

The Church

Being Church is much more than belonging to something. I remember experiencing a kind of culture shock in Zambia, and then another one on my return! Despite the very real differences, there is only one Body of Christ - *One Lord, one faith, one baptism.*

The Church I grew up in had many aspects taken for granted. Not just celebrating feasts - but *how* we celebrated - ashes, candles, incense, stations, confessionals... fish on Friday, Plain Chant...

Our Jewish ancestors relied in the main on hearing. There was only one way to experience God and that was to listen: no statues, no images... You could not see, touch or taste God, just hear and listen. The occasional poet would daringly say things like *taste and see the Lord is good...* but by and large they were hearers of the word.

The Catholic tradition has never been satisfied with this. The body was to be involved - standing, sitting, kneeling, genuflecting... We could do more than hear, we could see and feel, and so arose a tradition rich in ways of celebrating. Something which many pre-Vatican II people still miss.

One remarkable absentee in those days was *doubt*. There was a sense of security, an assurance of what we were about. There was no hesitation about confession and communion; nor about the authority of its ordained ministers.

Doctrine was neatly and expertly expressed in the catechism; the local Catholic school was a treasured possession. The system was both accepted and went unquestioned. The Sacramental vision that called us beyond the surface symbols to a deeper reality, had to be nurtured to show us how they lead to God who is beyond and without limit of any kind.

Finances continued to mesmerise. It was difficult to see the Church of Jesus in a polished institution. But why are we questioning now? The reason is serious and profound.

What actually happened at Vatican II? Sometimes the meaning of important events is not clearly understood at the outset. Many times during the Council Press conferences were called to explain significance and meaning that was unfolding. However, there was no Press conference to say that Vatican II was the Church's first attempt at self-expression as a world Church. This was the key and hidden factor, the way the Spirit was moving, the Church was acting now as a world Church. In Vatican I the Bishops of Africa and Asia were European and North American missionaries. 80% of Church members spoke a language that owed nothing to Latin.

Theologians search for the historic Christ - and have yet to allow him to be planet-wide and not just Mediterranean; even though the Spirit of the Risen Christ is definitely so.

Sacramental Life

We must move from the era of *the signs of the times* into the *time of the signs!* First to set aside a common and mistaken presumption, that *holiness, goodness...* we get and they belong *inside* the Church - literally.

Sacred history says something else: e.g. Melchisedek - brought a blessing to Abraham from *outside* the Jewish people - Gen.14.18. Jethro - Moses' father-in-law, was a priest of Midian - Ex.18.19. Prophets were sent to correct the priests. John the Baptist was a man from the desert.

Jesus cleansed the Temple! And we have cluttered it again: *My house is a house of prayer!* The power house from which we are sent out. He told the Samaritan woman that neither here nor there, but in spirit and truth will God be worshipped.

The Father speaks ONE WORD, which we hear twice! a) the eternal utterance within the Trinity. b) the word in creation. Not two words but one.

If we would seek after the full meaning of Church and Sacraments we must heed what Vatican II urged on us. That the whole of Creation is the body of God. This should tell us to look for the meaning of the Sacraments, e.g. not *within* the sign, not *within* the recipient, not *within* the Church, not *within* at all, but beyond [mission], in the heart of human living.

Baptism, Penance, Eucharist were commonly seen as rescuing us from having to live in an unholy world:

In a Sacrament, rather than entering a temple which walls off the holy from the ungodly, we set-up a sign "out there", in the thick of human living, proclaiming that everywhere, in Spirit and in Truth, is God adored. [Rahner].

The world isn't static, it is alive, in ferment with story - a story at times monotonous, greedy, cruel, unjust, selfish... and at times it is a beautiful story of dedication, commitment, service, affection... it is a story that reaches its climax on Calvary hill. Monstrous evil put him there, but what is it that kept him there? Look here for the meaning behind the signs contained in liturgy and sacraments.

We know that cruelty and selfishness are as commonplace as every day. We also know that compassion, forgiveness, love... abound even more. Our Sacramental living must contain and reflect this fact - of light and dark in everyday life.

We proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes - is what we say about the Eucharist - 1Cor.11.26. What does it mean to say - *until he comes?*

Whatever brings the world closer to its God-given purpose constitutes sacramental mission. They must be as real to us as our world is. Where is God in the thick of all this mess of cruelty and evil? Yet we know that right in the heart of that, for those who have eyes to see, there is also a ferment of goodness, and compassion, ordinary common decency... both are there. This why Jesus reminded us not to go out and pull-up all the weeds, lest we damage the precious shoots of life.

Sadly, we have confined our vision of sacrament to something, almost literally *inside* the Church; and, consequently, use up so much time and energy debating the *who, what, when, how* and forget all about the *where!* The end result has been simply to refurbish what is already there, what we have already made of the gift of the Sacraments entrusted to us by the Lord, instead of continually going back to him, to hear what he actually blessed us with.

The word *sacrament* is not actually mentioned in NT, even though Gospels are full of sacramentality. Note: the Baptism described there doesn't happen in a synagogue or the temple, but outside in the river. The wedding takes place in someone's home; it is in the wilderness he provides hungry people with food and gave us the deeper meaning of the *bread of life*. It was outside at a well that he used water to teach us about the Holy Spirit - *the inner spring welling up into eternal life* - Jn.4.13.

Most of all, at the Resurrection, each appearance, away from the temple, is linked with the sacraments, as if to say - *now that the Resurrection has happened*, and you have witnessed it [apostleship], this is how to pass it on:

Go to my brethren, you will find me there - Jn.20.17; Mt.28.7; Mk.16.7.

Make disciples of all nations - Mt.28.19.

Go into the whole world - Mk.16.16.

Receive the Holy Spirit - Jn.20.22.

Feed my lambs - Jn.21.15.

Recognise me in breaking bread - Lk.24.35.

None of these commands to sacramental mission were made for something to happen within the synagogue, but in the heart of human living.

a cheerful greeting on a Sunday morning in a garden.

a walk down a country road on a Sunday afternoon.

a meal out on Sunday evening.

What are these Gospel stories saying to us? This is a redeemed planet. Grace is here, guiding history; there is much more goodness around than evil. The reason why St. Francis found so much goodness is because he went looking for it. Grace is not a phenomenon parallel to everyday living, but is to be found in the thick of life, the holiness of all that we call profane!

Is this what we teach, is this what I was taught? Isn't there a tendency to suggest that the world is corrupt, and that in receiving the sacraments we are momentarily [going to confession] rising above all this? Aren't we stepping out of our world into a private, sacred area - that somehow doesn't seem to last for long?

*It is a perpetual and tragic misunderstanding when this little sign, which should remind us to the unlimited love of God, is made into an enclosure in which only God is to be found. [Rahner - *The Sacraments: Readings in Contemporary Sacramental Theology* NY Alba 1981 p.74].*

Don't we notice how unreal Christ and the Church appear to so many? How many stay with us out of blind loyalty, and their need to belong? We know that inter-communion is not allowed, that one reason for this is - *they do not believe what we believe*. I wonder what answers we would get if we were to ask each one of us what we believe?

A revision of ritual is good and worthwhile, but never enough on its own. St. Paul says - *You must give an account of the faith that is in you*; an account that will stand-up to audit, by those to whom we are sent.

Good efforts are being made in sacramental renewal, and we must press on with it.

Baptism

We are the first people ever to realise that we are adrift in an ocean of limitless space. Recall that beautiful picture of this blue, white and brown planet taken from outer space. The first ever picture of a redeemed planet.

Life on our planet is redeemed life; the only kind of sin on this planet is forgiven sin. The Resurrection has already begun here, we are already part of the new creation - this is our faith.

So, when we talk about Baptism it must be relevant for the whole planet. If it means initiation into the Church, then we must say that the Church too must be relevant to the whole planet. The Church is to be a visible and intelligible sign - as Vatican II says - *the sign of salvation held up for all nations to see*.

This community in Christ's body is a sign of the human community, and both are symbolised in Baptism. The ritual action, a bathing, even drowning and coming to life again: if this is an infant - we celebrate the innocence of the child, a member of our fallen race, yet who has taken no part in evil; a sign of our race's salvation and beauty, as is the Church. If an adult: the conversion of that adult life - [a necessary condition for Baptism] - has the same sign value, salvation and redemption here in one person is now the birth right of everyone born in Christ.

