

28 Year A - The Enduring Church

Sometimes we may feel that the Church is on its last legs, beset on all sides. There are signs of disaffection - even conflict - between factions within the Church itself – in our own parishes and dioceses, and around the world. In the developed countries the numbers of practicing Catholics has been decreasing, especially amongst the young. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life have significantly reduced. Families find the next generation lapsing from the faith to which they have been dutifully loyal. There have been scandals of one kind or another which have diminished the respect as a moral authority in which the Church has previously been held. The Church's teachings and expectations seem to be at odds with the 'progressive liberalism' of our times: it is seen as a bastion of conservatism, inflexible, lacking in compassion. This despite the example of Jesus and the mandate of his Gospel to the practice of mercy, forgiveness, and the possibility of new beginnings when human frailty and sinfulness have brought us to grief.

The election of our Holy Father Pope Francis has undoubtedly brought fresh hope and vigour to our beleaguered community. There are many features of his ministry which are doing that:

His simplicity of life style...

His openness of heart to one and all – especially to the poor, the suffering, the marginalised – evidenced by a succession of iconic photographs...

His challenging Apostolic Letter entitled 'The Joy of the Gospel'...

His readiness to allow for the expression of different views in the search for truth and for a pastoral care that is appropriate - while still upholding the main principles of the Church's tradition...

The invitation he is giving to attend again - and with confidence - to the teachings and to the practical expectations of the Second Vatican Council.

His personal courage...his humour and wit...his evident prayerfulness...

All these have evoked support, even admiration – and not only within the Catholic community but even within those societies that have been so forthright in their criticism of the Church.

We should then take fresh heart- and not only because of the Holy Father's personal disposition or because of the structures of communication and pastoral development that he is putting in place.

This is a time to remember once again that the Church, though human in character, is a Divine Institution.

The Church is rooted in history – a process which continues to unfold bringing new challenges, new questions, new issues to resolve. But it is forever guided by the Spirit of the Lord: 'I will be with you all days even to the end of the world'

The Church in our times is indeed beset – from within and without - opposed and persecuted, and often on the back foot. This has always been so – as our forefathers could relate, many of whom endured far worse times.

Moreover the Church - as ever - has to contend with those powers of evil that ‘wander through the world for the ruin of souls’ manifesting their activity in every age in human disorders and distress, availing of human weakness to hold back the growth of the Kingdom of God.

But the Lord assures us that ‘the powers of Hell will not prevail’.

Recently the Guardian newspaper published an article by Tina Beattie - who is professor of Catholic Studies at Roehampton University in London. Professor Beattie experiences on a daily basis the castigation of the ‘liberal progressives’ who abound in our society, not least in the intellectual circles she inhabits. She has herself expressed criticism of some of the shortcomings of the Church in our times, and historically. Nonetheless she writes of the strengths of the Catholic Faith and of our Community, and of the endurance of the Church in history up to our own day. She sees value and purpose in our continuing that struggle with courage and confidence:

“‘Progress’, she writes, ‘is a dubious concept. Our rights and freedoms are daily corroded by the politics of greed, power and wealth.

The Catholic Church has a rich tradition of teaching and solidarity with the poor which offers a different way of living.

It weaves together a vast multicultural family that defies the growing xenophobia and exclusivity of modern western societies.

It offers a perspective from which to evaluate our muddled values and short-term goals against a more enduring and hopeful outlook on what it means to be human.

The Church’s intellectual heritage is a complex mixture of theology, philosophy, art and science that enriches the mind, even if its own leaders have sometimes been the worst enemies of this tradition.

The sex abuse scandal has revealed a malignant darkness at the heart of the hierarchy.

Yet all this is just as true of life outside the Church.

One should expect better of those who claim to be Christian, but in reality we humans are a species with a peculiar proclivity towards violence, shame and corruption.

Christians call this ‘original sin’, and I find in the Catholic Church a powerful narrative of hope and redemption in the midst of that.

It is surely worth struggling for.”

(‘Sex, marriage and the Catholic church’ Tina Beattie, The Guardian, 9.10.14)