

THE TIDE OF UNBELIEF

PUTTING *COMPASS* together is something that I do after my other duties are done. My day job, so to speak, is to be the parish priest of Erskineville, in inner-city Sydney. That is where the real challenges lie. The census of last August revealed that Darlington, the suburb next to us, is the least religious suburb in the whole of Australia, with 48.2% of respondents ticking the ‘No Religion’ box, while Eskineville is one of the top ten suburbs in the whole of Australia where ‘No Religion’ was ticked. It seems little, if anything, has changed since the previous census in which it was revealed, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that Erskineville is ‘in the heartland of Sydney atheism’.

While being an outpost of Christianity in a sea of unbelief and agnosticism is all very stimulating for us Catholics, I feel sad for our ‘no religion’ neighbours. Their world, while grand in itself, is cramped and confined by comparison with the world of people who rejoice in the gift of faith. They may admire nature with all its wonders, but they do not see beyond the material reality of the natural world—for them there is nothing more to see. They do not see what they see as a vast array of signals of transcendence. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in his poem *God’s Grandeur*: ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God’. But people with no belief in God cannot glimpse the infinite wonders that their world discloses.

They are like the people that Jesus criticised for not seeing his feeding of the multitude as a sign. The crowd in the Gospel story had no perception, no vision of what the lavish provision of food signified. It was not telling them something more—all they saw was the material fact of a plentiful supply of food and they came back looking for another feed.

The gift of faith enables us to see signs all around us—messages from God. The Eucha-

rist is the peak sign: we do not stop at the wafer of unleavened consecrated bread—it is the sacramental food that nourishes for eternal life, it is Christ himself, the bread come down from heaven to give life to the world.

There is a long tradition of spirituality summed up in the phrase ‘The sacrament of the present moment’ by Jean Pierre de Caussade SJ. This phrase invites us to realise that if we have faith enough we can discover the divine in every situation and circumstance, and respond.

St Ignatius gave us the letters AMDG (standing for ‘*ad majorem Dei gloriam*’—‘for the greater glory of God’), letters that our generation was instructed to place at the top of each page of our work books at school. This is another expression of that spirituality.

Evidently we need a high level of faith if we are to go through our days motivated by such messages, but the very fact that we can pray for an ever-deepening faith means that we are being led towards ever-broadening horizons.

Our faith is the source of great joy—in-describable joy—in the words of the first epistle of Peter:

You did not see him, yet you love him, and still without seeing him, you are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described, because you believe, and you are sure of the end to which your faith looks forward, that is, the salvation of your souls. (1Pet. 1:8-9)

The gift of faith, however, brings responsibility. The gift is not for ourselves alone, it is to be shared. We are to be bearers of grace to others. Hence it is not enough for us to feel sad for our ‘no religion’ neighbours—the very fact that there are so many of them stimulates us to celebrate all the more what we believe and to go out and tell the Good News in whatever way we can.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.