

PASTORAL LETTER OF BISHOP KIERAN CONRY
to be read at all Masses on the weekend of 14/15 November 2009

33rd Sunday of the Year

My dear brothers and sisters,

In May of this year I wrote a letter to you all and suggested that you might go along to the priest and talk about the one thing that was the biggest obstacle in your relationship with God. Someone was clearly unhappy with this and reported this advice to the Vatican. I had a very kind letter from the Holy See asking me to correct the impression I might have given, and I am very happy to do this.

I was not suggesting that this is an alternative to the traditional practice of confession of sins, an integral part of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I was hoping that it might be a way back to the Sacrament for many people, a 'toe back into the water'. The Church's traditional teaching is that serious sins (what used to be called 'mortal sins') should be confessed at least once a year before receiving Communion, and that even the less serious sins (so-called 'venial sins' or 'everyday faults' as the Catechism puts it) should also be confessed, in order to form our conscience and help us advance along our spiritual path. All this is explained very clearly in the Catechism of the Catholic Church in Chapter 2, Article 4, 'The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation'.

All this raises an interesting question about presenting something in its entirety, something I clearly did not intend to do. There is nothing that can express our faith in its entirety. The question, "What does the gospel say about this?" cannot always be answered, because there are questions that Jesus simply did not address. He does not seem to have a clear view about climate change (except the spiritual climate), gender discrimination (except that he announced the resurrection to women first) and financial questions (except for a reference to whose head was on a coin).

It is all too easy to get caught up and even fixated with single issues, whether this is in religion or politics. So many people tend to focus on liturgy – even the language of the Mass – as if this somehow expresses the core of our beliefs. Others campaign on the moral issues of the day – someone said recently that a person's attitude to *Humanae Vitae* was a 'litmus test' of being a Catholic, whereas many might not know what *Humanae Vitae* is.

These are all undoubtedly important issues, but they will never get anywhere near expressing our faith in its entirety, and we can ask if some of these questions are actually fundamental to faith at all. And yet we would have to say that certain questions are fundamental; these are questions about Jesus' divinity – he is really the Son of God, not just a very holy and charismatic person. They are questions about the resurrection; did he really rise from the dead or was it a story put about by his followers? Was it the plan of the Father and the Son that the Holy Spirit should give birth to the Church at Pentecost? There are lots more fundamental issues – again I don't want to say that anything can express our faith in its entirety.

But there are also things that are not theological propositions, but fundamental human qualities that cannot be missing if we wish to grasp what our faith means. We might say that we can't express it completely, but we can also say that if this or that bit is missing, then the picture of faith is incomplete. At the funeral of Canon Bernard Thom recently, there was one phrase that the preacher, Fr Colin Wolczak, quoted from Canon Bernard, I think. He said that when we love, we somehow come closer to God. We cannot claim to be listening to God if we do not have love in our hearts. And we cannot really come close to God without praying. And we can't be fully members of God's Church without sharing in the Eucharist on Sunday. Nor can we claim to have understood the message of the gospel unless we are ready to reach out to our neighbour.

The very word 'Catholic' means 'universal' – my dictionary adds 'on the whole, in general'. The readings this weekend reflect the fact that we are coming towards the end of the year; they speak of the end of time and the fact that we will be judged. And we will not be judged on the particular and the minute, the single issue. We will be judged on how well we loved, and this applies even if we know God or not.

If we are to be truly Catholic, then we must be truly human too – this is why Jesus took on our humanity and saved it through his death and resurrection. We cannot afford to be distracted by things that restrict our vision of humanity. At our recent clergy retreat, the director, a Fr Paddy Sweeney from Dublin, spoke of the language that modern psychologists use, and referred to what they call 'thinning'. It means that we focus on one issue to such an extent that we actually lose sight of the bigger picture – our vision become thin. It's the old 'not seeing the wood for the trees'.

I hope that nothing becomes a distraction for you to such an extent that it thins your own vision. I hope that you find or remain in the joy of the broad picture of God's love for us. There is a beautiful picture in an exhibition at the National Gallery in London at the moment: I have asked your priest to mention it to you. It is a picture of Our Lady holding a cloak wide. In the foreground within the cloak are some Carthusian monks, but behind Our Lady the cloak is dark and endless. The commentary suggests that this means that there is room for us all. God's vision of the Church is broad and generous. Let us embrace that generosity.

With my good wishes for a fruitful Advent.

Kieran, your Bishop.