Water symbolises much more than thirst quenching - tidal waves, monsoons, floods, devastation, even drought. It is part of creation, groaning in travail, waiting for the revealing of the children of God, yearning to be liberated from decadence and unfreedom. It is an apt symbol of dying and rising; it helps us restore nature to its sacred vocation.

Human community is being brutally abused by repeated sin and selfishness. Rampant political, social, economic, religious individualism has reduced community to ruins. That is the death. The life is the evident presence of compassion in the thick of all this. Yet so passive is evil that all the darkness in the world cannot extinguish a single candle, the light ever flickering within this Church community.

Salvation means the restoration of broken community, by moving out into the heart of the world. In relation to baptism, we do not focus on the individual recipient, but on the human community represented there. The salvation of the one being baptised is a sign [the challenge to become what I am receiving for others] of this wider reaching redemption.

I am not baptised for myself, but for others, a reminder that the new baptismal life is to be lived *outside* in the thick of life. The Church is the sign that God is active in the world. Every time someone acts in a truly human way, Grace is there, active and well. Every laugh, every tear, whenever responsibility is owned, someone stands firm for truth, breaks with selfishness, refuses to be gloomy - there salvation is at work.

How sad that many are forced to see all this wonderful energy of human living as purely natural, managed by the heroic few, when in reality it is the work of Grace on offer to all. It is the role of the Church to name what is happening, to provide the nourishment and encouragement for it to flourish through the gift of Sacramental life. As Paul VI reminded us - *we are living in the privileged time of the Spirit*.

What would you say of a race discovered on another planet that did not need redemption, for whom such living was the norm? Already redeemed? Does not our own race deserve the same wherever such living is found?

What do you ask of the Church? Faith! Faith in what? Belief that we are doing the right thing in having this child baptised? Belief that this innocent life is set free from the grip of the devil, by whom it is now enslaved? Does any mother believe that?

Our liturgy must make sense now in C21. Faith of Baptism is faith in the Grace of God, present everywhere, always available, never able to be removed from our world - *I am with you always!* In this Baptism we are celebrating the innocence of this child, the innocence of the newly converted adult - as a sign of the real presence of the Grace of innocence being regained by a fallen world? It was said of St. Francis that in his conversion he recovered his original innocence. His life showed it. He began to appreciate so much goodness in the world that he actually went looking for it, and found it!

As the meaning of Baptism is *outside*, everything that builds community is baptismal - *He called them, to be with him, so that he might send them out...* [see Mk.3] The Sacramental essence [of all the sacraments] is the ongoing offer, challenge, for us to gradually become what we have received.

This Church community is a sign of the deeper communion, for whose sake the Church exists. Every activity that fosters the Kingdom, that builds up, affirms, welcomes, celebrates, comforts and mourns, is the field of Baptismal mission.

Today's folk live in an atmosphere of fear and violence, of crime and terrorism, of injustice, prejudice and inequality. We abuse creation, even making parts of it into weaponry to destroy other parts. Is it any wonder that folk become withdrawn and defensive, reluctant to get involved. Yet despite this very real darkness over the earth, there are remarkable things happening - in quality and quantity terms far more than their opposites. Stopping to give someone a lift, a cup of cold water offered, *it only takes a pair of hands to lift a baby out of a dustbin - and we all have hands!* – St Teresa of Calcutta.

Our baptismal calling forbids us to join the chorus of despair and woe, and to show in very real terms - *there really is one standing in your midst whom you have not recognised.* Without such a priority the Baptismal sign remains empty, and even misleading.

For anyone who is in Christ there is a new creation, the old creation has gone, the new one is here... God in Christ is reconciling the world, not holding our faults against us, and God as entrusted to us [Baptism] the news that they are reconciled. "Cor.5.17.

To accept that and begin living it is to be baptised.

They call us deceivers, yet we tell the truth; unknown, yet we are fully acknowledged; dying, yet see, we live; punished but not doomed to death; sad, yet always rejoicing; beggars who bring riches to many; disinherited and the world is ours. 2Cor.5.8.

Eucharist

Vatican II challenged us to widen our horizons when looking at the Eucharist.

