“The Church I know”: a reflection

Some high-ranking members of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre participated in the organization of the historic meeting convoked by the Pope regarding “The Protection of Minors in the Church” held in the Vatican from February 21 to 24. In particular, Cardinal Séan Patrick O’Malley, Archbishop of Boston, Cardinal Blase Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago and Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta. The assembly listened to moving testimonies of victims of sexual abuse, seeking solutions to the crisis in dialectic of exchange and prayer. Following the event, which was widely reported in the press, president of the Grand Magisterium’s Holy Land Commission, Bartholomew McGettrick, shared this text in which – conscious of the challenges and in no way justifying the horrible actions carried out by some clergy – he wanted to point to something we often forget or take for granted: the beauty of what we live at the heart of the hurch and the presence of God through the generosity and self-giving of so many people who form the Body of Christ. This is also the Church we know, we love and we should not forget!

Recent weeks and months have highlighted for the Catholic Church some of the difficulties and even atrocities which have taken place within the Church. The media have been vociferous in their condemnation of what has been happening over a period of years. There has been justifiable anger at what has been done, and what has not been done.

All members of the Catholic Church must feel emotional about this – shame, embarrassment, being perplexed, angry, cheated, and all the negative emotions that are possible. For many to be associated with such an institution is painful.

The secular media in particular have not spared any detail of some of the atrocities which have taken place. I am left to ask the question, **“Is this the Church that I know?”**

As a rhetorical question I am inclined to the view that this is not the Church that I know. Nor do I see myself as having any part of an institution which can shelter the misdemeanours and the shocking activities of members of the Church in whose name crimes and indiscretions have been committed.

The Church that I know, however, is a Church of generosity, of care, and of love. I know people in religious life and laity who devote themselves to the betterment of society and to accompanying and serving those in need. Many give their lives to the Church – either as ordained religious, or as people who serve through vows that they have taken, or through vocational calling. They do so freely and with integrity and with the simple mission of wishing to help others.

I am especially aware in the Holy Land that the Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem is devoting its attention to education, humanitarian aid, and pastoral care. These lie at the heart of the work of the Order, and indeed of the Church, and it supports many people who wish to make the world a better place by their activities and actions. It is one example of how the Catholic Church gathers resources and puts them at the service of those in need.

In season and out of season members in every continent donate funds to the Order. These funds go to supporting Christian communities. Of course it is not newsworthy to proclaim that the Church supports schools, hospices for the dying and homes for the elderly and infirm, hospitals for babies, clinics, orphanages, places of refuge for abused women, shelter for refugees and the tortured, and so on. That is the Church that I know.

Globally the Catholic Church works in the field of education to promote humanitarian values and to do what it can to ensure that there is a deep sense of justice in society. Catholic education tries to bring hope and achievement through the relationships that are created within the Catholic schools. It is the constant work of teachers who are motivated by the love of their students that makes the world a better place; of doctors and nurses who attend to those who suffer in the most miserable living conditions; and of so many others who simply serve others.

Amid the constant pressure for change is the fact that children still need to love and be loved. The Church has a duty to ensure this is a love that is pure and based on right relationships. Is it too much to think that this may indeed be a human right? This remains as perhaps the one area we still need to conquer – in the depths of the heart. The Catholic Church can lead in this, because that is the essence of the nature of Catholic social action and is integral to the work of **the Church that I know**. Of course the Church still needs to seek guidance of the Spirit to more fully celebrate the place of women in its social action and leadership.

In terms of humanitarian aid the Catholic Church is at the forefront of support for refugees, displaced peoples, and those who find themselves at the margins of society. One only has to look at those organisations which work with the most needy in our society to find that the Catholic Church is present. There is persecution of peoples for their beliefs and the Church is there. Indeed it is the role of the Church to accompany those most in need, and to walk with them on their various journeys.

Increasingly in our world there is a need for pastoral care of all God’s children. Support for the spiritual and social wellbeing of everyone is increasingly important in a complex world. In addition there is clearly a growing need for supporting people who struggle in a world which increasingly disregards the human needs of so many in society. Increased suicide rates across many “advanced countries” are simply one indicator of the pressure under which many people find themselves.

The Church that I know is a Church that is generous with the people who serve others. To be a Christian is to be a person for others; to be a Christian in the present world is to be a person of undying service; and to be a Christian in the present world is to walk along with our neighbours – and especially those who most need help and support. Many, many people are on those journeys – and they should not be forgotten. It is the Church of the pilgrim.

It is the Church of the servant. It is the Church of generosity, of justice, of hope and of love. **That is the Church that I know.**

Bartholomew McGettrick

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