

SERVANTS OF THE TRUTH

In recent decades, not only in Ireland but in many countries in Europe and further afield, institutions and traditions have been losing credibility. There seems to be a collapse in standards of integrity all round – or perhaps low standards that were always there have been exposed. Child sexual abuse, financial fraud, and corruption in commercial and political life seem to be rampant. So we are surrounded by tribunals and commissions of inquiry and polls show declining trust in various professions – politicians, media, police and church. Surprisingly, though you would never guess it from reading the papers, the Church invariably emerges from these polls as more highly trusted than the media!

In Ireland the various scandals and horror stories about child sexual abuse by priests and religious bring a great deal of anguish and pain for all of us, priests and people. Of course, faced with our own sense of being let down by brother priests who did these awful things, it will be important to remember that those who suffer most are the people whose vulnerability and trust were taken advantage of when they were children and who have had to live with terrible memories for many years.

It is, of course, good that low standards are exposed, whether by Church people or in business or in public life, but there is also a danger that something valuable may be damaged or lost. We could find ourselves in a culture without roots because it rejects everything that has come down from past generations. John Habgood, the former Anglican Archbishop of York, among others, has talked about what has been called a culture of contempt:

What we are witnessing is more than a justifiable reaction against abuses of authority, but rather a reaction against the concept of authority itself. It therefore cuts at the root of beliefs and attitudes and institutions which have traditionally held societies together. It discounts the accumulated wisdom of past generations. It sees history as no more than a record of human folly and corruption. Cynical contempt is one of the extreme forms of this rejection¹.

Contempt starts from a presumption that our generation's view of things is so superior to what went before that we have nothing to learn from it. That is self-contradictory. To presume that we are far wiser and better than previous generations would involve arrogance every bit as great as anything we criticise in those who went before us! Contempt in the form we see it today is also based on the lack of any guiding vision for society – not just an agreed guiding vision, but even the realisation that the question of an overall vision of life's meaning is an important foundation for commitment in political and public life. The destruction of institutions is not, like previous reforms and revolutions, based on a desire to put something better in place. Without some agreed vision or even agreed questions, how could a society possibly hope to work together to build for the future? Part of the problem is that we are caught in a kind of hopeless individualism that is tempted to think in terms of me and them or at least a very limited 'my group' and them, rather than a real deep and wide 'us'.

DISTRUST OF INSTITUTIONS

Perhaps a lot of this distrust of institutions is not just the result of scandals and corruption. Perhaps they are a kind of catalyst that has intensified an attitude that was already growing. There is an individualistic approach to life which is always ready to resent the idea that anybody else should tell me what to do. That is one reason why the exposure of flaws and the evidence of corruption is often welcomed. It enables people to say, "We don't have to listen to them any more, they're as bad as we are!"

This is uncomfortable for priests, because the Church is a large institution representing tradition and authority and bound by fidelity to a revelation it has received. Ministers of the Church are servants of a truth that we are obliged to preach, even when it is unwelcome (2 Tim 4:2). And we have to preach the truth even though we know that we do not live up to it ourselves. The honest preacher is always questioning his own standards and commitment, and strength of belief – even before he challenges his congregation! Preaching is meant to be an uncomfortable activity – raising profound questions first of all for the preacher himself!

¹ HABGOOD, J., *The Priestland Memorial Lecture*, BBC Radio 4, 8 October 1995.

People ask whether a preacher should feel nervous before he preaches. I am not sure, but he should certainly feel uncomfortable.

Healthy criticism of institutions, including church life, is not a bad thing in itself. It can serve a useful purpose; it can be a call to repentance and renewal of dedication. Criticism has been expressed down the centuries in Church and in society through various reform groups, prophetic personalities, cultural movements and political programmes. Some of it has been constructive, even if the people in authority didn't always see it that way at the time. But, as I suggested, there is something uncomfortably different about criticism today. Archbishop Habgood again says:

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 choice².

