a fundamental difference between today's protestors and revolutionaries and those of a former time:

What they all had in common... was the belief that such questioning would lead to a more profound apprehension of truth. The modern crisis of authority lies in the weakening, or even loss, of this shared assumption... The present crisis of authority is that authority is perceived to have no basis: in the end everything boils down to a matter of individual opinion and personal choice<sup>1</sup>.

That concern is what underlies the encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* – the loss of the conviction that it is possible for us to seek and to reach the truth. That was the concern that led the then Cardinal Ratzinger, just before the Conclave that elected him, to warn about the 'dictatorship of relativism' In other words he was saying that there is a danger that we begin to think that there is no objective truth, only a range of equally important opinions. The fundamental outlook of the Bible, the Pope says, is "that the world and human life do have a meaning"<sup>2</sup>. We are inheritors of a

<sup>1</sup> HABGOOD, loc. cit.

<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, [FR] 80.

tradition whose Founder said "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:5). The most urgent task in preparing to evangelise is "to lead people to discover both their capacity to know the truth and their yearning for the ultimate and definitive meaning of life"<sup>3</sup>. There is, in other words, a direction and meaning to our lives and would have to ask whether all our conflict and investigation is leading us understand that direction any more clearly – or helping us to follow it.

It was this challenge that Pope Benedict robustly addressed on the day of his solemn inauguration in St Peter's Square:

Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.

In fact, Aquinas pointed out that our final end is related to every appetite or desire as the first mover is to all other movements<sup>4</sup>. In other words, our longings and our freedom are finally intelligible only in terms of the God who made us restless to rest in him. Pope Benedict has repeatedly come back to this crucial point. He recognises that the challenge of our culture lies precisely here: 'do we believe in the human capacity to know the truth?' and 'do we believe that the truth gives meaning to our lives and indeed to the universe?' It is a challenge intimately connected with belief in and awareness of God. Archbishop Habgood put it like this:

In the end it is the weakening of this awareness which lies at the heart of our problems. God used to be perceived as the guarantor of the truth. This is not to claim that human beings can ever finally grasp the truth, or can ever wholly free ourselves from bias and misunderstanding. But to believe in God is to believe that there is a truth to be known, truth which is not simply of our own making. It is to believe that there is a dignity and purpose in human life which goes beyond individual self-fulfilment, which roots us in a meaningful universe, and which holds out for us a larger hope.<sup>5</sup>

The dominant culture of the world today does not accept that any religious or moral truth can be found. If one person thinks one thing and another thinks the exact opposite, then each opinion may be right for the one who holds it. In these areas, everyone has his/her own truth. In any case it is not real truth in the sense that it is the same for everyone. That kind of objective truth, the only truth that is worthwhile, is that which is demonstrated by scientific proofs.

Clearly this brings a particular difficulty when it comes to an institution which has as one of its central tasks to point to a high moral vision and to educate people in living up to that vision. And it creates a particular difficulty for us who are meant to preach a way of life, and an understanding of life and its Creator and Redeemer that cannot be proved in a laboratory. Many people listen to moral or religious teaching; people and to institutions only in a detached and sceptical way. So from both points of view the position of an institution trying to communicate religious and moral truth is difficult. Of course the Church is not primarily an institution but a communion in which we are more fully ourselves than anywhere else in life. But that is often very far from the image we actually communicate. That is the heart of the problem in communicating the Gospel message to the Lord's flock in our day.

Pope John Paul for the whole of his pontificate stressed the destiny and dignity of the human being, and put it at the heart of the Gospel. In his first encyclical he said that when we see ourselves in the light of the incarnation and redemption we not only wonder at God; we have a deep amazement at ourselves:

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<sup>3</sup> FR 102.

<sup>4</sup> cf. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II q 1, a.6

<sup>5</sup> HABGOOD, J., loc. cit.

