

Parish Forum May 23, 2010

Why I continue to believe in Church.

Speakers: Baroness Nuala O'Loan & Fr Alan Mc Guckian S.J.

Part I **What is the Church I believe in?**

The speakers adopted a conversation approach to the topic and asked for frank open discussion. They began by giving a brief input on the issue of "What is the Church I believe in?"

Nuala: *The Church is often thought of in different ways: property, business, schools... but these are not the Church. The Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. It is where Jesus and the Holy Spirit are, (like virtual space). It is also a temporal place of meeting in which important things happen such as worship and sacraments. We find God there.*

Fr Alan: *I believe in the Church. I believe that God is a man in Jesus Christ – the scandal of the Incarnation. Yet it is a bigger scandal to see the Church as the Body of Christ who makes her holy and spotless. This crowd of sinners is the Body of Christ. Though sinners, we are holy because we belong to Christ's Body and Christ is holy. Christ chose to make the Church His Body. I am very happy to identify with all the great saints and theologians but very unhappy to be identified with Jesuits who have abused children or young people. Then you put your head down. We are all part of this body of Christ. That means we have some connection to the sinners in that body.*

Nuala: *The Laity are the Church. Their role involves: dedication to Christ, seeking the Kingdom, engaging with the world, teaching, proclaiming the Word of God. Lay people have a duty to give their opinion and could take part in Pastoral Councils and Diocesan Synods. The call is remarkable. The Holy Spirit and Christ are at the centre and all sinners and victims are part of the Church and belong to and live in the Church.*

Fr Alan: *We, especially the laity, can feel lost in the Church because Church business is done in a place where we are not included. Perhaps we feel cheated by the Church; or maybe we share in that sense of fear that is widespread within the Church today. We are responsible, thoughtful, educated people and we need*

to find a voice. The recent scandals have reduced the esteem in which we all held our Catholic Faith. Why did it go wrong?

The forum broke into small groups to discuss what they had heard and then gave feedback in the large group on what is the Church. The forum also raised some of the frustrations with the Church, and their desires for change within the Church.

What is the Church?

Forum: At heart the Church is good; we see the Church as a Mother caring for her children and as a family of which we are a part. We are on the same side as Jesus and we want to support our Church. Prayer is an important aspect of our lives within which the Eucharist is essential. However, many do not understand the Mass and their belonging to God and the “drip drip” of abuse is confusing.

Forum: The essence of the Church is that of a Covenant and faithful pilgrim people seeking to realise the Kingdom, recognising that God acts in this world through their lives. Holiness is imitating Christ and realising his vision for the world.

Nuala: *I agree with this but if Christ and the Holy Spirit are present in the Church why is there now such a mess?*

Frustrations

Forum: Why are we having these meetings in our Parish? They will have no purpose unless they are replicated throughout the Diocese.

Forum: The leadership in the Church has failed and many individuals have been very hurt by the scandals. The laity's place in the Church is unclear. Historically the laity has been excluded from decision making in the Church. The Bishops have failed to take a leadership role in response to the scandals. They have shown a distinct lack of vision; e.g. they have failed, to date, to capitalise on the Pope's letter to Irish Catholics, which offers an opportunity to shape the future of our Church.

Fr Alan: *There is great fear throughout the Church. Bishops and priests can be very afraid that if there is so much anger the Church will fall apart. But many lay people have a deep love and concern for the Church and for that reason it is important for Bishops and priests to be much more in touch with the laity.*

Moving on

Forum: While greatly shocked by the revelations regarding abuse within the Church, the real challenge is how to move on from the current situation. The Church is actually being given a chance to change as a result of the scandals.

Forum: While it is obvious that the institutional Church must be more transparent, it is important for each of us to ask, "Where am I in all of this? For that reason we need clarity on what is the Church as there are varying opinions about the Church based on personal experience. Accepting personal responsibility for faith is a challenge for each individual believer.

Forum: The Church needs to discover and promote a sense of accountability. Marriage and the world of business provide models for this.

Forum: The abysmal lack of communication between bishops and priests, bishops and laity, priests and laity, urgently needs to be attended to.