The media both reflect and increase this sense of distrust. Scandals sell papers; good news is no news. People get information in different forms, facts, opinions and guesswork and investigations that may sometimes be difficult to disentangle. And, on the other hand, we have become so cynical that we take it for granted that official statements from a political party or even from the government are to be distrusted. If an official denies something we almost take it as proof that it must be true. [And, unfortunately, it does often prove to be true!] But the overall effect can be corrosive. One commentator put it like this:

If the media... indiscriminately labels office holders, professionals and experts inadequate or untrustworthy whenever a colleague fails, and regardless of evidence, if such failure is represented as common or even as the norm when it is not, there will be no return of public trust... I do not think we should underestimate the burden that being commonly misrepresented as untrustworthy and as mistrusted now places on all office holders, professionals, experts and others, a burden that is not lifted when they are trustworthy and comply with all regulatory, professional and audit regimes. Nor should we underestimate the anxiety that well-fomented and publicised uncertainty about others' trustworthiness creates for all citizens³.

A NEW AND PAINFUL TENSION

Before going on to look at the broader picture, I want to take a bit of time to say something about the particular tension that priests have begun to experience, some in an extremely painful way, in the last decade or so. That is the area of clerical sexual abuse and its effect on the image of what is called 'the institutional church'. It has a particular impact on the relationship between priests and 'the institutional church', or to put it more painfully, between priests and bishops. None of this should blind us to the most painful suffering of all – the suffering of victims.

It is an area full of ambiguities and no-win situations. A great deal of the thinking that has been dictated by the media and the politicians does not lead towards a solution. It is directed to removing as much as possible of the decision making from bishops and superiors and handing it over to the Gardaí and the Health Service Executive, or to the corresponding bodies in other jurisdictions. One obvious comment is that the speed and efficiency with which this leads to a clear cut conclusion and effective action was not and is not notably better than the record of the Church authorities at their least effective. When something is handed over to the police, a clear result will emerge in far less than 10%, probably nearer 3% of cases and the process may have taken several years. This has led to some procedures which risk losing sight of the 'paramountcy principle', procedures whose paramount consideration seems to be not the protection of children but the obtaining of a conviction.

The problem for any priest is the realisation that a false complaint of sexual abuse, at least if it carries a semblance of credibility, can potentially, even probably, end his active ministry. In other words, if a malicious complainant can give times and places and circumstances that

² HABGOOD, loc. cit.

³ O'NEILL, O., *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*, Cambridge University Press 2002, pp 191f.

match the facts, it may be almost impossible to make a good case that the allegation is false. In fact, Aristotle said that it is impossible to prove a negative. The only really effective proof would be an alibi – that is to be able to show that the priest was not, as alleged, serving in the parish when the complainant was the age he claims he was at the time of the alleged abuse. Even there, I have to say that I am aware of one case, not in my personal experience, in which the complainant's memory was nearly two years out, yet it turned out that his complaint was well founded – and was admitted by the priest. It is not much consolation for a wrongly accused priest to tell him that this kind of false accusation is relatively rare. I suspect that it is, but accurate figures are impossible to find because most of the investigations do not yield a definite result. Apart from criminal convictions, the best one can hope for is 'probably true' or 'probably false'. If that is the case, then statistics which say that only 2% or 3% are false must clearly be without foundation.

The bishop or superior or delegate or whoever deals with a complaint often finds himself face to face with two extremely vulnerable and troubled individuals – the *priest* who has just heard about the accusation and who sees his whole life turned upside down and his good name in ruins, and the *complainant* who has just talked about the depth of his suffering, his sense of betrayal, and how it has destroyed his life and relationships and perhaps faith. Each of them, separately of course, is putting the challenge: "Do you not believe me? Are you saying that you don't believe me?" He is likely to have no reason to disbelieve either of them, and equally obviously he has to take certain steps as a result of what he has heard. The priest, understandably, is saying "I have served this diocese for X years and nothing like this has ever been said before, surely I have a right to expect a bit of loyalty from you in return". The complainant is saying, "This is what I was warned to expect. It is bad enough that the Church is responsible for all my suffering. I have finally plucked up the courage to talk about it and now I feel I am being doubted."

In some cases it becomes clear that the accusation is mistaken or that it cannot be reconciled with known facts, or that it is a case of mistaken identity. In some cases it is crystal clear, perhaps because the priest tells you so, that the complaint is justified at least in its broad outline, allowing for inevitable differences in recollections of events perhaps ten or twenty or forty years ago.

In most cases, however, nothing is established beyond reasonable doubt and one is left with the word of one person against that of another. The person against whom nothing is established is legally innocent and understandably will be talking in terms of returning to his ordinary life 'without a stain on his character'. That is indeed sometimes the outcome, when it seems that the case against him is very weak and the risk that he might harm children has been judged by experts to be minimal. (Unfortunately, experts are increasingly unwilling to give an unambiguous green light in these cases!)

In such circumstances, when a bishop is not willing to put a man back in ministry, there are often severe criticisms from priests saying that the bishop is protecting his back at the expense of this poor man. I think that often the consideration that holds the bishop back is more complex. "Have I the right to send a man over whom some, perhaps considerable, doubt remains to a parish or other assignment where he will have trusted and privileged access to children? If the parents of the parish knew what I knew, would they be willing to have him? If not, by what right do I send him, without telling them of the possible risk? If an allegation is made and I can honestly say that there were no previous complaints, that is one thing; if I have to say that there were previous complaints and the parishioners were not warned to be vigilant then they will tell me that I have behaved with irresponsible clerical arrogance, saying that I know best, at the expense of their children" Of course, telling them to be vigilant would in all probability damage his good name even more publicly than has already happened. Once you have said something in church or in a public meeting that fact can be and will be reported in the media.

Occasionally, of course, the choice may be much clearer, but it may not be possible to say so – if, for instance, there are other complaints still under investigation, or if the man has admitted his guilt.

All of this leads to a very painful situation for the priest concerned. It is usually also very painful for the bishop or superior. I believe that we need to understand the impossible situation that it often is for everybody concerned, but we have to do that without infringing on the right of the accused priest not to have his whole story told to the world, especially if the outcome remains unclear.

I believe that all of this will remain impossibly painful until, as a society and indeed as a whole church, we begin to get a fuller picture of the uncertainties and grey areas and dilemmas that surround the whole question of dealing with allegations. We also need to get and to admit a clearer picture of the extent of child sexual abuse in society. We all know the figures from the SAVI Report which says that the percentage of abuse perpetrated by clergy (and the word is used improperly to include religious brothers and sisters) is just over 3% (that by clergy in the proper sense appears to be about 1.5%).

THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

The distrust of institutions is often expressed in a demand for openness and transparency. If it is taken too far, this may be counterproductive. It ensures for instance, that as little as possible is recorded in the minutes of any organisation. I suspect that the historians who look for these documents in the future may have a thing or two to say about the Freedom of Information Act!

Nevertheless, the concern to discover the truth is a deeply human trait. Without it the sense of meaning and purpose in our world begins to disintegrate.

The concern that underlies Pope John Paul's encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* is that there is a loss of the conviction that it is possible for us to seek and to reach and to speak the truth. Instead of the truth, there is only 'the story'; instead of seeking to be objective, one seeks 'an angle'. It is ironic that, as Pope John Paul was dying – one of the most significant news events in our lifetime – a journalist here in Rome was overheard saying, 'what's my angle on this'?

The fundamental outlook of the Bible, Pope John Paul says, is "that the world and human life do have a meaning"⁴. 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"⁵.

The challenge of the culture of contempt lies precisely here: "Do we believe in the human capacity to know the truth? When we criticise are we seeking a fuller truth?" It is a challenge intimately connected with belief in and awareness of the existence of God.

... 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.⁶

This question of truth is at the very heart of the crisis of modern society. It fuels the distrust of institutions, it diminishes the dignity of human beings, and it is at the heart of alienation from the Church.

