

WE BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH

THERE ARE construction works going on in our church as I write. The other day, as Jeremy, the project manager, was taking delivery of some building materials, a curious neighbour asked him what was going on. On being informed about the nature of the work, the neighbour said: 'When I see a church I feel sad.' When asked 'Why?' he replied, 'Because the churches are dying.'

Jeremy related the comment to me with considerable astonishment. He certainly did not share the perception that the churches are dying, and cited the resurgence of interest in spirituality as evidence that the churches are not dying but finding new vigour.

Statistics show that Jeremy has reason to be astonished. Globally the number of Christians, including the number of Catholics, is increasing (cf. the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod of Bishops on *The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church*).

On the other hand, the neighbour's perception, as we are all too aware, is not unfounded. In the western world many local communities *are* struggling for survival. In our parish we are a bold few, all the bolder because we are 'in the heartland of Sydney atheism' (cf. *Compass* 2008/4, p.1). We are swimming against the tide, locally speaking. We have no certainty that our small community will survive as it now is into the distant future. In a few years the diminishing number and the ageing of the clergy (myself included, perish the thought!) will force changes and hard decisions.

On Pentecost Sunday this year our parish will be host to a gathering of Pastoral Councils and other interested parishioners from our MSC parishes in Sydney. The theme for the gathering will be 'Your parish in five years time'. We will all be invited to

face the future and its challenges and explore possible ways we might guarantee our survival as parish communities.

When we hear the comment that the churches are dying, however, we think first of the Church institution and reject the idea. Whether the numbers be great or small in particular places, and whether local communities flourish or close down, it will never be that the Church as the People of God will die. The Church is here till the end of time. We base our conviction first of all on what Jesus did. For instance, he said to Peter:

You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of the underworld will never hold out against it. (Mth. 16:18).

No forces of destruction will destroy the Church, neither hostile forces from without, nor the forces from within, the sins and weaknesses of its members.

This text from Matthew's Gospel is an important one for Roman Catholics. Other denominations do not read in it all that we Catholics do. Questions then arise: upon what grounds do Catholics find more significance in it than other Christians? are we justified in doing so? To answer these questions we need to examine the text and also go beyond the text.

First we might note that scholars of all denominations are in general agreement on the likelihood that the text reflects Jesus' own words spoken in the Aramaic language. The 'name' Jesus gave to Peter is an indication. Matthew's Greek version reads: 'You are *Petros* [a first name] and on this *petra*...' The original Aramaic version would have worked much better: 'You are *kepha* and on this *kepha*...' The exact repetition of *kepha* makes more sense as a statement of Jesus. Also *petra* is a rock of any kind, but *kepha* is the rock that one digs down to find and

on which the builder lays his foundations—as the wise man who built his house on rock. Such details seem to help us get closer to the very words originally spoken by Jesus, viz. ‘You are *kepha* and on this *kepha* I will build my Church’.

From this text and many other indications in the New Testament, scholars of all denominations agree that Peter was appointed by Jesus to be the leader and guarantee of the stability of the new community. Where Catholic theologians differ from those of other denominations is in their claim that Peter’s ministry of ensuring stability was passed on to his successors, and that the Petrine ministry is essential to the nature of the Church that Jesus established. This claim cannot be proven from the biblical evidence, nor is there a strict historical proof. Instead, Catholic theologians point to what happened in the generations after the death of the first apostles and onwards to our own time.

By the end of the second century every church, except Alexandria, had a single bishop, recognized as a successor of the apostles in their role of pastoral oversight. Furthermore, communion with the successors of Peter was seen as an essential guarantee for bishops and local churches of their belonging to the Church that Christ established. Soon ecumenical councils of bishops were held, e.g. Nicea in 325 AD, in order to resolve matters of faith and order. Their decisions were binding when they were accepted by all the churches. One criterion for the ecumenicity of these Councils was that the bishops who participated in them were in communion with the bishop of Rome. (Cf. Francis A. Sullivan SJ, *Magisterium. Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1983, pp.57ff.)

What we see in this very brief historical

summary is the evolution of the hierarchical constitution of the Church. Crises arose, especially heresies, and the churches responded to them with heightened recognition of the ministry of bishops and of the primacy of the successors of Peter. (Scholars refer to this as ‘the trajectory’ of these ministries which began within the New Testament writings themselves.) In hindsight the Christian communities recognized these developments to have been so beneficial for safeguarding the unity of the Church and witnessing to the genuine Apostolic tradition that they were recognized as effects of the guidance of the Holy Spirit leading the Church into all truth.

For the Church in those first centuries as for us today, it was not a conclusion from hard exegetical and historical evidence that this was the Spirit’s work, but an expression of faith in the mystery of the Church as seen in its earthly existence. The Church is the Body of Christ, a work of the Trinity, animated by the Spirit of God to be an instrument of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.

The Church Christ established remains an all-too-human reality, but it is a divine reality as well, ‘after the nature of a sacrament’ (*Lumen Gentium* 1) Indeed, the Church is the fundamental sacrament for Karl Rahner.

Because God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are intimately involved in the being and life of the Church, and because of the divine purpose in establishing the Church to be an instrument to continue Christ’s work of redemption, we believe in a Church that will endure to the end of time. This is our faith. This is the Church we believe in. The belief that this Church is hierarchically structured as Catholics maintain is the fruit of discernment of the action of the Spirit in the life of the Church from the earliest times.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor