

# THE TRUE CHURCH

**A** REPORT FROM World Youth Day in Madrid that caught my attention was that of protesters at the welcome to Pope Benedict. In the face of more than a million cheering young people a number of—one must admit—very brave and dedicated protesters were chanting: ‘God yes! Church no!’

We can only guess what those protesters may have understood the Church to be, but clearly their experience of Church had been different from that of the young pilgrims.

Perhaps for the protesters the Church was no more than an institution experienced as impersonal, hierarchical, authoritarian, oppressive. The Church is indeed an institution, established by Jesus on a solid foundation, guaranteed to last for all time and equipped to resist the forces of the ‘underworld’. We thank God for that. It is good to know that the Church will stand till the end of time. But ‘institution’ is a cold word, very impersonal, even forbidding when used of something as big and, allegedly, as ‘powerful’ as the Church.

Vatican II reminded us that the Church institution is a *people*—the People of God. It is a community called together by God. It is a community with heart that supports, challenges and encourages each of its members. It is a community that prays together, a community of people who try to follow Jesus’ command to love one another as Jesus has loved each one of them. We can warm to this type of Church. It is wonderful to be here!

The Church is a community of people who care. In everyday situations people are often not very caring; no-one puts much effort into mending relationships. If someone down the road offends we often go our separate ways, cease to be on speaking terms and have nothing more to do with the person who has offended. In the Church it must be different. Relationships are important; the Church is a community to be worked at. When conflicts arise,

they need to be resolved. Jesus said to his followers (us): ‘May you be one as I and the Father are one’

Thus being Catholic entails more than being in a personal relationship with God, seeking to ‘save my soul’ and live a decent life. That would be far too individualistic. Being Catholic is to be a truly caring person as a member of a caring community of people united in Christ. That is what it means to be ‘in the Church’.

The Church is God’s family where we are cared for, where we experience God’s lavish gifts of love, especially in the sacraments. We are bonded to Christ, the Lord of life, at baptism, we hear God’s Word as Good News, we are nourished at the table of the Word and of the Eucharist down the years. This is the nourishment we need for our journey, our pilgrimage through life, a journey which concludes when we are called into the fullness of life. The Church nurtures us through life, and so we know the Church as ‘Holy Mother Church’. For the same reasons the Church is described as ‘the community of salvation’.

The Church is also a sacrament, ‘the fundamental sacrament’. Sacraments are earthly realities that disclose and channel spiritual or heavenly realities. Thus the Church community is more than a simple gathering of people, it is an instrument for channelling God’s saving action. To use St Paul’s favourite term,, the Church is the Body of Christ and we are all members of that Body.

The Church has been entrusted by Jesus with his mission—to tell the Good News of God-and-us, and to continue Jesus’ ministry of healing, casting out evil, showing the way to fuller life and attracting others into the community of salvation.

The Church is all this and more. We could go on to celebrate the treasures of spirituality, theology, art and architecture that the Church

has accumulated down the centuries.

The protesters were not recognising all these reasons to celebrate the Church, otherwise they could hardly reject the Church. They were rather put off by another side of the Church—the other side. It is to be noted that all the beauties of the Church that we have mentioned above are what God has done and is doing in the Church. The rest of the story is what we human beings have done and are doing in the Church.

The Church is a divine institution, but also a human community, and human beings, even dedicated members of the Church, are not perfect and often far from perfect. People can do bad things and entertain prejudices, and structures can become rigid and oppressive. As was said at the time of Vatican II by eminent members of the Church hierarchy, the ‘Spotless Bride of Christ’ (the Church) has blotches and barnacles all over her; the Church, far from

being perfect and complete is ‘*semper reformanda*’ (‘always in need of reform’). Thus those of us who love the Church have to be able to love her, warts and all!

The million and more pilgrims who cheered Pope Benedict were able to see at least some of the beauty of the Church. The protesters, on the other hand, saw only the ugliness. It brings to mind an old quotation from the Rev. Frederick Langbridge, English poet and religious writer (1849—1923):

Two men look out the same prison bars;  
one sees mud and the other stars.

If we indeed are blessed enough to see the stars, perhaps an appropriate prayer for us is the song of David :

One thing I ask of the Lord, for this I pray,  
to live in the house of the Lord all the days of  
my life. (Ps. 27.4)

—**Barry Brundell MSC, Editor**

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*Mother and Teacher of all nations—such is the Catholic Church in the mind of her Founder, Jesus Christ; to hold the world in an embrace of love, that men, in every age, should find in her their own completeness in a higher order of living, and their ultimate salvation. She is ‘the pillar and ground of the truth.’ (1Tim 3.15) To her was entrusted by her holy Founder the twofold task of giving life to her children and of teaching them and guiding them—both as individuals and as nations—with maternal care. Great is their dignity, a dignity which she has always guarded most zealously and held in the highest esteem.*

—**Pope John XXIII, encyclical *Mother and Teacher* (*Mater et Magistra*) 1961, opening words.**