

## Things Consider

- ▶ Years ago, I remember reading a story of an Orthodox theologian speaking to a group of theological students. One asked him, 'What do you do when you can't believe the Creed?' The theologian said, 'Well you just say it' to which the student replied, 'But if you can't?' The theologian seemed nonplussed. In the end he said, 'Young man it is not your Creed, it is not your Faith. When those times of struggle come we allow ourselves to be carried by the faith of others.' That is what it can mean to be in community with others. In those times of struggle in life, for whatever reason, we can allow ourselves to be carried by others. In return, there will be those times when we will carry them.
- ▶ Many older Christians today find that neither their children nor grandchildren have followed them in having a living, active faith within a Church community and very naturally, this disturbs them. What to do? Conversations have proved fruitless.
- ▶ Rolheiser reminds us in *Seeking Spirituality* that we can continue to pray for them and offer love and forgiveness and in doing so, they are receiving the love and forgiveness of God since we are part of the Body of Christ (the Church). Jesus has asked us to forgive and said to us through His disciples, 'Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven.' And 'whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained.' (Matthew 16.19).
- ▶ Rolheiser goes on to say, '... if you hold them in love, they are held to the Body of Christ. ... To make this more concrete: If a child, or brother or sister or a loved one of yours strays from the Church in terms of faith practice and morality, as long as you continue to love that person, and hold him or her in union and forgiveness, he or she is touching the hem of the garment held to the body of Christ, and is forgiven by God.'
- ▶ One of the beautiful things about the Christian Church and God's kingdom more particularly is that they are spacious spaces and can hold more than we can possibly imagine.
- ▶ It is in the Eucharist that this is all somehow brought together – our gathering in the name of God, our hearing His Word through Scripture, our receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, our prayers for each other and the needs of the world, our many and varied gifts used in His service (1 Corinthians 12).

ATG/B17/MBH

## Attending to God

## 'Walking our Talk'

### Part Three



**In recent times**, numbers of people in our Western societies have come to believe that your Faith, your religion, is a personal thing and has nothing to do with anyone else. There is a real sense of individualism in this and it means Faith becomes privatised. Things like spirituality are seen simply as to do with *my* relationship with God, *my* personal prayer life in its varying forms. It is carved off from the rest of my life.

**The problem with this** is that what we are doing is compartmentalising our life so that our relationship with God, bears little if any relationship to the rest of my life. As one writer describes it, we are practicing spiritual apartheid. We are limiting God to certain times and places in our lives. It is as if God only exists in a church or holy place.

**We need to reject this approach** for it is neither the Christian approach nor the Christian way. God needs to be involved in all aspects of our life so that it is a truly living relationship. This is not to imply that we are saying prayers all day long or constantly thinking of God. If you are married – in an almost unconscious way this fact will inform your decisions and thoughts through the day. If I am a Christian then God too should inform my decision-making and thoughts through the day.

**Whether we are married or single**, as Christians we belong to a community of Faith, a Church, because we have been baptised. This means that the secular model of individualism has no place for us since I belong to God and His Church. We are in community. Just as within a family I am not free to do what I want, so it is with us as Christians in God's Church.

**However, this is not easy!** I can (and will) find myself rubbing alongside others in the Church with whom I have little in common. Personalities can come into play. There can be difficulties in relationships, confusions, and hidden agendas as well as numerous other factors that can make real community life hazardous to say the least.

**Jesus understood this** would be the reality. In John 6, after He had fed the people He said to them that they needed to eat His Body and drink His Blood. At this point, we are told, many drew back from following Him. Why? Ronald Rolheiser tells us that the Greek word used here for 'body' is *sarx* rather than the more neutral word *soma*. *Sarx*, he says, refers to the human body negatively with all its bodily smells, sin, sickness and death. Now the Body of Christ can have three meanings: Jesus' physical body, the Eucharistic elements, and the community of the Faithful (the Church) and this latter is meant here in this context of John 6.

**Rolheiser is saying** that we are being asked to 'eat' the flawed body of believers here on earth. He says Jesus is saying: You cannot be in relation with God if you are not in relationship with this deeply flawed community of the Church. If you are not, then yes, you might still believe in God (this makes you a theist), but you are not a Christian for to be a Christian is to be a part of the Body of Christ, that is Christ's Church.

**John Paul Sartre**, in his one-act play 'No Exit' wrote '*...hell is other people*', which may make us, wonder about the people with whom he was associating. Nevertheless, as we know, life is not always easy with others, and yet God wants us to be in community with them. The alternative is the terrible isolation that so many face in our Western cities. God has made us for community not isolation and aloneness. We are to support and nourish each other.

**But why?** Our starting point is always God and with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we see God as 'community' or as a 'communion' where each member is in relationship with each other. There is interdependence and each looks to the other. There is no sense of individualism in God. This provides a model for humans. However, there is more.

**In the Genesis stories of creation**, we see this same interdependence between God and His creation. He chooses to work from within creation rather than imposing Himself on creation. We see this in the way humans get to name things (2.19). We also see this in the ongoing generativity where humans, animals and plants continue the cycle of creation through procreation and that interdependence that is there between humans, animals and plants.

**For us as Christians** we are 'in Christ' a beautiful phrase with deep meaning that comes from St Paul (2 Corinthians 5.17). It is a reminder that Church is not about buildings, but about people in relationship with each other 'in Christ' resulting in a 'new creation'.

**We can and will struggle with this** for real tensions will be involved as we relate to and live with our sisters and brothers in Christ. However, it is in seeing Christ in the other person that we will realise purity of heart and thus see God. (Matthew 5.8) It is in following Christ's example of servanthood (John 13.1-17) that we will discover something of the depth of true community and escape our individualism.