5th Sunday of Easter 2022

That which is beautiful catches and holds our attention – all of us have stood spell-bound in the midst of beautiful scenery, or before an artistic masterpiece, or have been lifted into a different dimension by wonderful music or literature. People who are beautiful in character, those whose beauty shines from deep within, have the same effect on us. The world of advertising attempts to limit beauty to physical desirability, but we know that true beauty is more than skin deep.

James McNeill Whistler, the American artist, painted an unsentimental, unflattering portrait of his elderly mother. His painting received a mixed reaction from the critics. For some, it became the focus of parody and ridicule; others, however, revered it as a portrait of motherhood. Whistler's mother had, in fact, lived through challenging times, and had suffered much, but always remained constant, kind, and religious. Whistler himself said, that in her, he saw, *“grace wedded to dignity, strength enhancing sweetness”.* Personally, I like the painting - something about it reminds me of the Church – Mother Church.

When non-believers look at the Church, frequently all they see is an anachronism, a left over from a superstitious age; often it is the focus of parody and ridicule, and, at times, violent verbal attack, and sometimes, even physical attack. It is then that we should recall the words of Jesus, *“If the world hates you, remember that it hated me before you” (Jn. 15:18).*

Today, we have moved beyond the unthinking acceptance of everything the Church says and does, and are developing a more balanced, and healthier understanding, of the Church's human dimension - including facing up to the sinfulness of her members. The expectation of transparency, and accountability, within the Church, bears witness to this – although it is a journey which has still some distance to go. The Irish Church has learnt to its cost, but also to its benefit, the truth of Cardinal Newman's words, *“Establishment was a more effective instrument of destruction than persecution”.*

Having said that, we must be careful that we don't become so pre-occupied with counting the wrinkles on the face of Mother Church, that we fail to see in her the deep-down spiritual beauty. Nor must we fail in our task of assisting the Church become, ever more fully, what Christ calls her to be, *“beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband”*. This we do by living Christ's commandment, *“love one another”,* in concrete and practical ways.

That word, “love”, which we hear so often, can, perhaps, begin to sound bland and even trite. However, the Bible thinks of “love” as “doing good”. St. Peter speaks of Jesus as going *“about doing good” (Acts 10:38).* If we understand “love” as “doing good” we see the commandment of Jesus in a whole new way: *“I give you a new commandment: do good to one another; just as I have done good to you, you must also do good to one another.”* By this way of living, others recognise us as disciples of Jesus.

Paul and Barnabas, in the first reading, acknowledged the *“hardships”* that their new Christians converts had to face. Those hardships, without doubt, included persecution, but there was a more immediate concern. An anonymous author put it this way: “To love the world is no big chore. It is that miserable person next door who is the problem!”. The Apostles *“put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith”*, in concrete and practical ways. Our own hearts are strengthened in the faith when, in the sentiments of the Lord’s Prayer, we acknowledge that the Kingdom of God comes on earth when we “forgive those who trespass against us”.

We must show a special kind of maturity and balance as we acknowledge the all-too-human defects of the institutional Church, and preserve an unqualified respect and love for Christ's Church, from which we receive so many beautiful spiritual benefits and gifts. Our criticism, no matter how rigorous it may sometimes be, should never have a derisive quality, which might encourage others to forsake this old Mother of ours. Only love, which Jesus asks of all of us, will *“put fresh heart into”* the Church.

The artist, Whistler, said that he saw in his mother, *“grace wedded to dignity, strength enhancing sweetness”*. As he was about to become a Catholic, Cardinal Newman, looked at the Church, and saw wrinkles and all; yet he said this: *“I gazed at her almost passively as a great objective fact. I looked at her - at her rites, at her ceremonial, and her precepts; and I said, 'This is a religion'” (Apo.,339-40).* Jesus, speaking from the cross, put it more simply; he said, *“This is your mother” (Jn. 19:27).*

*“Lord Jesus,*

*at the foot of your Cross,*

*Mary, your Mother, was made Mother of the Church.*

*May she be a source of hope and comfort to us,*

*as we strive to be true to you by loving one another.”* **Amen**