

## *5 Easter B - Circles of Faith*

This little figurine might help us to reflect on some important truths concerning our Catholic life. It's a Russian Doll, a matronly character, and - as I am sure everyone knows - within this outer shell there are a number of other figures until the solid core is reached at its heart.

Today the Scriptures invite us to ponder on where we stand in the living out of our faith. Let's consider our experience within 'Mother Church' as represented by this doll. There are many ways of living out our membership - some can be rather superficial, others are more at the heart of the matter.

The outer shell of this doll might serve to represent all those activities which form - or used to form - our social intercourse as Catholics. Catholic Clubs, Catholic Sports Teams, Weekly Parish Dances in or Socials in the Parish Hall, Associations of Catholics with some common interest, fund-raising groups, and the like. The '**Catholic Culture**' in which some of us were raised - and now very few are, in our present day secular society which has so many other providers of entertainment, social opportunities, and mutual support.

Such a milieu was once supportive to our faith, it even drew people into the Catholic community. It helped in the passing on of our Gospel Way of life. But 'Catholic Culture' is now only a memory. Perhaps that is not altogether a bad thing because it was often the case that people could be very involved in such goings on and for all the activity to have nothing to do with God at all.

At a deeper level Catholics should be involved in **upholding the moral values** which derive from the Gospel and to which we are called to witness in our daily lives. It is very challenging to hold fast to our beliefs and principles in a society which belittles them, or is antagonistic to them. Nonetheless it is our Christian calling, our responsibility as followers of Jesus.

Some of our fellow Catholics are shining lights in such matters as campaigning on matters of justice and peace; upholding the dignity of marriage and parenthood, respect for life from cradle to grave, the rights of workers, having a generous response to the needs of refugees and migrants, or promoting concern about the impact of modern humanity upon the natural world. Perhaps we need to ask how much personal time and energy we ourselves give to them.

Sadly, it is also possible for anyone of us to become committed to some social ethic or moral principle, or to some work for charity or justice or peace - which have their source or inspiration in the Gospel - and yet have no real love for the One about whom the Gospel was written and who called our Church into being.

To my mind it is always a warning signal when an organisation which began its operation with the name 'Catholic' proudly emblazoned in its title subsequently drops that name and loses its Catholic identity in its daily work and in the faith-less disposition of the personnel who manage it. It has become a worthy practitioner of human concern but is no longer inspired by or focused on Christ.

A church institution in this country of which we are justly proud is that of our **Catholic Education system**. All the efforts that have been made, and continue to be made, to uphold a Christian, a distinctly Catholic ethos, in our schools and colleges are admirable. Whatever is achieved should be acknowledged and appreciated and supported.

Our primary, secondary and tertiary establishments aim to support parents - the first educators in the Faith - in their challenging task, and they do it with wide ranging resources and dedication. No doubt the students gain a great deal from passing through these portals - in self knowledge, in academic and practical skills, in social awareness.

Yet it is possible, indeed common, for many of our youngsters to pass through thirteen years of Catholic schooling and beyond, and in all that time to have developed no apparent personal relationship with Jesus of a heartfelt or genuine character.

But this relationship is of key importance, and without it all else lacks proper direction and purpose. Our Catholic Faith is not just a matter of knowing certain things, or even of doing certain things, based on the Gospel. Quintessentially it is a matter of knowing, loving, and following the Lord *more clearly, more deeply, more nearly, day by day, by day, by day, by day.*

A deeper level of living in the Church is our participation in the **Mass and the Sacraments**. Here we are nearer to the heart of the matter because in the Sacraments we meet Jesus and commit ourselves to him in the 'fellowship of his friends' which is the community of the church. Everyone who participates in the sacraments with regularity comes into an appreciation of this truth: that Jesus is present to them; that He is inviting and encouraging them to keep following in His footsteps - never to stand still, always moving on, further on the way He leads us.

In the Sacraments Jesus comes to heal our wounds, to reassure and strengthen our faint hearts, to challenge us to take on that of which we would not consider ourselves to be capable. Jesus, who drew the first disciples to Himself in the Gospel events, attracts and inspires us in our turn in the encounters with Him which are the Sacraments of the Church.

In due course these meetings with Jesus will so affect us that the prospect of being anywhere else but in His company and in the 'circle of His friends' has no appeal at all, and we find ourselves echoing the sentiments of His disciples in the Gospel: *'Lord, to whom should we go? You have the message of the fullness of life'*.

And yet we know it is possible for people to be involved only superficially in the Sacramental Life of the church, seeing these Celebrations merely as occasional 'initiation rites' or 'distance markers', in what is an otherwise entirely secular journey. Thus it happen, all too frequently, that children are presented for 'christening' by parents who are strangers to the church. These same children may be presented some seven years later for First Communion, and - again later - look for 'Confirmation' in the faith, or for their Wedding to be blessed by God in the Sacrament of Matrimony. In between times they have been nowhere to be seen.

Where is the true love for Jesus in such behaviour? Here again we recognise only an empty shell. The core of faith is missing - the heart of genuine devotion to the Lord.

This is the **heart of the matter**. Behind, or rather within, our principles and practices, our many worthy activities, there must be a real, personal, living, loving relationship with Jesus. Without this all else is dead and useless. Jesus puts it strongly and clearly in the Gospel today: *Cut off from me you can do nothing... anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that is thrown away - he withers. Such branches are put upon the fire to be burnt.* We, each and all of us, have to ask of ourselves such questions as this:

What time do I give to Jesus in each day? Do I put each important decision of my life before him? Could I say that I am growing in my love for Jesus? Am I more aware of His presence in my life, and of his power, than I was before? Do I hear myself speaking aloud of Jesus to others - at home? at work? in my leisure time? Or do I find myself lacking in such confidence - too shy, too embarrassed, too afraid to do any such thing? If I cannot speak of Jesus in my family, or with my friends, how can I speak of him to the world which is waiting to hear His Gospel? But this is my vocation as a Christian, a Catholic, a member of his circle of friends: the Church.