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. This amazement determines the Church's mission in the world.<sup>6</sup>

In his last encyclical, he again spoke of the "amazement and gratitude"<sup>7</sup> that we experience in the celebration of the Eucharist when we see ourselves in the light of the paschal mystery. He often spoke about becoming what we are called to be, or in other words the call to holiness. Holiness' shouldn't be misunderstood a purely private matter between the individual and God. That, incidentally is often the claim made by those who say they are spiritual but not religious, or who say they believe in Christ but not in the Church – 'it is a private matter between me and God'. The idea that religion is a private thing and that the whole area of a person's life has little or nothing to do with God is the basis for secularism. Secularism basically means that if religion has any place it is a purely private one. Life can be viewed without the amazement that transforms our understanding of life and of ourselves.

Religious groups therefore would have no business talking about issues in society, still less intruding, as they say, into people's bedrooms, What that means, in the end, is that there are large areas of life in which the Creator is regarded as irrelevant and in which our relationship with God makes no difference.

It is true that everything in the Church exists to bring about the holiness of its members and to unite them more closely to Christ. But, of course, being united more closely to Christ, being holy, cannot be understood except as involving a closer union with Christ's body, that is with his brothers and sisters.

The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, begins its chapter on the People of God by pointing 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"<sup>8</sup>.

The trouble is that we are often seen as wishing to impose the rules of an institution – rules that make no sense to many people but which they are expected to obey anyway. These rules are expressions of the wisdom and experience of a community to which every member of the Church belongs as fully as we do. But that does not seem to come across. That Christian wisdom and experience has its roots in the encounter with the Incarnate Son of God and the memory of his life death and resurrection, the revelation of his Father, the power and truth of his Spirit. To see all that as the somewhat quaint, old-fashioned rules of an organisation is completely to miss the point.

#### **WE ARE A COMMUNITY – HIS BODY**

Jean Marie Tillard the great Dominican ecumenical theologian wrote a great deal about the ecclesiology of communion. He speaks of the passage in I Peter 2:4-10 where we are called a chosen race and a royal priesthood – what Tillard calls 'the priestly community of the king', offering spiritual sacrifices to God:

The context indicates that these sacrifices are not primarily liturgical cultic actions but the existential acts of the holy life of this community. Its communion comes fundamentally from the Spirit, and it serves God in the daily actions of its members. Through the 'sanctification of the Spirit' [see 1:2], the sacrifice of Christ [see 1:19; 2:21-25] bears the community's fruits

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<sup>6</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

of the New Covenant. Hence, it is from the people *as such* that the sacrifice which pleases and glorifies God, the sacrifice of holiness, ascends to God<sup>9</sup>.

Immediately after offering the gifts of bread and wine, we recite a prayer which sums up the real meaning of what we are doing: "Lord God, we ask you to receive *us* and be pleased with the sacrifice *we* offer you with humble and contrite hearts". We are the offering, the sacrifice that we make to the Father in union with his Son.

The idea that human beings are saved not as isolated individuals but as a people is central to Christianity. Being saved means becoming branches of Christ the vine, and members of the Body of Christ. The same passage of I Peter begins by calling 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)<sup>10</sup>.

Here we are at the core of the priestly ministry – the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the summit and source of this life of union with Christ and it is, like every sacrament, an action of Christ and of the whole community. In fact, as one author puts it, the words summit and source, applied to the Eucharist, are not metaphors, "they are names for Christ and speak of what he does in his community"<sup>11</sup>.

Pope John Paul was particularly struck by the insight that "the Eucharist builds the Church". It was the subject of his last encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. When the Apostles gathered with him at the Last Supper, they "entered for the first time into sacramental communion with him"<sup>12</sup>. The union with Christ which is the very meaning of the Church is constantly built up in the celebration of the Eucharist; not only do we receive Christ, but he receives us<sup>13</sup>.

You may remember that theological textbooks in dealing with the sacraments used to speak about what they called the *res* and the *res et sacramentum*. The *res* is the grace received, the effect of the sacrament in the recipient. The *res et sacramentum* refers to the continuing effect in the community brought about by the sacrament. These terms apply more clearly to some sacraments than to others. In the case of three sacraments, baptism, confirmation and orders, this continuing reality is known as the sacramental character. In the case of the sacrament of penance it is the reconciliation of the sinner with the ecclesial community and so on.

