4th Sunday of Easter 2022

We know that the public image presented by some, can be contradicted by the private reality of their lives. Unfortunately, we see this all too often in the lives of some political leaders, and in, the sometimes tragic, lives of those in the world of entertainment. Even more tragically, we are only too aware that it is also a reality in the lives of some clergy; they, who ought to be the most trusted, became “wolves in sheep’s clothing”. On the other hand, it is always most uplifting to encounter someone who is truly sincere and authentic.

Two weeks ago, Fr McGrattan and I, together with twenty-five university students, had the privilege of having a private audience with Pope Francis. I don’t think it is too colloquial, or provincial, to say of the Pope, “he is the real deal”! He is indeed someone filled with the spirit of Jesus – genuine, gentle, humble, and so very courteous, who radiates a deep joy. Indeed, two of his most important teaching documents are called, “The Joy of the Gospel”, and “The Joy of Love”.

The latter document, “The Joy of Love” is “an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to persevere in love.” However, Pope Francis is a realist, and he acknowledges the complexity of family life today; he says, “there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic, made up of many different realities, all with their own particular joys, hopes and problems” *(cf AL 2,5,57).*  Each of us, without exception, belongs to a family of one kind or another, but “no family drops down from heaven perfectly formed” *(AL 325).*  In spite of our limitations, we are exhorted not to lose heart, and are challenged to never “stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us” *(ibid)*.

Many of the complex issues that the Pope identifies, are realities for families in our parish, and are also realities for the family which is the parish itself. We in St. Brigid's, face the challenge of building a community, in which all, in spite of sinfulness, imperfections, limitations and problems, feel that they truly belong.

There are many today for whom belonging to the Church is no longer attractive or important. There are many reasons for this, some of which can be laid at the feet of the institutional Church; others the result of personal lifestyle choices; but frequently, it is simply that the habit of practice has been broken for one reason or another, thus causing a drift away from the Church. In the aftermath of the pandemic, we must ask ourselves, how can we encourage such parishioners to re-connect with parish life? What might we convincingly say about the joy of belonging to the Church? What do I love most about belonging to the Church? These are soul-searching questions. Allow me to briefly share with you three of my reasons for loving the Church.

First, I know that Jesus loves the Church. Scripture refers to him as the bridegroom and the Church as his bride. His love for his people is compared to the love of a husband for his wife; St. Paul writes, *“Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Eph.5:25).* The Psalm of today's Mass speaks of this relationship, *“He made us, we belong him, we are his people, the sheep of his flock” (Ps.99:3).*

Secondly, I recognise that the Church loves Christ. The Church, even if often imperfectly, constantly seeks to respond to the love of Jesus. Whenever the Church really responds to that love, there is nothing on earth like it! We see this in the lives of the saints, but also, we see it in the heroic virtue and fidelity of husbands and wives who are true to the ideals of Christian marriage; in the sacrifices of parents for their children; and in all those who strive to live with a Christian soul, and “have chosen deep down to be with others and for others” *(EG 273).* St. John sums this up in today's Gospel, *“The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”*

My third reason for loving the Church is that, through the Church, I grew to love Jesus, and to know that he loves me. I am ever thankful to the Church through which I was given the gift of faith; thankful for my parents, my first teachers in the ways of faith; thankful for those who, over the years, have guided me – friends, teachers, priests, parishioners, and many others. They have helped me keep my eyes fixed on what is good, beautiful, just and true. Through them I have heard the voice of Jesus; in them I have seen the face of Jesus.

What joy does belonging to the Church bring you? What reasons might you give for loving the Church?

*“Lord Jesus, you pray, “That they may all be one”.*

*May your Church of today, like that of old,*

*have but one heart, but one soul.*

*In the unity of our faith in you*

*and in our love for one another,*

*may we bear witness to your resurrection*.

*with the power of the Holy Spirit.”* **Amen**