Forum: There is need for greater catecheses in the Church, reaching all age groups.

Forum: The absence of leadership and vision to move forward is an issue, but a change of system or structure will not necessarily solve the problems of the current situation.

Nuala: *The Laity needed to be engaged and living our lives as a testimony of our faith. A Diocesan Synod is necessary. The PPC, as elected bodies, could nominate representatives to a Synod at which the Bishop would give an account of the state of the Diocese, e.g. moral and pastoral issues of current concern; diocesan finances; staffing etc.*

Fr Alan: *There is a lack of meaningful structures. Despite Vatican II the Church does not have structures in place to implement the recommendations of the Council. The Bishop has the power of a monarch and does not have to account to us but he ought to do so. The model of the Good Shepherd seems to have faded. A PPC can only exist because the Parish Priest allows it or wants it. We have to find a uniquely Catholic way to do things. The Church is not well organised to do what it has to do. But we need to be careful not to create a politicised model. The conversation has to be widened.*

Part II What is it about the Church that I cannot live without?

Again Fr Alan and Nuala started with a brief input.

Fr Alan: I owe the Church everything. Through the Church I know of the name of Jesus, the Trinity, Scriptures, Eucharist, Baptism. With the help of God I hope to continue in the Church.

Nuala: I grew up in the Church. It provides me with so much opportunity to learn. My faith is fed by the resources of the Church. Through prayer and sacred moments I find God. I found this to be so in a moment of tragedy. A visit to a Church and the praying of the psalms by a priest restored my spirit sufficiently to go on with my life. The Church gives me community, scripture, understanding of my relationship with God. At times when the vision gets dim, I can kneel with those who are praying.

At this point the meeting broke up into small groups to consider what it is in our Church that we cannot do without. The responses to this question included the following:

Forum: We heard of Jesus through the Church.

Forum: Personal Relationship with Christ is the most important aspect of belonging to the Church. It is what counts.

Forum: The Church gives us the Sacraments.

Forum: The Eucharist and the other sacraments make the Church.

Forum: Confession is a great sacrament. It would help if we had general absolution.

Forum: We are enriched by the Church and the people we meet.

Forum: It is a place to receive support and forgiveness, welcome and a feeling of belonging.

Forum: In the Church we find forgiveness, community, support in times of suffering, belonging and identity. The Church is like a Mother who cares for her children no matter what they do. On holidays, the first thing one does is to find the local Church.

Forum: The Church accompanies people on their journey through life. It is there in times of sorrow.

Forum: Priests who unselfishly dedicated themselves to being Good Shepherds.

Some members of the forum also expressed their ideas about how we make our Church stronger:

Forum: Making the faith attractive and meaningful for our young people and for those whose faith is weak.

Forum: In the Parish Youth leads Youth. What is to prevent other peer groups of different ages from sharing their relationship with Jesus? It is there to be shared.

Part III Conclusion

Nuala: *I lived in Africa for a time and the faith there was passed on by catechists. We need to talk about the love of Christ which we have. Now is the time to find a way to reinforce what we all believe with the help of the Holy Spirit. We use words like "Gospel greedy" negatively. Our role models are not the young and beautiful. How many people have, by example and encouragement led you to a greater understanding of faith? Priests have made faith real for me.*

Fr Alan: *Being here is an experience of Church but only if we speak the truth, listen to one another and search together. The Church needs the laity even more now to set an example for others to follow. We must be careful that the need for change does not lead to hasty change which could lead to another "corruption creeping in". It is important to remember that Jesus said to Peter: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church". The Pope, as Peter's successor carries on this daunting task. We need to place greater emphasis on Scripture and we need to think about how we are going to bring that Good News to future generations, keeping in mind that many young people no longer have the faith example of their parents.*

It is clear that we need to find new ways which will make us more effective messengers of the Word of Christ. Slowly but surely that is happening. The Church will not die because Christ promised that his Holy Spirit will always be with it. We recognise that we need the Church, and that the Church needs each of us to give our little bit. Prayer and the Holy Spirit will get us there.