In the Eucharist, the *res et sacramentum* is the continuing presence of Christ in the sacrament and in the community.

The *res*, is the grace of God, the sharing in the life and love of God. But according to the great theologians like St Thomas Aquinas, the *res* of the Eucharist is not the personal holiness of the individual. It is 'the unity of the mystical body'<sup>14</sup>, the building up of community which is the body of Christ:

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<sup>9</sup> TILLARD, J.-M.-R., *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2001, pp. 22,23.

<sup>10</sup> *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, pp. 23, 24.

<sup>11</sup> O'NEILL, C., O.P., *Sacramental Realism*, Dominican Publications, Dublin 1983, p.82.

<sup>12</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22

<sup>14</sup> AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, III q 73 a2 *sed contra*, q73 a3c, q80 a 4c.

In the Eucharist, it is the real presence of Christ that constitutes the immediate and certain efficacy of the sacrament. It can be accounted for only in terms of the power of the risen Christ, *but its whole purpose lies in the community*, which Christ comes to form as his body, which was present in him on Calvary and which is now to fill up what is lacking from his sufferings so that it may come to be with him in glory<sup>15</sup>.

In the Eucharist we celebrate the mystery which we are, namely the Body of Christ. St Augustine said it in a well known passage:

If, therefore, you are the Body of Christ and his members, your mystery is presented 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. For you hear: 'The Body of Christ!' and you answer: 'Amen!' Be a member of Christ's Body so that your 'Amen' may be the truth<sup>16</sup>.

This is a world which can be very individualistic and can often be uncomfortable with the expression of religious belief. We need to know that we share a faith in the good news, that God's people have lived in every place and time, and that in trying to live by the truth which makes us free, we are not alone.

The isolated Christian was always a contradiction in terms. We can be united to Christ *only* if we are united to his brothers and sisters. We can only live a vibrant life of faith if we do it together – encouraging one another, inspiring one another, challenging one another, helping one another to understand how the Gospel can speak to this new continent in which it has never been lived before. Soon after his election Pope Benedict made a pastoral visit to his home region of Bavaria. The theme chosen for that visit was "*The Believer is never alone*".

We are all travelling together through this new continent of the twenty-first century towards the same goal: We all eat the same spiritual food... and drink from the same spiritual rock who is Christ (cf I Cor 10:1-4). As Pope Benedict said at the beginning of his pontificate: "The Church as a whole..., like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life...towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance"<sup>17</sup>.

We see many deserts in the world and in ourselves, deserts of poverty, loneliness, sorrow, emptiness and fear. If we have really come to believe in the love of God for us, that belief has to change the way we see the world. Responding to God's love doesn't just demand *some* of our time, or a *share* of our attention or *part* of ourselves; it is not something to be *fitted in* among our other priorities. We know well what it demands. The words are so familiar that perhaps we do not really hear them: You shall love the LORD your God with *all* your heart, and with *all* your soul, and with *all* your might (Dt 6:5). The *uncomfortable truth* is that there is no room for self-satisfaction or complacency. Our response to God is never enough. Moses was afraid to look at God. The mountains quake and the nations tremble at the Lord's presence (Is 64:1,2).

There is a vital task for priests in the contemporary world. It is a world where people feel very vulnerable, and are often afraid or unable to express their vulnerability.. More people than we realise, think, and with good reason, that they are living through the decline of a civilisation. Economic collapse, climate change, and the continuing existence of enough weaponry to destroy life, the depletion of the earth's resources and species seem to make 'the end of the world' a more credible prospect than we like to think. Now it is clear that there are several possible ways that it could happen, The truth is that we are utterly dependent on that powerful, ever generous love. That is why the Pharisee in the temple, for all his admirable qualities and efforts, fell so far short of the tax collector he was looking down on.