In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God... Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him, and the world did not recognise him... The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us... this flesh is real food... the bread I shall give for the light of the world. Jn.1 & 6.

As these words show - the Eucharist contains the whole history of the world! As Sacrament, it is given to the Church, for a very specific purpose. That in the few who are asked to accept this, the Eucharist will flourish as their life and binding unity, at the same time persuading them to live it for others so that they too may know, receive and share. Given to the Church, intended for the world. What brings the two together is the genuinely appropriate celebrating of this *Mysterium Fidei*.

The core of the Eucharist - *this is my body given... my blood poured out*. Our celebrating reminds us that the one, eternal Word, become flesh in Jesus, is the origin of all creation; and that the *Mystery of Faith* is present not simply in the sacred host at the moment of consecration, but in this very gathering of those called together for this purpose.

The Lord is present in the Word proclaimed - *because* two or three have gathered in his name; *because* we listen to the Word together; *because* we break bread together. The Mystery of Faith is that Jesus is present among us throughout our liturgy. Just as he was on Easter Day with the two friends on the Emmaus Road, not just at the evening meal, but in the afternoon when he joined them on the road - because they had come together to share their story.

Our Eucharist has a two-fold involvement - to gather in this way and for those reasons - and also, because of the Grace offered in this Sacrament, to become Eucharist for others, ourselves as body given blood poured out in ministries of service.

Jesus asked: *Do you understand?* He got up, knelt at their feet - we gather to let the Lord wash our feet, so as to become this for others - *I am here among you as one who serves*.

We are blessed with the gift of hunger. It sounds obscene, but it is true. When God created hunger, along with it came so many ways of satisfying it; it is the gift by which we anticipate goodness assured. Sadly, what God has put together we have rent asunder. The sin of the world is separating the free gift of hunger from free access to so many ways of satisfying it. Now hunger, the blessing - is a curse!

Eucharistic mission shows how these belong together, and how it happens. Hunger is shot through everything that makes us human, not just in the need for food. We hunger for meaning, purpose and satisfaction - for affirmation, for warmth, for companionship, for the chance to work, the freedom to relax... It is for all of these and many more that Jesus claims to be the bread of life.

The few are invited to celebrate the *Mysterium Fidei* in such fashion that the many benefit, have their hunger satisfied. Otherwise the Eucharist remains an empty symbol if such hungers are not being

addressed as often as they arise. Jesus has no hands to touch, no voice to comfort, no arms to embrace - without ours.

He explained his feeding of the hungry - *The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world... and the bread is my flesh...* Jn.6.27. Eucharistic ministry is exercised through stewardship, not ownership of the good things of creation. It challenges the notion that if I have enough money I can buy and own - God only creates gifts. To be received and shared. Original Sin has us live in this world of gift as owner occupiers: *Preach the Gospel to all!*

Faith and Religion

Religion is part of a culture. Christianity as a religion can never dialogue with Islam, Buddhism... Only as a faith can we dialogue and evangelise.

Revelation is what God wants us to know and do, and faith is the authentic response to that revelation from the heart of human living. *Religion* is what we make of that revelation of God. People of every culture receive revelation about what God wants, either in their hearts, or from the Word proclaimed, and they can respond to it in faith. But they can also take that authentic revelation and make it into something frightening - their own, private religion.

Sometimes authentic revelation still shines out, but when it does not, that religion is itself in need of evangelisation. Jesus warned us about this:

Pharisees and Scribes from Jerusalem then came to Jesus and said: "Why do your disciples break away from the tradition of the elders? They do not wash their hands when they eat food." "And why do you," he answered, "break away from the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said: Do your duty to your father and mother... But you say, if anyone says to his father or mother: anything that I have that I might have used to help you is dedicated to God, he is rid of the duty to father and mother. In this way you have made God's word null and void by means of your tradition. Hypocrites! It was you Isaias meant when he so rightly prophesied: This people honours me only with lip-service while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer is worthless: the doctrines they teach are only human regulations... These are the things that make you unclean. But to eat with unwashed hands does not make a man unclean. Mt.15.1-9, 20.

God makes clear what we should know and do: *Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it... You may eat of all the trees in the garden. Nevertheless, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you are not to eat.* God saw all divine creation - *and indeed it was very good* - which has to be the greatest understatement in the Bible. If God saw that it was good, *it had to be perfect.* The world was the way God intended [Kingdom].