This was the precise point made by Cardinal Ratzinger, in the homily he gave to the College of Cardinals as they entered the conclave that elected him:

How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking. The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves - flung from one extreme to another: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism and so forth. Every day new sects spring up, and what St Paul says about human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error (cf. Eph 4: 14) comes true.

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, [FR] 80.

⁵ FR 102.

⁶ HABGOOD, J., loc. cit.

Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be "tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine", seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires.

We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism. An "adult" faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth.

THE CHURCH – MARIAN AND PETRINE

If the Church is to proclaim an adult faith, we will need to have a clear picture of what the Church is and a true perspective for viewing the criticism that we meet. We need to think more deeply about two inseparable aspects of the Church. Pope John Paul, following Hans Urs Von Balthasar, calls them the *Apostolic-Petrine* (i.e. the structural, institutional) aspect and the *Marian* aspect (the 'hierarchy of holiness'). He is in no doubt which is the more important:

"Although the Church has a 'hierarchical' structure, nevertheless this structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members"⁷. "This is why the Marian dimension of the Church precedes the Petrine"⁸. "Mary Immaculate precedes all others, including obviously Peter himself and the Apostles... because their triple function has no other purpose except to form the Church in line with the ideal of sanctity already programmed and prefigured in Mary"⁹.

The structure, the hierarchical nature of the Church, has only one purpose. It exists to foster growth in union with Christ. Often the Church is seen primarily as a structure – the dreaded "institutional Church". What is "the institutional Church"? Is it a phrase used by polite people who don't wish to say that they don't like their bishop or their parish priest? Is it a kind of sloppy shorthand which creates a scapegoat on which we can dump everything we dislike about the tradition to which we belong? There would be a lot to be said for asking people to say precisely who or what they mean every time they use the phrase, 'the institutional church' – and to apply the same discipline to ourselves!

But here we come to the heart of the reason why the Church is so often seen in these terms by the contemporary world. The fundamental question of the *truth* of the Gospel message cannot be easily addressed in our culture, for a number of reasons. First of all there is the assumption that religion has no place in politics and in public discussion; we assume that religious truth is divisive and better kept to oneself. Secondly and even more fundamentally, the horizon of secular society is too limited to look to eternal truths and questions about grace and resurrection and the inner life of God.

So, without the truths of the faith, what then is left of the Church except the shell, the structure? The Church becomes one association or interest group or lobbying agency among others. To follow that line means getting the Church out of perspective by looking at the secondary, structural element as if it were the first, indeed the only aspect, ignoring the life that the structure is meant to serve. It would be like talking about an opera without reference to the music or the libretto. You are left with a fairly banal plot: Boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy wins girl again, or Boy meets girl; girl dies tragically; boy is devastated. This is simply missing the whole point.

It may be an oversimplification, but I believe that a fair definition of 'the institutional Church' would be 'the community of Christ's followers seen from outside without any reference to their living spirit and the purpose for which the community exists'. The term "institutional church"

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [MD], 27

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 773

⁹ MD 27n.

means the hierarchical structure of the church considered apart from the growth in holiness which the structures exist to foster¹⁰. It is a way of speaking about the Church while missing the central point! The communion of human beings with God “is the purpose which governs everything in her... The Marian dimension of the Church precedes the Petrine”¹¹ The Church viewed without this Marian dimension would be empty, lifeless and pointless.

A mere structure won't be perceived as resonating with 'the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time'¹². This partially explains the widespread complaint that the Church does not listen or understand. It is only *people* who listen and understand. And no matter how exhausted we may be from trying to listen, understand and respond, it is still possible for people to feel that 'the institution' is not listening.

The institutional church of course never seems to include lay people or the lives of Christian families, the work of missionaries and development workers, the prayer and contemplation of Christians – so all the love and compassion and holiness shown by the vast community of the Church's committed members is simply left out!

If the Church is perceived simply as a structure, everything it does will be interpreted in that light. This is one of the great obstacles to the new evangelisation that Pope John Paul and now Pope Benedict have constantly called for. If the Church is seen primarily as a structure, the most important spiritual or doctrinal statements, and moral teachings, will be interpreted as the efforts of an institution to defend its influence and structures.