Our task is not about relying on our own strength and resources but about trusting in the unlimited resources of God's love. That is not a recipe for being soft and ineffectual; it is actually a call to

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<sup>15</sup> *Sacramental Realism*, p.210.(emphasis mine)

<sup>16</sup> ST AUGUSTINE, *Sermon 272*.

<sup>17</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Homily at the Inauguration of his Petrine Ministry.

the kind of courage, clarity and creativity that we could never dare to have if we were relying on ourselves. Paul, in the same context recalls that the Lord urged him on saying: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:8).

That is, perhaps the greatest challenge of all. We are constantly drawn to be self-justifying. We can often find ways of excusing our failures, but when we earn a bit of praise, it is all ours! Did you ever feel that you had done a particularly good job with the homily and wait in humble expectancy for the praise that would surely follow, only to hear nothing? Did you ever carry out a ceremony that you thought went rather badly and during which your mind was entirely elsewhere only to find someone oozing with gratitude and appreciation? But who is the better judge? The effect that our words or actions have on others is one of the great mysteries of priestly life!

But we don't need to rely on our own resources. We have learned that the infinite God cares for his people, his Son's Body, with a burning, limitless love. But the life of every Christian is a journey towards the appreciation of that gift and the sharing of it. And so the people of God are always a repentant people. We cannot ease our consciences by telling ourselves that others are worse than we are. "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:22,23).

#### EUROPE NEEDS HOPE.

But the *comforting truth* is that the infinitely demanding love of God is all powerful, It is what Dante called, 'the love that moves the sun and the other stars'<sup>18</sup> The same love that rescued the Jews from slavery, that sustained the martyrs, that sent missionaries out from this country and this parish, that sustained people in their grief, anxiety and disappointments, gives life and hope to all the community of believers. There is no corner of our lives which is not moved and sustained by the love that moves the stars. That is a truth that we are only learning.

As Church communities all of us need to capture the sense of shared weakness and shared trust in God which is the first step. Then we can build the kind of leadership appropriate to the Church, which is primarily a communion rather than an institution. That means a leadership where, although there are different gifts and roles, and indeed because there are different gifts and roles, the primary reality is "Us", not "Us and Them".

The other side of recognising our own weakness is to trust in God's strength. Otherwise the recognition of our helplessness would lead only to despair. We cannot bring about, or even understand God's plan until, as in the Book of Revelation, the Lamb takes the scroll and opens the seals. Commenting on this passage in his Apostolic Exhortation to the Church in Europe, Pope John Paul points out that only Jesus, the Lamb, is able to open the scroll and to bring about the plan that it reveals. By ourselves, we are "not capable of giving meaning to history and to human affairs: life remains without hope. Only the Son of God is able to dispel the shadows and to show the way"<sup>19</sup>.

There is a strange paradox in Europe and in a great part of the English-speaking world. On the one hand, there is a kind of amnesia about our spiritual heritage. This was absurdly expressed in the proposal that Europe should give itself a constitution that made no mention of the Christian heritage of the Continent! At least we are no longer talking about a constitution. It appears to be much more respectable in some places to be an agnostic than a believer – and this in the name of tolerance and liberalism! This is particularly true in relation to Catholicism, which is increasingly seen as the only credible obstacle to the "liberal" social agenda. Hence the hostility from those who, at the same time, proclaim that "the Church is finished". One possible miscalculation here is a failure to realise that in the "new Europe", the second biggest Christian grouping is not the Protestant churches but the Orthodox.

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<sup>18</sup> DANTE, Divine Comedy, Paradiso, Canto 33:145.

<sup>19</sup> *Ecclesia in Europa*, 44.

The other side of the paradox is that all the predictable symptoms of the loss of a religious sense are evident, but hardly anyone seems to make the connection.