Everything changes in Genesis in 3.1. We have the first religious question in the Bible: *Did God really say you were not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?* God said no such thing! From now on the questions pour in: Cain's question after murdering his brother - *Am I my brother's keeper?* Building a tower to reach God; Moses' questioning God; the people in the desert questioning Moses.

Jesus was plagued with questions - in Mt. 19.8. - and points out the difference between revelation [what God wants us to know] and religion [what we have made of what God wants us to know]. God says No!, but Moses, because of your hardness of heart says Yes!

The rich young man comes to Jesus: *What must I do to possess eternal life?* He is asking what act can I perform to merit eternal life; not what *shape* should my life take. Never mind what God has revealed to us and what is written in your heart... People of every age can recognise religious questions of their own - tell me what to do so that... This young man wanted to get himself off the hook - give me an insurance policy... so that he could forget the one thing necessary - *Go, sell what you own and give money to the poor... then come and follow me.* Matthew got the same call, Peter makes reference to it also with his - *What about us...?*

Jesus did not play games - *Jesus looked at him and loved him* - Mk.10.20. Typical of his reaction to honest seekers - Andrew and John - Jn.1.38. He didn't give a religious answer. He turned the focus from actions to people - come and follow me. Walk in the company of Jesus, someone who cares about him, join in the journey of life with others. We are not immune from this temptation to turn revelation into religion, to turn what God is asking into what we are interpreting.

Religion tends to justify in the name of God: democracy, capitalism, just war... and not just to justify but to authenticate it in the name of *the Christian way*. Religion is our own creation. Its horizons are ours, it leads us to cling to structures that fit that vision.

Revelation shatters that, presenting a God who is nothing like us, who tends to ask uncomfortable questions. The Pre-Vatican II Church was comfortable in having all the answers. Jesus warned about this - *You know that the pagans lord it over them, making their authority felt... this must not happen among you!* Mt.20.25. [those who wear fine clothes belong in palaces]. The Lord's Supper is revelation, the Eucharistic liturgy is religion. The command to preach the Word is revelation, restricting this is religion.

A Church that reaches the ends of the earth is revelation, a Church concerned solely with its members is religion. Praying simply without feeling the need to inform God, is revelation. Long, monotonous prayers scheduled hourly, weekly, yearly... is religion. It is not the clergy alone, but all of us who regard the Church as a refuge.

We can be burdened by racial hatred, sexual prejudice... we can accept blindly the promptings of culture and pretend that Jesus never said anything about the blessedness of the poor. We are invited to walk with him.

Evangelisation Today

Culture is one of the most necessary and determining factors of our time. A stream is nature, a canal culture; a grunt is nature, a word is culture; sex is nature, marriage is culture. There would be no understanding of religion outside culture. Culture makes the Gospel understandable, and dialogue possible. This is what evangelisation is - dialogue; not brain-washing, not proselytism or even convert making. It is dialogue, and it has two necessary components: authentic Gospel and openness to conversion.

The whole notion of Christ, both as Jesus in the Gospels and the cosmic Christ, is essential. When we enter into dialogue with cultures, including science and technology, we must be open to conversion - i.e. conversion to a fuller truth. If we are not open to conversion we have no right to proclaim.

Familiar concepts take on deeper meaning as we reach every new dialogue. Dialogue with science should remind us of our conviction of the sacredness of the earth, the life and death of our planet. The scientific world needs to be reminded time and again of the presence of the sacred in the heart of a world of things: *This is my body.*

No community or body on earth possesses absolute truth or the answer to the earth-threatening problems that beset us. We must see each other as resources, not threats, so that the truth in them may become in us, and that we might share our truth with them.

The Pre-Vatican II Church had many outward signs of strength and beauty - seminaries full, Catholic Schools flourishing, Church attendance high. But insularity was growing with it, and the Church was becoming more and more distanced from the world, with the Gospel buried among rules and teachings. The Gospel life was drying-up of vitality.

The same was true of all Christian Churches. Vatican II was important for them too; it was also a watershed for Islam, Buddhism etc. The growth of scientific, technological culture was more of a threat to these latter than to Christianity.