We need to find a new language, a renewed vision of the Church. It is very difficult for people whose vision of the Church is one of an awkward and largely obsolete structure to hear the message, however well it is spoken. This is particularly true when, as at present, this 'institution' is constantly presented as responsible for and complicit in the scandal of child sexual abuse and when the horrible sexual misdemeanours of clergy and religious are highlighted in a way that distorts their frequency in society.

A PARTICULAR CHALLENGE FOR PRIESTS

There is a particular challenge for priests. With diminishing numbers and increasing age, there is a danger that priests may become overwhelmed by problems of administration, by unexpected crises, by widely varying responsibilities, leaving no time or energy to reflect and to pray. The world in which we live your priesthood is one in which, certainly in Ireland, we face a very new situation, with pressures and challenges quite different from those of the past.

What Pope Benedict said in a recent Angelus message is increasingly relevant:

We must beware, [St Bernard] says, of the danger of excessive activity, whatever the state or office that one holds, because being too busy often leads to 'hardness of heart', such busyness 'is nothing other than suffering of spirit, loss of understanding and waste of grace'. The warning holds for every kind of occupation, even those which are involved in the government of the Church. What Bernard says about this to the Pope, once his disciple in Clairvaux, is provocative: 'See', he writes, 'where these cursed activities may lead you if you continue to lose yourself in them... leaving nothing of yourself for yourself.' How useful, also for us, is this recall to the primacy of prayer and contemplation! May Saint Bernard, who knew how to harmonise the monk's desire for solitude and the silence of the cloister with the urgency of important and complex missions in the service of the Church, help us to make this a reality in our lives.

Such a person with hardened heart is one who has not learned that everything does not depend on him. The man who sets out to run his parish 'without interference from the laity' will be doomed. He will be entirely ineffective – the truth is that such a priest was probably always ineffective, because he didn't draw out, and perhaps even repressed the gifts that the Spirit gave his people. If all the responsibilities of the parish, urgent though they are, are allowed to dominate their lives, priests will find *themselves* living as if the Church were primarily a

¹⁰ MD 27.

¹¹ CCC, 773.

¹² VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1.

structured institution and priests were its managers. They will become functionaries of 'the institutional church'.

In the Western world priests face a situation of ministering in a world that seems to grow deaf. Other people have that experience too. Religion teachers, also meet apathy and resistance. Parents suffer because they see their children drifting away from the life of the Church. People seeing a decline in religious practice and knowledge among children – and among adults – seek for solutions on the level of structures and programmes. The constant search for new initiatives and plans absorbs people's energies; the constant struggle saps their morale. The fundamental problem lies deeper than plans, methods and structures. Without a spiritual foundation, external structures, "will serve little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth"¹³.

Some people believe that the Church has changed too little to meet the new challenges; others believe that the Church has changed too much; both can get very angry! Church teachings, catechetical programmes, priests, diocesan or parochial policies and initiatives are all blamed. The complaints can spring from deep concern and include valid elements. But they are often not reconcilable with one another and fail to see all sides of the issue!

Some of these representations, on both 'sides' of the spectrum, are marked by exaggeration, distortion and even imputations of bad faith. Destructive and misdirected anger arises at least partly because people are seeking in vain on the surface for causes and solutions of problems which lie deeper. In the end, such approaches both reflect and strengthen the flawed vision of the Church as a mere institution. These tensions need to be placed more consciously in the context of the Mystery which infinitely surpasses us.

The first challenge is to ourselves. Everything in the life of the Church -- administration, doctrine, liturgy, pastoral concerns – exists in order to foster union with Christ, to lead us to the Truth. We need to understand more clearly that the truths we preach and try to live are not our own; we are servants of God's mysterious Word. We need to deepen our awareness that the people who oppose the Church's teaching or influence, people for whom the question of God seems entirely irrelevant, are all called to be our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Church is not so much our work as the Lord's. It is a witness to the Truth which sets us free. This deeper Truth will rarely be heard in our kind of culture, but if it is not clearly present in the minds of believers, will it ever be heard?