There is, as Pope John Paul pointed out, a loss of the sense of meaning in life, an inner emptiness and a strange sense of loneliness, which we can all see around us even, perhaps especially, in crowded cities. For me it was very poignantly summed up by a young drug abuser, who when he was asked in a radio interview a couple of years ago what he was trying to escape from, replied, "From the fact that I exist". There is also the growth in racism and social tensions, and the tendency to fight one's own corner – all of which are the result of insecurity and fear about the future<sup>20</sup>. This sense is growing for various reasons. You notice that, with regard to climate change for instance, the signs are that predictions about what will happen by mid century remain much the same while the polar ice caps melt more quickly than anyone predicted! And who would have thought a few years ago that the world would be desperately trying to avoid a catastrophic economic collapse?

Now we have the experience of what we hopefully call the recession. I say 'hopefully' because recessions only last a few years. Now we see that a civilisation which seemed impregnable only a few years ago is much more vulnerable than we imagined. I suspect that one of the key images of the twenty first century is already well entrenched in our minds – the collapsing twin towers, which threatened, and perhaps foreshadowed, the ongoing collapse of our way of life that had become complacent. And that is not to speak of the threat of the possibility of new kinds of wars over such resources as water.

Strangely, this world, which has so much need for hope, is increasingly marked by what *Ecclesia in Europa* calls 'silent apostasy'<sup>21</sup>. That phrase reflects a remark made at the Synod by the late Cardinal Pierre Eyt of Bordeaux. The words he used were even more powerful. He spoke, as I recall, of "*une apostasie tranquille*" – a tranquil apostasy, an apostasy, in other words, that is not just silent but entirely at ease with itself.

We need to be clear in our own minds that the kind of leadership that we can exercise in such a world must be focussed on hope. We are, after all, proclaiming the Good News, which alone can make sense of human life. If it is true, and I believe it is, that the world is marked by fear and insecurity, it can only be spoken to effectively by a message of hope.

One reason for that is what Pope John Paul called "a fundamental defect or rather a series of defects... at the root of contemporary economics and materialistic civilisation"<sup>22</sup>. In fact, we might go further and say that what we have is not a civilisation in the proper sense because it has no vision coherent enough to provide a meaning for life: Des Fennell says:

It is not simply that this chaos of rules can be seen on examination not to make sense as a framework for living. It is also *experienced as senselessness* by us white westerners who are required to live by it. For the most part, we experience it as senselessness unreflectively, in that depth of our being where countless human beings before us have trained us by heredity to assess – in a combined act of reason, feeling and intuition – any presentation purporting to be a framework for life. And that encounter with senselessness, when our minds and hearts are seeking sense, sends distress, a pain of soul pressing into our consciousness<sup>23</sup>.

Fennell goes on to look at symptoms of this senselessness – drugs, recklessness, rage, the falling birth rate and 'self-immersion in mind numbing work.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ecclesia in Europa*, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ecclesia in Europa*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> FENNELL, D., *Ireland After the End of Western Civilisation*, Athol Books, Belfast, 2009, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> FENNELL, p. 22.

The message at the end of the European Synod in 1999 put a three-fold challenge:

*Let us proclaim the 'Gospel of Hope'!* In a world grown deaf to words and often incapable of having trust in anyone... let us renew Peter's profession of faith: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'...

*Let us celebrate the 'Gospel of Hope'!* In a society and culture often closed to the transcendent, stifled by consumerist attitudes, enslaved by old and new idolatries, let us rediscover with awe the sense of mystery...

*Let us serve the 'Gospel of Hope'!* In a Europe closed in on itself by new forms of egoism, the only way to restore hope to the hopeless is by personal and communal works of active charity. In this, let us make a definitive choice for love<sup>25</sup>.

The real danger is that we may allow our pastoral approach to be distorted by our own fears and insecurities, adopting an aggressive, threatening attitude to those who appear to be deaf to our message. We need to deepen our own conviction that what we are preaching is God's unconquerable truth and love. The fact that people reject and look down on us is not the problem. The problem is that they are failing to hear the deepest truth about their own glorious dignity. They are living in a kind of half-light that deprives them of the hope that would let them see life as a gift, a vision that comes only through contemplating the God of life<sup>26</sup>.

