



## The Church's deepest identity

The Catholic Church exists in every country in the world but she is not like an international, corporate organisation concerned just for her own members. Nor is the Church, as Pope Francis is fond of saying, a big NGO, a non-governmental organisation, helping people in need all over world – even though the Church provides more help through her members who teach, nurse the sick, feed the hungry, care for orphans and the elderly and work for human development on every level than all the NGOs put together. While providing all these services to humanity the Church never forgets that she exists to proclaim the salvation that Christ has gained for the whole world.

### The mercy of Christ

The Second Vatican Council gave us this definition of the Church which is easy to remember: “The universal church is seen as ‘a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’”.<sup>26</sup> This unity in Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the hallmark of the Church: we are God’s people who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ; we share Christ’s love with one another; we seek to make Christ known to others as we live and show forth that unity which we have with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Where the Church exists, Christ is present. Jesus made this great promise to his disciples as he sent them forth to the whole world to preach the gospel: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). This abiding presence of the redeeming Christ makes the Church “the sacrament of God’s mercy” in the world today. In encountering the Church, the people of God, individuals and whole communities, should be encountering the mercy of God. As Pope Francis says:

<sup>26</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 4.

Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. The Church “has an endless desire to show mercy”. Perhaps we have long since forgotten how to show and live the way of mercy.<sup>27</sup>

Mercy should be the public face of the Church of Christ because he is the “face of the Father’s mercy”.<sup>28</sup> If people do not feel embraced by mercy as they approach the Church, they will never enter into communion with the Church. Our challenge is this: people meet the Church through her individual members in the parishes, in priest and people. As members of the Church, our witness to those who are seeking Christ and a deeper meaning in life should speak clearly about the mercy of God for each individual, no matter what their circumstances may be. We never sit in judgement nor indulge in condemnation, because we too remain sinners, always in need of God’s mercy. The Church is often dismissed as living in the dark ages because of her strict code of morality and, at the same time, criticised by the very same voices for the extravagance of the mercy she shows to poor sinners who repent. Deep within our hearts we keep the words of Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees who were demanding that he would agree that a woman should be stoned for adultery: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). As the minister of God’s mercy, the Church embraces with mercy each repentant sinner.

### To be a Catholic

The statement “we are Catholics” can mean many different things. It can mean that we were baptised, educated in a Catholic school, brought up in a Catholic family, became a Catholic later on in life,

<sup>27</sup> *Misericordiae Vultus*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Misericordiae Vultus*, 1.

that we say our prayers and go to Mass every Sunday. Is that what it really means to be a Catholic? As we ponder this in our hearts we begin to hear the words of Jesus: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-19). Making disciples is the mission statement of the Church. The Church exists to make disciples. Each diocese and each parish within the diocese has, on Christ’s authority, the right and the duty to make disciples. We can’t leave that to the priest or the deacon or the youth minister. It is to us that Christ says “proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). If our parish is not actively seeking to proclaim the good news of Christ to those outside its own members it will not pass the test set by St John Paul II:

The effectiveness of the Church’s organizations, movements, parishes and apostolic works must be measured in the light of this missionary imperative.<sup>29</sup>

### **Witness to Christ**

It is through each one of us as individual members of the Church that people encounter the Church and experience the merciful welcome of Christ. We are witnesses to the love and mercy of Jesus Christ for each human being by the way we live and relate to them. Recalling the words of Pope Benedict XVI recounted in chapter 1:

We become witnesses when, through our actions, words and way of being, Another makes himself present.<sup>30</sup>

Another becomes present! Christ becomes present to others as we seek to witness to him, not through eloquent words, but through the love that we have in our hearts for each person. We welcome all, both those who are seeking the truth and the meaning of their life and those who may be hostile to us. The bigger the sinner, the bigger the welcome! We are not a Church that condemns others; we are a

<sup>29</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, 49.

<sup>30</sup> *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 85.

Church that encourages everyone, a Church that believes that the Father, who has been patient and forgiving in the way he deals with us, will be equally patient and forgiving with every single person, even with those who, at the present, may seem to be enemies of the Church. It is always worth reminding ourselves that there was a time when St Paul, who was known as Saul to the early Christians in Jerusalem, was the biggest enemy of the Church. Writing from his prison cell, towards the end of his life, to St Timothy, his disciple and helper, St Paul said:

I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

1 Timothy 1:13-16

Paul says that the mercy he received brought about that amazing spiritual transformation that changed him from being Saul, the persecutor of all Christians, to being St Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. We learn from this that the Church’s first witness in our world is to show love and mercy to all. If the Christian community can welcome into its midst the converted persecutor, Saul, and begin to revere him as the great St Paul, we despair of nobody’s conversion. Everyone is welcome in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Love and mercy are not abstract terms but concrete virtues. We don’t love humanity, nor have compassion for humanity. We love the individual person whom we encounter, the neighbour, and we have compassion for the individual suffering person whom we

can help. The fact that I cannot help every suffering person at this moment is no justification for me not trying to help the person who turns to me for help. Each of us, by the way we live and respond to others, extends a welcome in the name of Jesus. No one is excluded because of their past. Once they open their hearts to Christ in the present, as Paul did, and seek the grace to put their trust in him in the future, they have been reconciled to God. The Church is not an elite club for sinless people. We will always remain a Church of sinners for sinners. Pope Francis profiles the type of Christians who are needed today:

We need Christians who make God's mercy and tenderness for every creature visible to the men and women of our day. We all know that the crisis of modern man is not superficial but profound. That is why the New Evangelization, while it calls us to have the courage to swim against the tide and to be converted from idols to the true God, cannot but use a language of mercy which is expressed in gestures and attitudes even before words.<sup>31</sup>

If we are going to be merciful, just as our Father is merciful we cannot close our hearts to those in need. The mercy that we ourselves have received from God must be shared with those who need to receive our mercy. St John Paul II was very specific on this point:

Jesus Christ taught that man not only receives and experiences the mercy of God, but that he is also called "to practice mercy" towards others: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." The Church sees in these words a call to action, and she tries to practice mercy.<sup>32</sup>

### **Reclaiming our true identity as a Church**

When St Paul VI spoke about the identity of the Church he went beneath all the externals. He didn't dwell on all the good works

<sup>31</sup> Address to Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, 14 October 2013.

<sup>32</sup> St John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* ("Rich in Mercy"), 14.

carried out by members of the Church all over the world: works that are called "the corporal works of mercy". He said:

Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.<sup>33</sup>

Highlighting evangelisation as the deepest identity of the Church, St Paul VI was preparing the Church to embark on the new evangelisation. Paul became pope on 21 June 1963, in the middle of the Second Vatican Council. He saw that the renewal of the Church – which was the aim and purpose of the Council – would be achieved only through fidelity to her deepest identity. The canonisation of Pope Paul VI should encourage us all to study again his great Apostolic Exhortation, published in 1975, ten years after the Second Vatican Council. This exhortation inspired the whole Church, beginning with St John Paul II, and inspiring Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. Pastors of other Christian denominations found his exhortation very enlightening and helpful. Fr Gino Henriques, an Indian Redemptorist who has been engaged internationally in the ministry of evangelisation, shared this story with me. Around 1985 he was travelling on a plane from Korea to Singapore with three pastors of an evangelical church. They had been speaking at a conference in Korea on evangelisation. When they heard about his commitment to evangelisation they shared with him their presentation texts. To his delight all three quoted St Paul VI in their presentations. For them evangelisation was also the deepest identity of the Church. But for a number of years after the Second Vatican Council St Paul VI's great exhortation wasn't studied much by Catholics.

<sup>33</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.