This is the challenge clearly stated by Pope John Paul in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*:

... (T)o place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, 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 with a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity.

(But) it is fatal to forget that 'without Christ we can do nothing'. It is prayer which roots us in this truth. It constantly reminds us of the primacy of Christ and, in union with him, the primacy of the interior life and of holiness. When this principle is not respected, is it any wonder that pastoral plans come to nothing and leave us with a disheartening sense of frustration?¹⁴

The second challenge is to detect and respond to moments when individuals and communities are open to the Mystery, open to the deep and immeasurable truth of Christ. This can happen in times of tragedy – natural disasters, violence, or personal heartbreak. It happened on a global scale on September 11th and after the tsunami and after the hurricanes and earthquakes of the last year or so. It happens when individuals are moved to wonder, admiration, or deeper reflection by great art or by noble lives. It can happen when people experience helplessness in the face of suffering and injustice. It can happen when we detect the astonishing order that lies behind apparent chaos. It happens when people ask themselves about the meaning of life.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43.

¹⁴ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31, 38.

A TRUTH THAT IS BIG ENOUGH

We have to find a language in which the Church can speak to these moments of openness – otherwise the gap will be filled by cults, sects and superstition. We need a new language of hope in new imagery, reflecting modern experience. What matters will not be simply the words but the intensity with which we live the truth. The Church has to be seen not as a structure, but as a family, feeling and sharing the pain, the searching, the creative restlessness which is most deeply human¹⁵, but at the same time humbly confident in its proclamation of the meaning of life revealed in Jesus Christ. If Jesus Christ is to be seen living in the Church, then the Church must be seen as a *living organism*, living with the Spirit who speaks from the depths of the human heart with sighs too deep for words (Rom 8: 26).

In other words, we need to make room to hear and to speak the truth that is always bigger than our words. That is why Pope John Paul spoke so tellingly about the need for what he called the contemplative outlook, an outlook that:

arises from faith in the God of life, who has created every individual as a "wonder" (cf. Ps 139:14)... the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning... the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person the Creator's living image¹⁶.

That is a challenging task in a world which is so full of noise and activity and distraction. For the moment, we might simply say this. All that running around and all that noise is the result of a desperate search for a fulfilment which can never be large enough to satisfy the human heart. There is a longing that is expressed in all sorts of ways – in art and music, in love, in the urge to belong. There is a longing that is felt in the face of the fragility of life and relationships. In all sorts of ways people feel a restlessness which, as Augustine says, will continue until we rest in God. We should never despair of anyone because the Spirit of God has been poured out on all creation and is inviting even those we think are farthest from us into the same new creation.

The most profound tragedy about child sexual abuse is that it can obscure the truth which is the ultimate source of healing, of the healing which wipes away every tear and makes all things new. It can drive its victims away from the Church which is the presence in the world of Jesus Christ, the truth who makes all of us free.

The truth of Christ is the only thing that can satisfy our restlessness. We need to believe ourselves and to communicate that belief in our words and actions and ministry. In our own lives and in the lives of the people we try to serve we should be offering the world what Pope John Paul called our most valuable gift:

The most valuable gift that the Church can offer to the bewildered and restless world of our time is to form within it Christians who are confirmed in what is essential and who are humbly joyful in their faith¹⁷.

Our society is cut off from its deepest needs and hopes; it seems to echo the cry of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, "Our bones are dry, our hope is gone". We hope that, through the ministry of the Church, God may put his Spirit in us so that we may live (cf. Ezek 37: 11-14). We need to find ways to make it clearer to all Christians, including ourselves, that the Marian dimension is primary in the Church; so that the message can be communicated and lived, so that people, who are weary, disillusioned and lacking a sense of God, may, like the dry bones of Ezekiel, "live and stand on their feet, a vast multitude" (Ezek 37: 10).

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 18.

¹⁶ *Evangelium Vitae*, 83.

¹⁷ *Catechesi Tradendae*, 61.