Pope Paul VI set the standard for our response, and for our leadership, while he was still Archbishop of Milan. He spoke to his priests in these words:

We will love all those whom we approach and who may have contempt for us, hinder us, perhaps even offend us. But we will never be able to feel offended. The less we are loved, the more we will love. The more difficult it becomes to remain in contact with the world, the more we will love. The more difficult it becomes to free the world of its illusions of happiness, self-sufficiency, satisfaction, the more we will love it, We will seek to overcome all with love. 'Charity conquers all things'.

And charity is the core of the life of the Church. When the sense of structure is dominant people feel that they are held together by regulations which are often seen as burdensome, arbitrary or unintelligible. The purposes of the structure are seen as something external, even alien, to their deepest concerns and interests, like their family life, their religious and moral convictions.

Failure to see that the task is for everyone will result in a decline of Christian faith and an opening of the way to ever growing secularism, or, more likely – because secularism is nothing like as satisfying a world view as it may seem at first sight – to other religious expressions, some of them quite superficial and superstitious. It will also result in a rising sense of frustration and inadequacy among priests who feel that all of this is *our* problem and that if a secularist tide is flowing strongly, we must not be doing our job.

#### **WHAT IS THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH?**

Because the task needs everybody, bishops and priests today need to exercise the kind of leadership that sets a high priority on developing the responsibility and leadership of all the members of the Church. That is almost a cliché, but it is surprising what pockets of resistance we can find, sometimes where one least expects it, not only among laypeople but among ourselves.

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<sup>25</sup> MESSAGE OF THE SECOND SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR EUROPE OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, 21 October 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

It is important also to try to be clear about the nature of the task and where it begins. Very often we hear it stated in terms of the so-called "institutional Church". I believe that is a vague and inaccurate term that fosters lazy thinking. When I hear the term, I feel a little like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. As they were desperately trying to escape the posse of pursuers, they kept looking back and they always seemed to be there. They kept saying to one another, "Who are those guys?"

I feel like that about 'the institutional church'. Who or what is being referred to? Sometimes it seems to mean, "Everything about the Church that I don't like". Sometimes it simply means the parish priest or, more likely, the bishop. More seriously distorting, it sometimes means "the Church viewed without any of the spiritual reality by which and for which it exists".

So we hear challenges like, "If a business had lost 25% of its customers in fifteen years it would be heading for bankruptcy; a company whose returns were in such sharp decline would be rebranding itself as a matter of urgency; if an undertaking was unable to recruit new senior staff, it would be in crisis." No business consultant would say to a firm, "Your trouble is that you don't pray enough"! I strongly suspect, however, that that is precisely the first challenge than needs to be put to us, priests and laity.

Of course declining statistics do pose a challenge for us. Of course they prompt us to ask whether we could be doing things better. Of course we need to be asking ourselves whether we are speaking the message in a way that can actually touch the hunger in people's hearts today. Of course we need to challenge each other about how we can live the Gospel in a way that reaches out to all the people who in various ways find themselves on the edges of the Church and of society. Most importantly, the statistics pose the challenge as to how we can reach out to those who no longer see themselves as fully taking part in the Church's life, to the young people who are no longer coming to church and so on. I do not want in any way to diminish the challenge of bringing the Gospel into the world of the twenty first century. But that challenge is not, in the first instance, about *improving an institution*; it is about *enabling a community*, and its members, *to live more fully*. That is why statistics may be misleading.

The first thing that is questionable about these statistical arguments is that they often seem to presume that somebody else should be doing something about this situation. They also, very annoyingly seem to assume that clergy are unaware of this situation when the truth is that we have been acutely aware of it and reflecting on its implications and challenges for decades – long before many laypeople began to realise its seriousness. They also seem to assume that, given that such a serious situation exists, it is the clergy who should be worrying about it and the clergy who should be fixing it. And this comes sometimes from people who at the same time complain that the church is too clerical!