Scripture says - *when the time was full, it came to pass...* Jesus was aware that his hour had come; and there have been successive moments like that throughout the history of the Church. All the religions of the world today are aware of such a time now - realising, at the eleventh hour, that spirituality is for the entire human experience. Fundamentalists and fanatics are trying to return to a past that is forever gone. To capture the past requires rejection of the present.

We believe that the Sp.S. is working in the world, unpredictably and way beyond any of our boundaries. The Jews of the early Church were shocked to see the Spirit poured on Gentiles. Their ancestors had made an Exodus from Egypt; now they were asked for another and even more daring Exodus - and many never made it.

We are asked likewise, to move from the age of technology into a world of ecology, from a Church in Europe and N. America to a Church in the world. The Church must be evangelised by the world; Christianity is to be explored not from inside out, but from outside in. If we believe that God desired to become a member of the earth community, we can do no less.

New Earth

The scientific culture has always been seen as the enemy of the religious, the seducer and destroyer of faith. What do we have in common with science and technology?

Evangelisation requires mutual inter-penetration and fertilisation. A search for common ground - e.g. Creation. Evangelisation moves out from the centre towards the culture being evangelised. It is for us to accept the basic, scientific concept of creation as a truth possessed by that culture, as common ground to begin dialogue. Science has genuine ideas and theories about *what* happened, and religion has the same

about *why!* The big-bang theory does no violence to our understanding of creation, indeed in many ways it is extremely consonant with biblical teaching.

God the creator of the world is the maker of the laws that govern it, which requires ongoing creative power to be operative: *and God said, let there be light!*

According to both science and religion, the process of creation is not over. Men and women of science are dreaming of a new earth, a new quality of life from birth to grave. *For now I create new heavens and a new earth... No more will be found the infant living a few days only, nor an old man not living to the end of his days* - Is.65.17. *This is a new creation, the old is gone* - 2Cor.5.16.

Science is convinced that a qualitative change has taken place, because its future direction is in the hands of humankind itself, for the first time. We now possess knowledge of the genetic code, cloning has happened. This leads to a startling understanding of the biblical responsibility of humankind to enter into the process of creation, to help God complete it: *Fill the earth and subdue it... Be masters of all living things* - Gen.1.28.

The miracles of Jesus now show in a new light. *Miracle* is not used in the Gospels to describe what Jesus was doing - it is neither a biblical nor a Jewish word. The Jewish Bible saw the same creative power of God at work in the most ordinary actions of life, as much as in the extraordinary. God is creating when I overcome a personal difficulty... the first meeting of two soon-to-be lovers, as well as in the calming of the storm.

It is not only the human being that has spirit There has been Spirit hovering over the void before creation happened. The world has a spiritual meaning, to bread and wine and water and oil... Jesus took bread and wine and fish, and wind and water; he made a paste of clay in bringing healing. The word used in the Gospel for this is not miracle, but sign - Sacrament - a sign pointing to the presence of the divine.

The *nature* miracles of Jesus are often dismissed as unworthy of belief. Seen as special effects, or tricks - then this would be so. But if they are seen as portraying a person, completely at one with the world of things, as the presence of the creating God, then these actions flow naturally, without doing any violence to our faith.

The Gospel writers make no distinction between ordinary and extraordinary actions of Jesus - whether it be in the waters of the Jordan, or the water in the jars at Cana, or the pool at Siloam... bread for the people in the wilderness and the bread of the Last Supper.

The sacredness of the earth is mediated to us through Jesus. Together with scientists we ponder that sacredness. Everything we know as human came from the earth. It was in the earth first, it came from no other place. Out of the lifeless, seemingly inert earth came all sorts of living things. The earth is not simply our only source of life, it is also our primary source of revelation. The earth even became the body of God: *Aperiat terra, et germinet Salvatorem* – [Let the earth open up and bud forth a Saviour - *Rorate Coeli*].

Preaching the Gospel

Evangelisation means bringing the full force of the Gospel face-to-face with cultures. It is necessarily unpredictable, and the conversion hoped for is both of the evangelist and the evangelised. We must speak

the language of the people, and that includes much more than the right words. It must express the richness and the emotions those words contain. Indeed, many languages themselves have been affected by the Gospel.