The second and more serious flaw is that we have to resist the idea that the message of the Gospel can be adapted in response to the findings of market research. We have to be sceptical of the idea that the success of our preaching of the Gospel can be measured in terms of the number of people who attend Church regularly. Financial and statistical returns are not the final criterion for measuring the vitality of the Church.

No good marketing manager would speak to his customers in the way Jesus did, St John told us a few Sundays ago that many of them turned back and would no longer follow him. To make things worse, he went on to say to the remaining few, "Do you also wish to go away?" (Jn 6: 66f) This is very poor management technique and a disastrous approach to public relations; it shows a complete failure in market research!

Not the least of the problems about the image of the 'institutional church' is that unless one has a deeper vision, renewal can get lost in fiddling with the nuts and bolts of the institution. That may well need to be done, but only in order to help advance the vocation and mission of Christians to grow in Christ. If that purpose is not kept in view then what is left is only fiddling with structures

I stress this point because it seems to me that one of the most difficult aspects of leadership today is to keep the desire to do things, to plan things, to organise things in perspective. That is not the most basic step. We are living in a culture in which doing and having and achieving are the goals. Faced with what is clearly a crucial situation 'a generation of decision', there is a great urge to DO something. But maybe we should first be saying to one another, "Don't just do something, sit there", or better, "kneel there and first reflect together on the truth that sets us free".

The new creation is the fulfilment of our relationship with all of our brothers and sisters. It is a vision so rich and so full of promise that we will spend our lives only on the fringes of it and glimpsing the wonder of it. As St Paul puts it, "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). We will see clearly only in the kingdom prepared for us since the foundation of the world.

One of the great advances in our world has been in the sphere of communications. We can see, on our television screens, documentaries about places we will probably never visit; we can see and hear people we will probably never meet and whose culture and language seem very strange to us. We can hear and see people on the other side of the world live as they speak. I am sorry to have to tell those of you who are still struggling with email, that, this year, Boston College, didn't bother giving email addresses to their students, because, for them, email is passé! People can Twitter and use Facebook and blogging in a way that makes the old idea of a pen friend look unbelievably slow and cumbersome. It took radio 38 years to have 50 million listeners; it took television 13 years; the internet 4 years. iPod applications had *one billion in nine months!* One consolation is that social networking is now the most popular use of the internet – replacing pornography!

I think we have hardly begun to think about the demands that this will make on us, and on all Christians, in communicating the Gospel in a world where books, if they are read at all, will be downloaded and where most communication will be concentrated in text messages and tweets.

But this falls unimaginably short of what we cannot even begin to imagine – the immediacy and intimacy of the communication when the whole human family, from every time in history, gathers around God our Father and Christ our Brother, united by the Spirit who is God's infinite love. What will it mean, in God's house, when all these people, in all the variety of their individual personalities, their experiences, their cultures, their gifts, will be at home together? Everything that they bring will be part of the wonder of God's creation, which we will rejoice in and share.

We will find in our Father's house the huge variety of human gifts and achievements, but we will also find those gifts and achievements, free from every limitation, flourishing and blossoming in ways we cannot imagine. Thomas Aquinas put it like this:

Finally, in heaven there will be the happy society of all the blessed, and this society will be especially delightful. Since each one will possess all good together with the blessed, and they will love one another as themselves, and they will rejoice in the others' good as their own. It will also happen that, as the pleasure and enjoyment of one increases, so will it be for all"<sup>27</sup>.

**Blessed Virgin Mary,  
may our ears constantly hear with the proper clarity your motherly voice  
"Do whatever my Son tells you".  
Enable us to persevere with Christ.  
Enable us, Mother of the Church, to build up his Mystical Body  
by living with the life that he alone can grant us from his fullness,  
which is both human and divine.** (Pope John Paul at Knock, 1979)

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<sup>27</sup> AQUINAS, *Collationes super Credo in Deum* 12. Saturday Week 33.